

# Greatness in the Great Tradition

A serious, if quick, survey of what the world's sages and wisdom traditions have taught since humanity left prehistory reveals a remarkably consistent take on what greatness is. Here is a quick rundown on some key ideas of greatness from Laotzi, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, the Quran, Judaism, and Confucianism.

## Taoism

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Laotzi's wisdom encourages taking the path to intelligence, wisdom, strength, and power:

Knowing others is intelligence;  
knowing yourself is true wisdom.  
Mastering others is strength;  
mastering yourself is true power.

The goal of life is living in harmony with the source of Being. Simplicity, patience, and compassion guide one's life. In these two passages he sets out clearly how a gentle acceptance of these virtues is diametrically opposed to a life of acquisitiveness, which belies the basic truth that we already have everything we need.

Simplicity, patience, compassion.  
These three are your greatest treasures.  
Simple in actions and thoughts, you return to the source of being.  
Patient with both friends and enemies,  
you accord with the way things are.  
Compassionate toward yourself,  
you reconcile all beings in the world.”

Be content with what you have;  
rejoice in the way things are.  
When you realize there is nothing lacking,  
the whole world belongs to you.

## Zoroastrianism

The fundamental feature of the Zoroastrian moral code is to be good and to do good, and the community is expected to practice these virtues in everyday life by living lives committed to right thought, right speech, and right action. One who follows the way of *asha* is an *ashavan*, leading as righteous and virtuous a life as possible. Zoroastrians aim to be caring, generous, truthful (a term for evil is “the Lie”) and trustworthy. For believers, untruthfulness is a form of evil.

Zoroastrians adopted Aristotle’s idea of the Golden Mean, the idea that virtue is the mid-point between opposing extremes. Both extremes of asceticism and debauchery are to be avoided. Sin is thinking, saying or doing anything which adversely affects any part of the Good Creation.

## Hinduism

At first glance, Hinduism is, of all the world’s major religious traditions the one most hierarchical. The caste system in India has posed challenges to the modernization of Indian society.<sup>1</sup> Hinduism is by most accounts the world’s oldest religion, and it is

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[https://www.mercatornet.com/india\\_s\\_caste\\_system\\_hampers\\_its\\_rise\\_to\\_global\\_power#:~:text=The%20caste%20system%20perpetuates%20social.%2C%20healthcare%2C%20and%20employment%20opportunities](https://www.mercatornet.com/india_s_caste_system_hampers_its_rise_to_global_power#:~:text=The%20caste%20system%20perpetuates%20social.%2C%20healthcare%2C%20and%20employment%20opportunities). Accessed March 24, 2025.

without a doubt the richest and most complex. It is very difficult to sort out the religious aspects of Hinduism from the societal, secular, and cultural folkways that are a part of the Hindu's experience.

But the ethics of Hinduism leave little doubt about what makes a person good, and what makes a good person great. The most basic and most general answer is "following *dharma*." That begs the question because dharma itself has many different interpretations and applications. Still, at the end of the day Hinduism values and inculcates truth, right conduct, love, peace, and non-violence. All the devotional practices, the emphasis on karma, the way one deals with the endless cycle (samsara) of birth-death-rebirth point to living a life characterized by those virtues.<sup>2</sup>

## Buddhism

Buddha's rich life and thought has influenced the entire world directly or indirectly. Buddha's enlightenment, as I understand it, was triggered by the insight (or, if you please, was the insight itself) that human suffering essentially results from desire (itself a nuanced word), and that the path to dealing with that fundamental problem leads to letting go of the false perception of reality that stokes human desires. The way of meditation is the essential practice which bores down beyond that false perception and

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[https://www.mercatornet.com/india\\_s\\_caste\\_system\\_hampers\\_its\\_rise\\_to\\_global\\_power#:~:text=The%20caste%20system%20perpetuates%20social.%2C%20healthcare%2C%20and%20employment%20opportunities](https://www.mercatornet.com/india_s_caste_system_hampers_its_rise_to_global_power#:~:text=The%20caste%20system%20perpetuates%20social.%2C%20healthcare%2C%20and%20employment%20opportunities). Accessed March 24, 2025.

brings a person into harmony with the still-point at the center of life.

Meditation itself is where the Noble Eightfold Path leads. That path begins with right view, and continues with right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi (which can be thought of as centered meditative awareness).

It is typical of Westerners (I'm one) to want to get to the "point" of this, seeking what all it means. *Samsara* (the world of anxiety, striving, and acquiring) is the opposite of Nirvana (the state of enlightenment, blessedness, and peace). Buddha's teaching (*dharma*) emphasizes practices such as gratitude, thanksgiving, sharing, peacemaking, generosity, and quiet attentiveness. Here are a few of the Buddha's thoughts:

*If you knew what I know about the power of giving, you would not let a single meal pass without sharing it in some way.*

*No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path.*

*When you realize how perfect everything is you will tilt your head back and laugh at the sky.*

*Give, even if you only have a little.*

*You only lose what you cling to.*

*Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared. Whatever words we utter should be*

*chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill.*

*What is evil? Killing is evil, lying is evil, slandering is evil, abuse is evil, gossip is evil, envy is evil, hatred is evil, to cling to false doctrine is evil; all these things are evil. And what is the root of evil? Desire is the root of evil, illusion is the root of evil.*

*If you are quiet enough, you will hear the flow of the universe. You will feel its rhythm. Go with this flow. Happiness lies ahead. Meditation is key.*

*Meditation brings wisdom; lack of meditation leaves ignorance. Know well what leads you forward and what holds you back and choose the path that leads to wisdom.*

*If you meditate earnestly, pure in mind and kind in deeds, leading a disciplined life in harmony with the dharma, you will grow in glory. If you meditate earnestly, through spiritual disciplines you can make an island for yourself that no flood can overwhelm.*

## **Judaism**

In Judaism, greatness is not measured in comparison to others, but rather in comparison to ourselves. Jewish teach assumes that we are limited by our perceptible potential only if we fail to recognize that all we accomplish is solely by Hashem's [God's] grace and will. Our life mission is to transcend those limitations that are personal to us, rather than measuring ourselves in comparison to the achievements of others. In fact, if we fully acknowledge that everything we undertake is dependent upon

G-d's boundless capacity, even objectives beyond our innate capacity are achievable.

Greatness has emerged from the theater of war, embodied in the passion, devotion, resilience and bravery of our soldiers.

The Talmud (Bava Basra 10b) teaches that the World to Come is upside down, topsy-turvy. Individuals who are exalted in our physical world are diminished in the World to Come, and those marginalized in this world are acclaimed.

Many whom we perceive as lowly may have risen above their earthly capabilities and challenges to a far greater degree than those boasting celebrated achievements. In Judaism, authentic greatness is measured only within one's own capacity and circumstances.

## Jesus

The teaching of Jesus leaves little room to question the quality of greatness. It has nothing to do with wealth, power, prestige, erudition, eloquence, or control of others. It has everything to do with submission and wholehearted participation in a process of transformation of the whole person.

Here are the three synoptic versions relevant passages on the topic. The first, from Luke, sets this conversation within the Passover meal that Jesus (according to the Synoptic gospels) shared with his disciples on the night he was handed over to suffering and death:

*A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the*

*Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. [Luke 22:25-27]*

*But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. [Matthew 20:24-28]*

Possibly the most radical thing recorded in the gospels about Jesus is embedded in this Markan passage:

*Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. [Mark 9:33-37]*

The passage in the Fourth Gospel that addresses the question of greatest, albeit obliquely, is John 3 in the dialogue of Jesus with Nicodemus:

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.' [John 3:1-6]*

Taken together, these passages from all four gospels clearly indicate that Jesus taught that true greatness involves a radical transformation of the human person and also of human values. Greatness is neither the acquisition nor the exercise of power, authority, or status (he asks Nicodemus in the story above, "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not know these things?" indicating that position and knowledge do not equate with true greatness.

## Islam (Quran)

The Quran covers various aspects of life, including theology, morality, law, guidance, and stories of past prophets and civilizations. Here is a summary of characteristic Quran teachings touching on morality and practical living, from which we can deduce the implicit profile of greatness in human beings:

*The Quran emphasizes the oneness of Allah, the importance of faith, and the concept of monotheism.*

*It outlines the purpose of human existence, which is to worship and obey Allah.*

*The Quran provides guidance on moral values, such as honesty, justice, kindness, and compassion.*

*It stresses the importance of family and community ties, and the responsibilities towards parents, spouses, and children.*

*The Quran encourages self-reflection, self-improvement, and personal accountability.*

*It emphasizes the importance of seeking knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.*

*The Quran promotes social justice, equality, and fairness in all aspects of life.*

*It prohibits immoral acts such as murder, theft, adultery, and dishonesty.*

*The Quran highlights the importance of patience, perseverance, and gratitude in times of difficulty.*

*It promotes peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity among people of different faiths and backgrounds.*

*The Quran emphasizes the sanctity of life, the protection of human rights, and the prohibition of oppression and injustice.*

*It provides guidance on family law, inheritance, business transactions, and other aspects of daily life.*

*The Quran encourages the pursuit of knowledge and science, and the appreciation of nature as signs of Allah's greatness.*

*It warns against arrogance, pride, and selfishness, and encourages humility, modesty, and generosity.*

*The Quran promotes modesty and decency in dress and behavior.*

*It emphasizes the importance of prayer, fasting, and other acts of worship as means of spiritual purification and connection with Allah.*

*The Quran teaches the concept of accountability in the Hereafter, where people will be judged based on their actions in this world.*

*It encourages forgiveness, reconciliation, and resolution of conflicts through peaceful means.*

*The Quran emphasizes the importance of community and cooperation among Muslims.*

*It provides guidance on the rights and responsibilities of husbands and wives in marriage.*

*The Quran promotes good governance, justice, and leadership based on righteousness and accountability.*

*It encourages charitable giving and caring for the less fortunate members of society.*

*The Quran emphasizes the importance of truthfulness, trustworthiness, and fulfilling promises.*

*It prohibits intoxicants and gambling as harmful to individuals and society.*

*The Quran encourages the pursuit of lawful livelihood and prohibits usury and unfair business practices.*

*It promotes modesty and protection of privacy in personal and social interactions.*

*The Quran teaches the importance of defending oneself and others against aggression and oppression.*

*It promotes environmental conservation and sustainable use of resources.*

*The Quran provides guidance on dealing with adversity, grief, and loss.*

*It concludes with a call to submit to Allah's will, follow the guidance of the Quran and the example of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and strive for righteousness in all aspects of life.<sup>3</sup>*

## Confucianism

The core idea is *ren* (“humaneness,” “benevolence”), signifying excellent character in accord with *li* (ritual norms), *zhong* (loyalty to one’s true nature), *shu* (reciprocity), and *xiao* (filial piety).

Together these constitute *de* (virtue). [Mencius](#), [Xunzi](#), and others sustained Confucianism, but it was not influential until Dong Zhongshu emerged in the 2nd century BC. Confucianism was then recognized as the Han state cult, and the Five Classics

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<sup>3</sup> See the following which is copied *verbatim* from the cited source. Compare it with the article from the Encyclopedia Britannica below.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/summary-holy-quran-30-key-points-zeeshan-jawaid/>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quran>

became the core of education. In spite of the influence of [Daoism](#) and [Buddhism](#), Confucian ethics have had the strongest influence on the moral fabric of Chinese society.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>[https://www.britannica.com/summary/Confucianism#:~:text=The%20core%20idea%20is%20ren,and%20xiao%20\(filial%20piety\).](https://www.britannica.com/summary/Confucianism#:~:text=The%20core%20idea%20is%20ren,and%20xiao%20(filial%20piety).) Accessed March 22, 2025.