

# How to Change Your Mind: The Contemplative Practices of Philosophy

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## Abstract

The methods of philosophy may be associated with practices such as rational dialogue, logical analysis, argumentation, and intellectual inquiry. However, many philosophical traditions in Asia, as well as in the ancient Greek world, consider an array of embodied contemplative practices as central to the work of philosophy and as philosophical methods in themselves. Here we will survey a few such practices, including those of the ancient Greeks as well as examples from East Asian traditions. Revisiting the contemplative practices of philosophy can help us to rethink the boundaries of the discipline, the nature and scope of scholarly methods, and the role of philosophy in everyday life.

## 1. Introduction

In 2021, two new books were released with the same title: *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. The first, co-authored by Matthew Sharpe and Michael Ure, inaugurates a new book series at Bloomsbury on the topic ‘re-inventing’ philosophy as a way of life. The second, an edited volume by James M. Ambury, Tushar Irani, and Kathleen Wallace, is a contribution to Wiley’s series in metaphilosophy. All such publications hearken back to the 1995 book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, an English-language collection of the writings of Pierre Hadot, whose French-language publications in the 1980s introduced the notion of ‘philosophy as a way of life’ and the ‘spiritual exercises’ associated with it. As evidenced by the spate of new publications and the book series, the topic undoubtedly remains popular.

Hadot’s work, and the work that follows in his wake, focuses on the various practices of the ancient Greek philosophers, such as the Stoics and Epicureans, many of which can be described as meditations or structured contemplative methodologies aimed at self-betterment and self-cultivation. Such ‘spiritual exercises’ convey practitioners toward a way of living that is more rational, more reasonable, and, we might say, more existentially content. As Sharpe and Ure trace in their impressive history of the idea, the approach to philosophy

as a ‘way of life’ is repeatedly revived by various thinkers throughout European history such as the Italian Renaissance humanists and French Enlightenment literati. However, such revivals are ultimately unable to stem the tide that carries us to where we are today, where philosophy has become, we might say, somewhat pedantic, focused often exclusively on logical analysis and argumentation, and perhaps overly concerned with thought experiments that are, by design, abstractions. Without casting judgement on the contemporary approach to academic philosophy as a discipline, we may nonetheless note that it is not invested, at least not explicitly, in the kind of holistic project of self-formation and transformation that marked earlier Greek models.

Sharpe and Ure note that the central, founding premise of any approach to philosophy as a ‘way of life’ is the claim that ‘philosophical discourse, through teaching and intellectual exercises, can change people’s deep-set beliefs’ (Sharpe and Ure, 2021, p. 15). At stake, they say, is the philosopher’s contention that human beings are rational animals and hence that rational contemplation is meaningfully transformative. Nonetheless, there has been sobering data recently on what has been called the ‘backfire effect’, which documents our tendency to double down on our deeply held beliefs *especially* when we are presented with facts, evidence, or good argumentation to the contrary (see Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). In other words, when confronted with good reasons that we might be wrong about something, we tend to believe even more strongly that we are right.

Here, I want to pursue this issue cross-culturally. In response to the recent renewal of interest in philosophical contemplative practices, I explore examples from the schools of ancient Greek philosophy as well as the scholarly academies of Song-dynasty China (960–1279). This rich period in Chinese intellectual history has much to contribute to the ongoing discussion of ‘philosophy as a way of life’. In what follows, we will see many similarities in the Greek and Chinese practices themselves but some fundamental differences in the understanding of why those practices are effective. If we dig down into these differences, we will find divergent assumptions about the world, the mind, how the mind works, and what happens when we change it.

## **2. Philosophical Practices of the Greeks**

We begin with perhaps the most familiar philosophical practice of the Greeks – i.e., dialogue, as in the famous Socratic dialogues written by

Plato. When I teach these in my undergraduate classes, I often have students compose their own philosophical argument in dialogue form. Plato uses a set of tools that I want students to use – I want them to identify the unstated or hidden premises in a partner’s proposed claim; I want them to identify gaps or mistakes in another’s deductive reasoning; and I want them to understand the role of counterexamples and thought experiments in philosophical argumentation. The dialogue activity communicates to students what many philosophers today might consider the core values of philosophy as a discipline – namely, that philosophy is a *joint venture* of people in *conversation* seeking the *truth*.

Dialogue as a philosophical methodology was not special to Socrates because Socrates never wrote anything down, nor was it special to Plato because Plato was a playwright. As Pierre Hadot discusses, the question-and-answer style of self-examination is rooted in various ‘spiritual exercises’ that predate Socrates himself (Hadot, 1995, p. 89). Such a process brings a person to confront her own uncertainties and unearth the contradictions in her own beliefs, so as to develop the properly humble orientation toward truth – or, better to say, *the truth* – that transcends the finite human condition. In this way, the Socratic dialogue, when pursued to its end, results in a spiritual conversion on a path that aims at wisdom.

In addition to this practice of dialogue, which does remain recognizably philosophical today, there were other practices that we do not routinely use in the discipline any longer. These include types of meditations, memorization practices, and other contemplative exercises. For example, the Epicureans recommend various meditations to dispel the fear of death: we should contemplate for ourselves the time before we were born; we should feel, for ourselves, that our own non-existence prior to birth does not provoke any feelings of anxiety; and from there we should work to transfer this calm experience of our previous non-existence to our anticipation of a future non-existence after death (Sharpe and Ure, 2021, pp. 67–68).

Some such meditation exercises were linked to practices of memorization. In these, a practitioner aims to commit to memory certain philosophical doctrines, so as to be able to recall them to the mind in a contemplative mode. The contemplative mode itself is a kind of training for everyday life. By setting aside dedicated time to internalize philosophical doctrines, intentionally and calmly, the practitioner is able to face everyday stresses, anxieties, tragedies, and sorrows, and to apply her learning on the spot. For the Stoics and Neoplatonists, such memorized doctrines might be reminders to practice detachment from the vicissitudes of mortal life and align

instead with the true and unchanging nature of ultimate reality. For the Neoplatonists, this ultimate reality is the eternal cosmic unity on which our world of diversity depends. For the Stoics, ultimate nature referred to a material conception of ‘god’ or a god-principle as the animating intelligence that structures the cosmic body of which we all are a part. As I stated earlier, if we dig down into the philosophical practices of the Greeks, we eventually find that these are rooted in beliefs about the world, the mind, how the mind works, and what happens when we change it.

Let us return to our earlier definition of philosophy as a *joint venture* of people in *conversation* seeking the *truth*. This gives us a picture of philosophy that is, perhaps, somewhat static and purpose driven. It is static in the sense that this kind of philosophy leads to the analytical breakdown of arguments and assertions – philosophy is not an open-ended process but an exercise with a stopping point. This notion of philosophy is purpose driven, then, for that same reason – i.e., we are progressing toward a fixed goal that is, in most cases, a judgment of truth. We can now see that the static and goal-oriented nature of such spiritual exercises are in line with foundational beliefs regarding the unchanging nature of truth and reality in the ancient Greek sense.

We can also see that, obviously, there can be winners and losers. Some of us may take the dialogical journey of philosophy only to find out at some point along the way that we are wrong about something. The issue we face concerns how to admit mistakes and correct our course without provoking the backfire effect I mentioned earlier, which reveals our tendencies to double down on what we believe, especially in the face of good argumentation and evidence to the contrary. My point is that we have to practice taming those emotions that cause us to become defensive; we have to cultivate that reverence for truth, or at least for truth-seeking, that humbles us and coaxes us when needed to concede when we are wrong. This, I think, is a fuller picture of why philosophy *has* to be a way of life – it has to be a full set of physical, psychical, and spiritual practices, because rationality alone is not effective if we are not constitutionally and emotionally prepared for the truth-driven process of argumentation.

Perhaps the above picture takes us beyond the Greek approach to philosophy as a way of life, since the Greeks did seem to believe that contradiction was its own pain and that we naturally do not abide it. As Epictetus says, ‘Socrates knew that, if a rational soul be moved by anything [...] [s]how the governing faculty of reason a contradiction, and it will renounce it’ (quoted in Sharpe and Ure, 2021, p. 77). My concern, however, is that we actually do need a bit

more priming before we are so sensitive to the so-called pain of contradiction. This is why we turn now to a cultural context that is different, but which offers a set of practices with a similar goal – namely, helping us become the kinds of people who can change our minds.

### 3. Philosophical Practices in Song-Dynasty China

Our setting is Song-dynasty China and the scholarly culture of the academies associated with the tradition we often call ‘Confucianism’. This is a somewhat misleading translation for the tradition known as *rujia* (儒家), because it suggests that the historical figure of ‘Confucius’ (Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE) is the founder of a school. In fact, he was a member of the ‘lineage’ or ‘family’ (*jia* 家) of the *ru* (儒), a term better translated as ‘scholar’ or ‘literati’. The *ru*, whose lineage predates the life of Kongzi, were members of China’s educated elite: they were often employed as educators or government officials, they were versed in the classic scholarly and literary texts, and they were qualified to preside over various state rites and civic ceremonies as well as the rituals performed at ancestral shrines. In what follows, I use an alternative English word ‘Ruism’ instead of ‘Confucianism’ to talk about this rich heritage of what we might call, after Hadot, ‘scholarship as a way of life’.

Scholarship in this context is understood as ‘investigating things’ (*gewu* 格物) and ‘extending knowledge’ (*zhizhi* 致知), two terms taken from the chapter on ‘Great Learning’ (*Daxue* 大學) in the Chinese classic *Liji* (禮記) or *Book of Rites*. The investigation of things did have connotations of empirical inquiry into the natural world, but it was most closely associated with reading, reflection, and scholarly study. Practitioners would read the classics, the histories, and all the many commentaries on them in order to perceive certain patterns or tendencies (*li* 理). These might be seasonal cycles, for example, and their effects on agriculture, but most often the focus would be on political, social, and moral affairs. Observing tendencies in human aspirations and endeavours, both in relation to our successes and failures, can help us understand optimal ways of flourishing together in the world and also analyse the causes of mistakes and disasters. All such patterns were seen as interconnected, in that understanding imbalances in an agricultural context might be seen to help us understand imbalances in a social context, regarding strife, or in a medical context, regarding bodily health, and so on.

In other words, grasping patterns and tendencies in one area can be extended or applied to others. This is the extension of knowledge.

However, before we can do any of this – before we can observe anything, or read anything, or extend what we know – we have to prepare the mind to learn. The famous Song-dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) says, ‘Now, when you want to read books, you must first settle the mind to make it like still water or a clear mirror’ (今且要讀書, 須先定其心, 使之 如止水, 如明鏡) (Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*).<sup>1</sup> One would do this usually by a brief period of quiet sitting and calm breathing before even opening a book. At that point, reading itself is not so much an endeavour aimed at intellectual understanding – although intellectual understanding is one outcome – but rather, reading is an active and audible practice of recitation. As Zhu Xi says, ‘The value of a book is in reciting it. By reciting it often, we naturally come to an understanding’ (書只貴讀, 讀多自然曉) (*ibid.*).<sup>2</sup> Here, Zhu suggests that there is a kind of inevitability to intellectual insight. That is, the brain will respond to the words of a text according to certain predictable patterns and tendencies. Readers need only to let the process play out.

Zhu Xi describes this process via reference to dynamics such as vibration, resonance, and harmonization. He advises that we open our minds to the way a text itself resonates, even suggesting that we might sit still and hum as a way to calm the mind and perhaps better ‘tune in’ to a text’s meaning: ‘Scholars, when reading books, must collect themselves, sit up straight, relax their gaze, hum softly, empty the mind [of forms], and fully immerse themselves [in the texts]’ (學者讀書, 須要斂身正坐, 緩視微吟, 虛心涵泳) (*ibid.*).<sup>3</sup> We can see here that in making the mind still like water or clear like a mirror, we are not rendering it simply passive or receptive; rather, we are making it actively responsive so as to better sensitize it to the dynamics of the content that we are studying as it passes through our lips in recitation.

I have said twice now that if we dig down into certain philosophical practices, we will eventually find assumptions about the nature of the world and the mind which help undergird the understanding of *why* these practices are thought to be effective. Here, these quotes from

<sup>1</sup> See passage 12 at <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/10/zh>. I consulted Daniel K. Gardner (trans.) (1990, p.145).

<sup>2</sup> See passage 65 at <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/10/zh>. See also Gardner (1990, p. 137).

<sup>3</sup> See passage 21 at <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/10/zh>. See also Gardner (1990, p. 147).

Zhu Xi reflect his own assumptions about what the mind is and how it operates. To take us back to the Greeks for a moment, the important assumptions we saw there included the idea that human beings are uniquely rational, that rationality is at the core of what it means to be human, and that proceeding via reasoning takes us toward the true and unchanging reality at the foundation of all existence. In the Chinese context, we also find the assumption that human beings are rational but not uniquely rational. In different sources, animals are described as having some capacity for rational understanding, in that they can reason their way through tasks, or out of dilemmas, or toward their intended aims. Without digressing too far on this point, we may at least safely say that what the human mind accomplishes via investigating things and extending knowledge is not completely explainable simply by our capacity for rational thought. Moreover, in the Chinese context, we will see a different understanding of the nature of what is ultimately real and what that means for human life. To better understand this, we look next into relevant Chinese theories regarding the nature and origins of the cosmos, all of which play a special role in the philosophical practices of the Song.

### 4. Cosmological Assumptions in Song-Dynasty Thought

Common cosmogonies in Chinese sources often make reference to a primal state described variously as a great unity (*taiyi* 太一), as the unsurpassable supreme (*taiji* 太極), as limitless (*wuji* 無極), or as chaotic (*hundun* 混沌). Daoist sources may use terms that suggest a void, absence, or emptiness (*xu* 虛, *wu* 無, *kong* 空). In Ruist context, such terms most clearly function as descriptors of a primal state that has not yet been differentiated into any one thing or another – i.e., it is void of form, absent of distinctions, and empty of things.<sup>4</sup> This can be understood as ‘primordial *qi*’ (*yuanyi* 元氣), where *qi* refers to the basic ‘stuff’ – i.e., both matter and energy, both physical and psychical – that constitutes the existence of anything that exists at all. *Qi* is an important term which, in the Song dynasty, takes on an especially philosophical usage. The contemporary philosopher JeeLoo Liu refers to this as ‘qi-realism’: ‘1) *Qi* is permanent and ubiquitous in the world of nature. There is nothing over and above the realm of *qi*. 2) *Qi* is real in virtue of its causal power. It constitutes everything and is responsible for all changes’ (Liu, 2011, p. 61).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see Liu (2014).

English-language translations of *qi* include ‘psychophysical stuff’ (Gardner, 1990), ‘vital stuff’ (Angle and Tiwald, 2017), and ‘lively material’ (Ivanhoe, 2016). Such terms attempt to capture the sense in which *qi* can refer to material and physical things as well as intangible things, such as thoughts and emotions, or spiritual things, including what the Ruists thought to be the spiritual aspects of people both living and dead. The primal *qi* at our cosmological origin, as an undifferentiated matter-energy matrix not yet divided into either matter, energy, or anything at all, is hence a kind of pure potency.

Then, out of this initial phase comes the spontaneous differentiation into the polar aspects of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽), which can refer to differences such as heavy versus light, condensed versus dispersed, or coarse versus refined. This initial distinction allows for recursive interactions, in layers of escalating complexity, to produce more and more complex manifestations of ‘stuff’. Eventually, the distinctions result in the earth and the cosmos as we know them, with all the ‘myriad things’ (*wanwu* 萬物) of our everyday lives.

Here, we are finally coming back around to what the Ruists intend to accomplish when they sit and clear their minds before reading texts or studying. The primal formless *qi* is not only a feature of our cosmological origins, but it is a force that remains with us in the present. In other words, all existing stuff emerges from undifferentiated *qi*, whether we are talking about the first stuff at the inception of the cosmos or all the myriad things around us now that continue to live out, in the present, ongoing processes of materialization, persistence, and eventual disintegration. Meditation is that practice that allows the mind to relax into its primal formless state, a process that is believed to be healthy, refreshing, and invigorating. From this exercise in relaxation, or in settling the mind, we draw down on that primal potency that is the ever-present source of new forms and new ideas, enabling us to call forth those more refined thoughts and emotions that mark the wisdom of the sage (*shengren* 聖人).

Let me be clear that this is not a wilful or ego-driven creativity. By that I mean that the goal of Ruist meditation is to get our own egos out of the way, as it were, and to stay ahead of our ordinary thoughts and emotions so that we are not overtaken by them. Through philosophical practice, we can provide the right conditions in our own mental ecologies through which the power of formless *qi*, or the raw power of reality itself, can express, through us, its own natural tendency to manifest form. This, if anything, distinguishes the human from the animal in the Chinese context: we are a partner in the cosmic



project of reality. Or, in the words of the classic text the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記):

In the world only people of utmost integrity [*cheng* 誠] are able to make the most of themselves. Those who can make the most of themselves are then able to make the most of others. Those who can make the most of others are then able to make the most of things. Those who can make the most of things are then able to assist the Cosmos and Earth in their transforming [*hua* 化] and creating [*yu* 育]. Those who can assist the Cosmos and Earth in their transforming and creating can then join with them as a triad. (Johnston and Wang (trans.), 2012, p. 325)

In Ruist thought, it is the one who pursues scholarship as a way of life that attains this uniquely human capacity to be a partner in shaping the continued flux of reality.

Earlier we mentioned a Greek understanding of philosophy as a progression toward that eternal unchanging reality that underlies the world of temporary things we ordinarily inhabit. Accordingly, we mentioned the contemplative practices of the Greeks that help orient our minds along this path. In contrast, the Chinese tradition gives us a picture of philosophy that is, perhaps, more dynamic, creative, and open ended. It is dynamic in the sense that we mean the active conditioning of the mind to prime it for learning. Here, critical thinking is not absent but is a baseline minimum needed to avoid certain basic errors in reasoning. Beyond this baseline, philosophy is about conditioning and transforming the mind through scholarly discipline. For that same reason, it is open ended. The goal of philosophical learning is good living, framed in terms of a heightened state of flexibility or as a capacity for appropriate responsiveness in unfamiliar situations.

In other words, whereas we might understand rationality in the Greek context as putting us in touch with a pre-given true *reality*, here we see that our own dynamic creativity is part of the ongoing process of *realizing* what exists, moment to moment. Like with the Greeks, this philosophical process is thought to cultivate in us the kind of humbleness that makes changing our minds possible. This is not a humbleness born of awe before that eternal truth that transcends our understanding, as we might say for the Greeks. Rather, it is a humbleness born of an acceptance of the flux of things, or an acceptance that we must be ready to let go of what we think we know, at a moment's notice, because rapidly changing conditions often do not wait for us to catch up.

Now, at the outset, I promised two different accounts of what it means to change our minds, and I would not be surprised if readers feel, at the end, that both options are overly optimistic and maybe even a little naïve. Is it naïve to think that there is a greater, truer reality out there, other than the one we are currently experiencing? Is it naïve to think that contradiction is all that painful for people? Or, if we pose these questions from the Ruist perspective, is it naïve to think that reading a book has the power over the mind to bring about understanding naturally? Is it naïve to think that a meditation practice can actually put us in touch with primal cosmic forces? Some days, I do feel far from optimistic on these matters. That said, I have been inspired by the Ruist approach to learning and changing, which does not appeal to our capacity for intellectual deliberation so much as it bypasses our tendency to over-intellectualize according to our own agendas. It purports to give us the tools to train our minds well, despite our own tendencies toward what the Chinese tradition might call ‘pettiness’ or ‘small-mindedness’ (*xiaoren* 小人). At the end of his essay *Spiritual Exercises*, Pierre Hadot notes that ‘we have forgotten how to read: how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us’ (Hadot, 1995, p. 109). He hopes at most that his work encourages us to appreciate a few ‘old truths’ and the necessity of reading for ourselves the old books that contain them. That is undoubtedly a satisfying goal for this brief essay, as well.

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