

# Practical Session 2

Early Indian & Chinese Philosophy: from Ritual to Knowledge, from Rules to Non-Action

# Today's learning goals

Explain why Indian thought shifted from ritual practice to inner knowledge and meditation.

Compare the Vedic worldview with later “life is suffering” perspectives and identify possible causes.

Test two models of identity: Atman (Self) vs Anatman (no permanent Self).

Debate Confucian “rules” (Li) vs Daoist “non-action” (Wu-Wei) in modern contexts.

Use key terms accurately in English (Brahman, Atman, Samsara, Dharma, Dao, Qi, Ren, Li, Wu-Wei...).

## Warm-up: Doing → Knowing

Think of an activity you do “by habit” (a ritual): studying, training, prayer, routines...

When does a routine become meaningful knowledge (insight) rather than repetition?

Share one example in pairs (60 seconds each).

# Discussion 1: Ritual vs Knowledge

Question: Why did Indian thought move away from “doing” (rituals) to “knowing” (meditation & philosophy)?

Consider: limits of external ritual (does it guarantee inner change?)

Consider: new social realities (cities, debate culture, wandering teachers)

Consider: Upanishadic focus on inner self-inquiry and unity (Atman ↔ Brahman)

Goal: produce 2–3 plausible “triggers” and defend them.

## Discussion 2: The “Pessimism Turn”

Question: Why did early Vedic optimism shift toward the idea that “life is suffering” and needs escape?

Possible angles: dissatisfaction with worldly success; impermanence; ethical anxiety; social instability

Connect to key aim: liberation (moksha / nirvana) from Samsara (rebirth cycle)

Prompt: Is “pessimism” the right label, or is it a more realistic diagnosis?

# Task 1: Reflection on Identity (Atman)

## Setup

Work in groups of 3–4.

2 minutes silent writing → 6 minutes discussion.

Be charitable: do not mock anyone's view.

## Guiding prompts

If you strip away your name, memories, body, and social roles—what is left?

Is the “leftover” personal... or universal consciousness (Atman)?

Why could this realization feel liberating (less fear, less attachment, more clarity)?

**Output: One group statement: “The Self is ... because ...”**

# Debrief: Why “liberating”?

If my deepest identity is not my roles or possessions, then loss becomes less threatening.

If my deepest identity is universal, then separation from others is partly an illusion.

If knowledge is transformative, then insight—not ritual alone—can change how suffering is experienced.

Bridge question: What changes if Atman = Brahman (unity)?

## Task 2: The Identity Crisis (Anatman)

### Setup

Pairs → then full group.

Argue both sides before choosing.

### Guiding prompts

If there is no permanent Self (Anatman), who gets reborn?

How can Karma work without a consistent “person” to receive consequences?

Is a causal chain (process) enough, or do we need a stable substance (self)?

**Output: Two models on the board: “substance self” vs “process self”**

# Bridge idea: Karma without a permanent self

One way to think: continuity  $\neq$  identity.

Example analogy: a flame lighting another flame (connection without a single unchanging entity).

Key question: what matters morally—an unchanging owner, or reliable cause-and-effect?

# Task 3: Desire vs Progress

## Setup

Split the room: Team A vs Team B.

Prepare 2 arguments + 1 counterargument.

## Guiding prompts

If craving causes suffering, should we stop wanting anything?

Does this include progress, ambition, activism, or social change?

Can we distinguish “craving” from “healthy intention” or “compassionate action”?

**Output: Mini-debate + one compromise position**

# The paradox of rules: Confucius vs Lao Tzu

Confucius: more rules (Li) → better people → social harmony.

Lao Tzu: more rules → more criminals → artificial society.

Question: Who is right? When do rules civilize, and when do they corrupt?

Scenario: A city faces rising fraud—do you add regulations or simplify and trust?

# Modern Wu-Wei (Non-Action)

Is “non-action” possible in a hyper-active world?

Interpretation: not laziness, but “effortless action” aligned with reality.

Prompts: When does pushing harder backfire? When does ‘letting it happen’ work better?

Micro-practice: choose one area this week to reduce forced control (communication, work, habits).

# Beyond Good and Evil: Yin & Yang

Yin/Yang is not “Good vs Evil” but complementary forces.

Can a moral system work without an absolute Evil?

Does the “shadow” (Yin) always have a right to exist?

Prompt: What happens to ethics if we focus on balance rather than victory over evil?

# The concept of Qi

If everything is made of the same energy (Qi) in different states...

...what does that imply about mind and body (two substances or one continuum)?

...what does that imply about humans and nature (separation or interdependence)?

Prompt: In a Qi worldview, what would “health” or “harmony” mean?

# Review exercise: connect the concepts

Complete the sentences (work in pairs, 6 minutes):

- 1) The transition from Vedic hymns to the Upanishads marked the search for unity between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2) While Confucianism insists on the importance of \_\_\_\_\_ for harmony, Daoism calls for \_\_\_\_\_ as following nature.
- 3) The primary goal of most Indian schools is to escape from \_\_\_\_\_, which requires understanding one's \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4) According to Confucius, only one who possesses true \_\_\_\_\_ can be called a “noble man”.
- 5) In Chinese thought, the \_\_\_\_\_ is not a deity, but the ineffable “Way” through which the life energy \_\_\_\_\_ flows.
- 6) Members of the \_\_\_\_\_ movement rejected the authority of the Vedas, arguing for personal experience over tradition.

# Self-check key

- 1) Brahman / Atman
- 2) Li / Wu-Wei
- 3) Samsara / Dharma
- 4) Ren
- 5) Dao / Qi
- 6) Sramana / Nastika

# Vocabulary (Indian thought)

Brahman — the ultimate, impersonal reality / absolute ground of being.

Atman — the inner Self; in the Upanishads, ultimately identical to Brahman.

Samsara — the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Dharma — cosmic/moral order; duty; the path that sustains harmony.

Upanishads — late Vedic texts shifting focus from ritual to inner inquiry.

Astika / Nastika — accept / reject the authority of the Vedas.

Shramana — wandering ascetic “seeker” pursuing liberation through practice.

# Vocabulary (Chinese thought)

Dao (Tao) — the “Way”: the ineffable principle and natural flow of the universe.

Qi — life energy; one continuum expressed in different states.

Li — ritual/propriety; structured norms that shape character and society.

Ren — humaneness/benevolence; moral core of the “noble person”.

Wu-Wei — effortless action / non-interference; acting in alignment with nature.

Ziran — naturalness / spontaneity (“self-so”).

Yin & Yang — complementary forces, not Good vs Evil.

# Closing (exit ticket)

Write on a sticky note / in chat:

- 3 key terms you can now define in English
- 2 tensions you noticed (e.g., ritual vs knowledge; rules vs freedom)
- 1 question you still have