

南懷瑾文化

# Old Sage, New Robes

A Fresh Perspective on the  
Confucian Analects  
Volume I

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English Version  
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reverse my ideas. Who knows? But to this day, I believe this is the case.

## What Is So Pleasurable About Learning?

Chapter I states the purpose, attitude, aims, methods, and so forth of Confucian “learning.” It is wrong to read the text as a bunch of separate sayings.

The Master said, “Is it not a pleasure to learn and often practice what one has learned? Is it not a delight to have friends come from afar? Is it not gentlemanly to be free from resentment when one's abilities go unappreciated by others?”

子曰：「學而時習之，不亦說乎？有朋自遠方來，不亦樂乎？人不知而不慍，不亦君子乎？」

All Chinese, old and young, know these lines by heart. According to our forefathers, one derives pleasure from studying, and one is delighted when friends come from afar. If Confucius had acquired sage status on this basis—the explanation by our forefathers—this sage would have lost a worshipper in me. I would not have even stepped foot in a Confucian Temple. Looking back at the days when our teachers and parents were always on our backs, making us bury our noses

in our books, would you call that a pleasure or drudgery? If Confucius had said “drudgery,” I would readily acknowledge him as a sage for his profound understanding of life.

As for the line “Is it not a delight to have friends come from afar,” it does not make a lot of sense. Why? Everyday people who depend on their monthly salaries for a living, including civil servants, are “rich for three days at most and poor for the rest of the month.” If friends show up on your doorstep for a free meal during your cash-strapped days, it is more like an albatross around your neck. As I see it, it is a burden—rather than a delight—to have friends come from afar.

As for the third question: Is it not gentlemanly to be free from resentment when one's abilities go unappreciated by others? Resentment, by definition, means that you harbor pent-up anger in your heart. Inside you feel annoyance, indignation, irritation and bitterness. So, if you are free from resentment when you feel unappreciated, then you can be called a gentleman? Well, then, I would rather not be a gentleman! When people do me wrong, I don't hit them, I don't cheat them, but I should at least be allowed the luxury of feeling indignation. Right? If I cannot even do that in order to qualify as a gentleman, I give up. It is beyond me.

The annotations follow a literal explanation of the text. That is why, for hundreds of years or even thousands of years, students were and still are really sick of the Four Books. They

have been reduced to religious-like tenets and rigid rules that must be obeyed.

In fact, this is not at all what those three questions are about. After you gain a true understanding of them, you will be convinced that Confucius was indeed a sage in the true sense of the word.

As for “Is it not, after all, a pleasure to learn and often practice what one has learned?” First, remember that after you have studied all of Confucius’ works and gained an understanding of all of Confucian thinking, you will know what he means by “to learn.” Conventional wisdom says that to learn is to put your nose in a book. That is wrong. In Confucian thinking, learning has little to do with reading books, as is explained in this very chapter of the *Analects*. Learning has little to do with literature. Those who write beautiful essays may be well-versed in literature. Those who are erudite may be eminent scholars. As for ‘learning,’ one who is completely illiterate may be quite accomplished in ‘learning’ in the Confucian sense, by being the best person and by doing all the right things. This is what is meant by the words “to learn.” I am not being innovative for innovation’s sake. After we have gone through the entire volume of the *Analects*, we will know that Confucius’ main concern was how to truly be a human being and do the right things.

## A True Man and an Incomplete Man

When we talk about truly being a human being, we tend to think of Zhuangzi, who also made mention of this. According to the book *Zhuangzi*, one who attains the Dao is a “genuine human” or, in his words, a “True Man.” After the Tang and Song dynasties, immortals were also called “True Men.” For example, Lü Chunyang (also known as Lü Dongbin) of the eight immortals is True Man Lü. In this day and age, the term ‘True Man’ has taken on a religious tint and has become almost equal to ‘God’ in Western religions and ‘immortals’ and ‘Buddhas’ in Chinese beliefs. In fact, True Man as a Daoist term used to be a reference to an individual accomplished in learning and in moral integrity. The opposite of a true person is an incomplete one. Albeit still a human being, an “incomplete man” is one who fails to attain the highest standards of morality. One who has attained completion as a person is a True Man in Daoist terminology and is, in Confucian thinking, a person of consummate learning. You see, the word “learn” is rich with a multiplicity of concepts.

Now, from where does one acquire learning? Learning is not just knowledge acquired through the written word. It is acquired from life's experience, through our personal conduct, and from the way we do things. One's character is shaped not just by book-learning but by life, at all times and in all places. That is why Confucius says later in this volume, “Observe the errors and you will know what is good.” When we witness

mistakes being made by others, take the opportunity to self-reflect so that we do not commit the same mistakes. This is what learning is all about. To apply Confucius' method of learning is to think, to practice, to experience, and to reflect at all times and in all places. Self-reflection is not easy at the beginning but when you have slowly made progress, your interest will be piqued, and you begin to derive “pleasure” from the process. This can happen to us in our everyday life. For example, if you see your friend doing something foolish, you might try to talk him out of it saying, “You really shouldn’t do that, buddy! It’s going to make things worse!” He won’t listen to you, which of course makes you feel sad, but in the end, you are proven right. While feeling sorry for him, you are still pleased at your own insight. This “pleasure” makes you smile inside, not a chuckle but a mild feeling of internal delight.

To recap, my first point is about the purpose of learning. The focus is on “often” and “practice.” Learning should take place at all times and in all places; saying that learning should be limited to the Four Books is deviating from the intention of the text.

## Enjoying the Pleasure of Loneliness

The second point is that all those committed to learning must be prepared for one thing, loneliness. In my personal learning, I have found that a true devotee of learning knows what

to do and what not to do, even upon the pain of death. Acts of benevolence and justice for the benefit of the world and for other people are worth doing even at one's own sacrifice. Therefore those committed to learning for its own sake must be prepared for a life of loneliness. An examination of history—in fact, an examination of Confucius' life—suffices to illustrate this point. He spent his life in loneliness. Now his statues receive lavish offerings everywhere but in his lifetime, he could not even afford the cheapest bento. And yet, he did not seek fame and fortune. How do we know that he did not? Because power and high rank were within his reach and his disciples did urge him to take it up, but he did not. You see, in the time of Confucius, there were only several million people in all of China, and he had three thousand students. Three thousand out of several million, and all of them were members of the elite of the various states. They were a formidable group. Some of them, the military strategist Zilu in particular, almost went as far as raising his fist and saying, "Sir, let's do it!" But Confucius turned a deaf ear to them. Why? Because he knew that if a society, even a peaceful one, that had not solved its cultural and educational problems was in no condition to move on to other issues. Basically speaking, it takes an ethical ideology and moral integrity to solve these problems. That is why he remained a poor man throughout his life as a teacher. My conclusion is that those committed to learning must not be afraid of a life of solitude. Only when you

are mentally prepared to accept this can you begin your learning process.

Even though those engaged in learning, in their lifetime, may not find someone who truly understands them, a genuinely accomplished learner eventually will, according to Confucius. Thus he went on to say, “Is it not a delight to have friends come from afar?” Someone who is painstakingly working out plans for the future generations of the country is lonely. The arrival of even one person who truly understands and appreciates what that person is doing can be a great delight. By “from afar,” he did not necessarily mean a friend who came from a place a world away. A few foreigners come here to study Chinese culture. This is supposed to bring us joy? That is just a way to bring in a little foreign money. That is not what Confucius means. The words “from afar” points to the fact that those who truly understand you are few and far between. There is an old saying, “If you have one true friend in your lifetime, you can die without regrets.” You may not have even one true friend throughout your lifetime, not in your wife, your children, or your parents. One may have had a spectacularly successful career without ever making a true friend who understands you inside and out. This is even truer for someone committed to learning. And so the line goes, “Is it not a delight to have friends come from afar?” Do not be afraid that no one understands you. With the passage of time, someone will. That someone may be far removed from you, not necessarily in space but perhaps in time. Confucianism did not gain ground

and take off until the reign of Emperor Wudi [r. 140 - 80 B.C.E.] of the Han dynasty. How far removed from Confucius was Dong Zhongshu [179-104 B.C.E.] who spread the word about Confucius' learning! And the same goes for Sima Qian [145 or 135 B.C.E. - ?] who, in his *Records of the Grand Historian*, wrote in glowing terms of Confucius. During the five hundred year interval, Confucius remained a lonesome soul. The line, "is it not a delight to have friends come from afar," now makes perfect sense.

## Who Understands You?

The third question "Is it not gentlemanly to be free from resentment when one's abilities go unappreciated by others?" This says that those committed to learning are not resentful even if they go through life without being understood by anyone.

Being free from resentment is very important. We all know how it is when someone "harbors bitterness against Heaven and men," as the saying goes. When one goes through a trying time, when one suffers a blow, one lays the blame at someone else's door, accusing other people of doing him or her wrong, of failing to offer help, and so on and so forth. This is what is to be expected from the average person. Worse yet, one may even rant against Heaven, resenting "Heaven and men."

When one is able to pursue learning for its own sake, one will harbor bitterness toward none, not to man nor Heaven, but

will instead ask, “Why can't I stand on my own two feet? Why haven't I gotten to where I want to be? The problem must be with my own learning, my moral cultivation, or the way I do things...” One capable of deep soul-searching harbors no bitterness against Heaven and men. In our present-day thinking, this is a very healthy mentality, and this is how a gentleman is supposed to be. Only such an individual is qualified for the pursuit of learning, of learning the Dao of life. This, so to speak, marks the beginning of the study of the philosophy of life.

To take the point a step further, the thread that runs through all three of these questions is that one first derives pleasure for oneself in the process of learning and in self-cultivation before one can share one's pleasure with the world. Therefore, the emphasis of these three questions is in “Is it not a delight?” in the second question. Let's look at a quote from Chen Meigong [1558-1639], a man of letters and calligrapher of the Ming dynasty, for reference: “What is happiness in solitude? With nothing to do, sitting quietly and spending one day as if it were two. What is happiness in company? A conversation with a scholar, because I profit more from it than from ten years of reading. What is happiness in a crowd? The emptiness which can contain multitudes.” One with such an open mind and spirit would be free from resentment when his abilities went unappreciated by others. Failing that, as his learning progressed and status rose, success would go to his head and he would become easily annoyed and impatient, both of which are

undesirable. By the time he reaches the gate of heaven, he would have little tolerance for anyone but himself.

## Love and Crime

The next line is from Youzi.

Youzi said, “It is rare for those devoted to their parents and elder brothers to defy their superiors outside the family; no such man has ever been known to stir up trouble. The gentleman devotes himself to what is fundamental in life. When the fundamentals are firmly established, the Dao will grow. Filial and fraternal devotion, is that not what is fundamental in life?”

有子曰：「其爲人也孝弟，而好犯上者鮮矣；不好犯上而好作亂者，未之有也。君子務本，本立而道生；孝弟也者，其爲仁之本與？」

Filial piety is stressed as being primary and essential in human life. Benevolence and filial piety are at the heart of Confucian learning. But filial piety was one of the “crimes” for which the Confucian shop was to be smashed.

Why? We must remember the monumental work by Sima Qian: *Records of the Grand Historian*. He did not take kindly to