

# Exploring the Core Common Principles in the Practical Cultivation of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism

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**Abstract:** When any culture is first introduced to a foreign country, friction and conflict inevitably arise due to differences in national character, political ethics, religious beliefs, customs, and habits. In order to reduce such conflicts, the introducers of the culture must find common ground between the two, facilitating its acceptance and development. Buddhism is no exception. When Buddhism was first introduced to China at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, it was introduced in the form of Taoist practices. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, with the rise of metaphysical thought, Buddhism further aligned itself with metaphysics. In order to survive, Buddhism continuously sought to reconcile its teachings with traditional Chinese culture. As Buddhism took root in China, debates regarding the merits and shortcomings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism emerged. Scholars studying the similarities and differences between these three schools gradually increased, and it became widely acknowledged that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism had many areas of overlap and integration. This paper mainly analyzes the commonalities of the three teachings in aspects such as "detachment from form," "respect for life and cherishing life," and "moral cultivation," emphasizing their similarities in views on life, morality, and the relationship between humans and nature. The research method employed is textual analysis, comparing the classic teachings of the three schools to reveal their similarities and differences in philosophical thought and ethics. The results show that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism share significant commonalities in their respect for life, emphasis on moral cultivation, and advocacy for the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

**Keywords:** Cultural Integration, Buddhism in China, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Respect for Life, Moral Cultivation.

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## 1. Respect the King and Reverence for the Dao, Unifying Principles

The Confucian doctrine advocating for involvement in worldly affairs represents the interests of the feudal ruling class [1]. Confucius founded Confucianism with the proposal of "governing the country through ritual" and the moral ideal of "universal benevolence," advocating for "self-restraint and returning to rituals." He hoped to restore and rebuild a good social order by strengthening ethics and implementing education, aiming to elevate the inner morality of individuals. His political ideas and ethical teachings contained a demand for the establishment of a unified centralized monarchic kingdom.

In the system of "benevolence," Confucianism advocates for "benevolence" as adherence to royal authority, playing a pivotal role in maintaining and strengthening feudal monarchical power [2]. To strengthen moral cultivation, Confucianism encourages learning from ancient sages. Confucius regarded Yao, Shun, and Yu as ideal sages. Mencius also stated, "All men can be like Yao and Shun," thus laying the theoretical foundation for Confucianism's internal sage and external king ideology. In the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu reformed Confucianism, further emphasizing the political ideal of "external kingship," and proposed the "Three Bonds" (the relationship of ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife), which gave Confucian rites absolute authority and binding power, thereby effectively maintaining the autocratic political system. Dong Zhongshu also sanctified Confucianism, starting from the idea of "the unity of heaven and humanity," and proposed the idea of "the divine right of kings." In the system of "rites," "loyalty" and "filial piety" are core elements.

Buddhism, founded to oppose Brahmanism, promotes the

"out-of-the-world" philosophy of life. Buddhism asserts that life is suffering, dividing it into eight forms of suffering: birth, aging, sickness, death, the suffering of encountering what one dislikes, the suffering of separation from loved ones, the suffering of unfulfilled desires, and the suffering of the five aggregates [3]. According to Buddhism, life is inherently "suffering," and the world people face is also filled with suffering. This is a typical pessimistic worldview, which essentially reflects the thoughts and emotions of the oppressed and exploited lower classes. Obedience to royal authority is also reflected in some Buddhist ethical norms, such as the promotion of loyalty to the king, "Serve Buddha with faith, serve the law with purity, serve the monks with respect, serve parents with filial piety, and serve the king with loyalty." This is clearly in line with the feudal kingly way. Buddhism also has classics discussing "filial piety," such as the story of "Mu Lian saving his mother" in the *Ulambana Sutra*, which embodies the spirit of filial piety. Buddhism believes that: "Those who place filial piety first, benevolence will spread across the four seas. Buddhism takes great compassion as its goal, transforming into the kingly way." Therefore, this filial piety education aligns with the kingly way, as moral cultivation contributes to good governance and national stability.

Taoism, founded by Laozi, took a different approach in response to the disintegration of rituals and music [4]. To criticize the active pursuit of benevolence and righteousness, Laozi proposed the Dao of nature. The core of Laozi's Taoist theory is the natural "Dao" of inherent nature. In contrast to Confucianism's active governance, Taoism advocates for non-action, hoping to achieve "doing nothing but achieving everything." Taoist non-action is not inaction but an ultimate form of action, absolute and pure. Laozi said: "The difficulty of governing the people arises from the rulers' actions, which

is why it is hard to govern." "The sage achieves no failure because of non-action, and no loss because of non-attachment." Here, Laozi highlights the dangers of forced actions and emphasizes the necessity of non-action. Zhuangzi also greatly admired non-action, stating, "The ancient rulers governed without action" and "The true person acts without force, the great sage does not act." Laozi and Zhuangzi's political philosophy of non-action provided rulers with a new model of governance, which maintains that by following natural principles, respecting, adapting to, and following objective laws, one can achieve the goal of "doing nothing but achieving everything" or "governing everything." From the beginning of its creation, Taoism has absorbed Confucian thoughts on loyalty to the king and filial piety, advocating for "one should be filial as a child and loyal as a minister," emphasizing that subjects should serve their rulers with devotion and loyalty.

## 2. Promoting Goodness and Abandoning Evil, Unifying Virtue and Conduct

Confucianism primarily studies human nature, personality, human values, and ideal character, fully affirming the noble position of humans in the universe [5]. Confucianism places great emphasis on moral cultivation, focusing on self-improvement of morality and the elevation of one's spiritual realm to realize human value and dignity. Therefore, Confucianism introduces the concepts of "benevolence" (仁) and "ritual" (礼). The "ritual" promoted by Confucianism is, in fact, a set of guidelines for regulating social ethics, moral behavior, and daily life. Confucianism uses benevolence and rituals to harmonize interpersonal relationships and regulate human behavior, in order to realize self-value and moral perfection. Confucianism emphasizes human relationships, promoting "benevolent love" (仁爱) and advocating for the group, emphasizing "selflessness for the benefit of others." As the saying goes, "Do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself" and "If you wish to establish yourself, help others establish themselves; if you wish to succeed, help others succeed." These sayings stress that people should have a heart of benevolence that extends to others, promoting universal love. With such a spirit of compassion, people will naturally act to promote goodness and abandon evil, being selfless and without desire, thus achieving the purpose of benefiting all sentient beings.

Buddhism, with the principle of "compassion in the heart," takes "compassion for all" as its moral starting point [6]. It warns people to "do no evil, and practice all good," urging individuals to pay attention to their moral cultivation. The fundamental practices in Buddhism are the Three Studies: morality (戒), meditation (定), and wisdom (慧). Among these, morality (戒) is a form of ethical cultivation. The "Five Precepts" (not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not drinking alcohol, and not lying) in Buddhism regulate human behavior with these five requirements. Additionally, Buddhism teaches the concepts of "karma" and "rebirth," advising people to abandon evil and embrace good. Buddhism aims to "save the world" and prioritizes "benefiting all life." The Mahayana tradition of Buddhism believes that without the liberation of all sentient beings, there is no true liberation for oneself. Therefore, it proposes the slogans "save the suffering and the needy" and "universal salvation of all

beings," showing a spirit of fearless self-sacrifice. How can one truly save all beings? Like Taoism, Buddhism advocates breaking the attachment to self. Buddhism teaches that life has three poisons: greed (贪), anger (瞋), and ignorance (痴). These three poisons are the primary causes of the attachment to self. Therefore, to benefit others, one must eliminate the three poisons and break free from self-attachment. Only then can one truly practice "selflessness to benefit others."

Taoism has absorbed and developed Confucian ethical concepts, while also focusing on personal moral cultivation in the pursuit of immortality and transcendence [7]. It states: "Those who seek immortality must be based on loyalty, sincerity, harmony, and benevolence. If one does not cultivate virtue but only seeks magical techniques, immortality cannot be achieved." This emphasizes the equal importance of virtue and the pursuit of transcendence; without virtue, one cannot achieve immortality. In daily life, Taoism also teaches people to do good and abandon evil, and to strengthen moral cultivation. Taoism believes that in order to truly achieve "selflessness," one must first break free from self-attachment. Laozi teaches: "Focus on breaking attachments and establishing words. One must let go of intellect, abandon actions, and cultivate purity." He believed that desire is the root cause of all evil, and attachment to greed leads one away from purity and is detrimental to life. Only by achieving "selflessness" can one truly "benefit others." Laozi also said, "The sage always helps others, so he never abandons them; he always helps things, so he never abandons them." Here, "helping others" and "helping things" refers to caring for all beings, which is essentially about "benefiting others."

## 3. Respect for Life and Cherishing of Life: No Difference

Confucianism, at its core, is a study of human nature, with Confucian culture centered around humanity. It values human dignity and cherishes human life [8]. The importance of life is clearly expressed in Confucius' sayings, such as "If one cannot serve people, how can one serve spirits?" and "If one does not understand life, how can one understand death?" Respect for people is essentially a form of cherishing life. This respect for life in Confucianism also influences its political views. Confucianism opposes war and advocates for benevolent governance. The Confucian approach to ruling a country with virtue, emphasizing governance through morality, is a manifestation of its respect for life and cherishing of life.

Buddhism, with its core principle of "compassion in the heart," holds life in even greater regard, and its moral guidelines are centered on "great compassion" and "compassion, joy, and equanimity." Buddhism teaches, "Saving a life is better than building a seven-story pagoda." "Human life is difficult to obtain, and the teachings of the Buddha are hard to hear." These expressions highlight the preciousness of life. In Buddhism's "Ten Heavy Precepts" and the "Five Precepts," the first rule is "not to kill," further emphasizing the importance Buddhism places on life.

Taoism also values life highly. Laozi, in response to the common human inclination to prioritize wealth and fame, reminds people to reflect: "Which is closer to you, fame or life? Which is more valuable, life or wealth? Which is more harmful, gaining or losing?" According to Laozi, life is more precious than fame or wealth. To focus on fame and fortune while ignoring the value of life is a complete reversal of

priorities. Zhuangzi also agrees with Laozi's view on the importance of life, stating that human life is more important than reputation or material gain, and that it surpasses everything. In the *Rang Wang* chapter, Zhuangzi uses fifteen fables to illustrate the idea of valuing life over fame and fortune, urging people to cherish life. "Today, many so-called gentlemen in society are willing to sacrifice their lives to serve others. Isn't this tragic?" To better cherish life, Zhuangzi also proposed a series of methods for maintaining health and preserving life: "Do good without seeking fame, avoid evil without fearing punishment, follow natural principles, and this will preserve your life and health." Taoism also has many methods for preserving life, such as alchemy, talisman painting, and cultivating immortality, aiming to prolong life. Clearly, Taoism holds life in great respect and cherishes it.

In summary, although Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism ("the Three Teachings") are different in many ways, they share common principles. In addition to the three major common points analyzed above, many scholars have pointed out other shared ideas. Some believe that the Three Teachings all embody a similar "unity of heaven and humanity" thought. Confucianism's "pursue understanding of heaven with sincerity," Taoism's "sit in forgetfulness to attain the Dao" and "unity of body and spirit with the Dao," and Buddhism's "attain the ultimate nature of the self" and "merge with the Dao" all reflect the idea of the unity between heaven and humanity. Others argue that the Three Teachings are all theories concerning the mind, body, and life, and they are consistent in their views on human nature. Confucianism advocates for "rectifying the mind and sincere intention," Buddhism for "clarifying the mind to see the nature," and Taoism for "clearing the heart so that the spirit becomes pure." This shows that although the teachings of the Three Schools are expressed differently, their core thoughts are unified. As the saying goes, "The Three Teachings have different paths, but the principles are the same."

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explores the core common principles in the practical cultivation of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, highlighting their shared values despite differences in

doctrine and practice. The research identifies key aspects such as the respect for life, moral cultivation, and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature as central to all three teachings. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of "benevolence" and "ritual," Buddhism advocates "compassion," and Taoism promotes "non-action." These principles collectively form a unified moral framework that encourages individuals to cherish life and cultivate virtue. Furthermore, the concept of "the unity of heaven and humanity" is evident in all three traditions, reflecting their shared philosophical approach. Despite differing practices, all three teachings underscore the universal value of moral cultivation, respect for life, and the importance of selflessness in benefiting others.

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