

The Greatest Philosophers: Illuminated Guides to a Full Life

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When we speak of philosophy, we should not confine ourselves to the fact that it is an ingenious combination of words. It is, above all, a path toward living a great existence. To live it, we must be stoic — that is, self-denying in the Hellenic sense of the doctrine.

Socrates, who wrote nothing for posterity, was the master of Plato (who bequeathed to us in writing the Socratic work, originally spoken so as not to "perpetuate" any errors in the face of time). According to Socrates, one must "know that one knows nothing", for in this way we may come to know ourselves — "know thyself". And through that knowledge Plato completed the message, holding that the measure of a person's character is given by the way they exercise power: power not only over others but, above all, over themselves.

With that thought in mind we must mention Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who held that we should exercise self-control along the line he professed — that care of the body is a moral duty, since in this way we may tame the mind through the regular practice of meditation. In that duality of focused body and mind, the chemical reactions of the organism would be ready to receive, in full, the Confucian ideal that we should expect nothing from others but demand everything of ourselves, in a steady change of character directed toward pure pacifism, which avoids every form of violence and so allows us to feel victorious in ourselves. (Confucius, after all, left us the doctrine that when we let ourselves be carried by hatred, the person to whom that terrible feeling is directed has already defeated us.) As the Dalai Lama put it: never ruin your present for a past that has no future.

This self-knowledge — which, as we have seen, passes through the Buddha, Confucius, and the Dalai Lama, culminating in the Socratic maxim that we come to know ourselves — is not easy. Much resilience is required to reach the state of enlightenment, especially in a troubled and inhuman world. It is fitting, then, to recall Saint Teresa of Ávila, for whom patience is a virtue. Together with the maxims of Laozi — that a great journey begins with a small step, and that one should abstain from every form of competition, including on the road traced toward enlightenment — we shall be able, in faithful following of the Buddha, of Confucius, and of the Dalai Lama, to be stoic enough to rejoice in being people of ample measure of character, as Plato defined it.

One detail: with the exception of Socrates and Plato, these great figures never met one another. Their thoughts did — in a wide spiral of wisdom, purity, and light.

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