

The wisdom of Confucius can help us to obtain spiritual happiness in the modern world, to get used to the daily routine of our lives, and to find the personal bearings that tell us where we are.

We might sometimes think that what we read lacks a rigorous logic. Very many of the sayings concentrate on a single issue, there are few passages of any great length, and almost everything we find is simple and short.

We will see how this absence of words is also a kind of teaching.

Confucius said, "What does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say?" (Analects XVII). Confucius said: See, the heavens are above us, solemn and quiet, never speaking a word, yet the four seasons come round again and again, and all of nature increases and multiplies around us. Do the heavens need to speak as well?

What we will find in Confucius is a way of thinking that is plain, simple, and warm. It is exactly this attitude with which Confucius influenced his students.

Confucius had three thousand students, seventy-two of whom were men of exceptional wisdom and virtue. Each of these men was a seed, and each in his turn spread the seed of this wisdom and this view of life far and wide.

That is why in China we call Confucius a sage. The sages are those people who in their time on this earth are the most practical and capable, and possess the most personal magnetism. They bring us conviction, and a kind of faith. Such men can only be the product of natural growth, emerging from within our lives, not dropping down from heaven.

This sense of natural, balanced growth can be found in China's creation myth, which tells of Pan Gu, who separated heaven and earth. This separation was not a sudden change, as in a Western creation myth, where Pan Gu might be expected to take a big ax and split them apart with a bang, whereupon a golden light might shine out in all directions, and the heavens, earth, and everything in them all appear at once. That is not the Chinese style.

The type of story that Chinese people are used to is like that described in the *San Wu Li Ji*, our very early Chinese history, which includes stories of how the world was made. Here we find that creation was a very lengthy process: calm, relaxed, and full of anticipation:

*Heaven and earth were jumbled together in a cosmic egg for eighteen thousand years, and Pan Gu lived in the midst of it. The heavens and the earth split apart. The pure Yang essence became the heavens, the heavy Yin essence was the earth. Pan Gu was between them, nine changes in one day, a god in the heavens and a sage on the earth. Every day the heavens rose higher by ten feet, the earth grew thicker by ten feet, and Pan Gu became ten feet taller. When he reached eighteen thousand years of age, the heavens were infinitely high, the earth was infinitely deep, and Pan Gu was infinitely tall.*

Afterward, heaven and earth split apart, not in the way that a solid body splits in two with a crack, but rather as a gradual separation of two essences: the light, pure yang essence rose up and became the heavens, and the heavy yin essence sank and became the earth.

But that was not the end of the separation of heaven and earth. The process had only just begun.

Notice how Chinese people pay a lot of attention to changes. Look at Pan Gu, who in between the heavens and the earth went through "nine changes in one day": just like a newborn baby, tiny, subtle changes were taking place every day.

There is a stage in the changes that the text calls "a god in the heavens, a sage on earth," when Pan Gu had become a wise and powerful being in both realms.

For the Chinese, this idea of mastery in both realms is an ideal way of being, one to which we should all aspire: a heaven where idealism can spread its wings and fly freely, with no need to compromise with all the rules and obstacles of the real world; and the ability to keep our feet planted firmly on the ground, so that we can make our way in the real world.

People who have only ambition and no realism are dreamers, not idealists; those who have only earth and no sky are plodders, not realists.

Idealism and realism are our heaven and earth.

But Pan Gu's changes are still going on and our story continues.

After the heavens and the earth had separated, every day the heavens became higher by ten feet, the earth gained ten feet in thickness, and Pan Gu "became ten feet taller" every day, along with the heavens.

In this way another eighteen thousand years passed, until at last "the heavens were infinitely high, the earth was infinitely deep, and Pan Gu was infinitely tall."

In other words, humankind is equal to the heavens and the earth: heaven, earth, and people are referred to together as the Three Realms — the three equally great and important things from which the world is made.

Confucius viewed the world in this way: human beings are worthy of respect, and people should respect themselves.

When reading *The Analects of Confucius* we find that Confucius very seldom spoke harshly or sternly to his students; he usually talked things over with them in a relaxed, easy manner, giving them clues and hints so that they could work things out for themselves. We have all seen teachers scold their students, telling them not to do this or that. That is what happens when a teacher is not all he or she should be. A truly excellent teacher will be like Confucius, peacefully exchanging views with their students, together getting to the heart of how to make these Three Realms of heaven, earth, and humanity all prosper and flourish together.

This relaxed, unhurried, assured spirit and modest, respectful attitude is something we should all aspire to. *The Analects of Confucius* is the embodiment of this ideal.

From it we can derive great strength, a strength that flowed from Confucius's inner heart. It is this strength that Mencius, another of China's great philosophers, who came after Confucius and further developed his ideas, described as "the noble spirit."

Only when the essences of heaven, earth, and everything in between combine within a person's heart can they be as powerful as this.

Our ultimate aim is to let the key principles of Confucius enter into our hearts, uniting heaven, earth, and humankind in a perfect whole, and giving us infinite strength.

In China today we often say that for a nation to survive and prosper, heaven must smile on it, the earth must be favorable to it, and its people must be at peace. It is to this harmonious balance that Confucius can lead us today.

What do we mean by heaven and humanity becoming one? We mean humankind and the natural world in perfect harmony.

We are working hard to create a harmonious society, but what is true harmony? It is more than just harmony within a small housing estate, or mere cordial relations between people. It must also include the entire natural world, harmoniously and happily living and growing together on this earth. People should feel reverence for the natural world and a willingness to follow its rhythms.

This is a kind of strength. If we learn how to temper this strength, and to draw on it, then we will be able to attain a breadth of mind like that of Confucius.

Confucius's attitude was extremely placid, yet his inner heart was very serious. This was because he had a deep strength within him, rooted in the strength of his convictions.

His student Zigong once asked him what conditions were necessary for a country to be at peace, with a stable government. Confucius's reply was very simple. There were only three: enough arms, enough food, and the trust of the common people.

First, the internal apparatus of the state must be powerful; it must have enough military power to protect itself.

Second, it must have sufficient supplies, so its people can be well fed and clothed.

Third, the common people must have belief in the nation.

This student was always full of awkward questions. He said that three conditions were too many: Tell me, if you have to do without one of these, which one would you remove first?

Confucius said: "Give up arms." So we'll do without military protection.

Zigong asked again: If you had to get rid of another one, which would you give up?

Confucius in all seriousness told him: "Give up food." We are willing not to eat.

He continued: "Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the common people will have nothing to stand on."

To do without food will certainly lead to death, but from ancient times to this day has anyone ever cheated death? So death is not the worst thing that can happen. The most terrible thing of all is the collapse and breakdown that follow when a country's citizens give up on their nation.

On a material level, a happy life is no more than a series of goals to be reached; but true peace and stability come from within, from an acceptance of those that govern us, and this comes from faith.

This is Confucius's concept of government. He believed that the power of faith alone was sufficient to hold a nation together.

In the twenty-first century we say that it is no longer enough to use the simplistic standard of GNP (Gross National Product) to assess the quality of the people's life in different countries. You must also look at GNH: Gross National Happiness.

In other words, to evaluate whether a country is truly rich and powerful, you should not just look at the speed and scale of its economic growth, you should look more at the feelings in the heart of each ordinary citizen — Do I feel safe? Am I happy? Do I truly identify with the life I lead?

At the end of the 1980s, China took part in an international survey, which showed that at that time the happiness of our citizens was only around 64 percent.

In 1991 we took part in the survey again. The happiness index had risen, reaching around 73 percent. This came from an improvement in our standard of living, as well as all the reforms that were being carried out around then.

But by the time we took part for a third time, in 1996, the happiness index had fallen to 68 percent.