



WHAT IS RÉN 仁?

“ The wise are not confused, the Rén are not anxious, the courageous are not afraid.

THE ANALECTS 9:29

RÉN 仁 IS KNOWN in English in many forms. It is commonly translated as benevolent or humane, kind or virtuous, but the Chinese character 仁 carries a lot more meaning than that. To begin to understand Rén 仁, we should look at one of the simplest words in Chinese, rén 人, which means person. It is written in two strokes and it depicts a person walking.

Rén 仁 has roots in the word for person, rén 人, but it also builds upon it. Though they are homophones (pronounced identically), they are written differently and carry different meanings.

The Chinese character Rén 仁 is made up of two parts. On the left is the radical rén 亻, which is a simplified version of the character for person rén 人. A radical is used in combination with other characters to form more complex words and the radical would hint to the reader as to the purpose of the word. In this case, a complex word with the radical rén 亻 would imply that it has to do with people. To the right of the character Rén 仁 is the character èr 二 for the number two. So essentially the character for Rén is a combination of the characters for person and the number two, thus literally translated as meaning two people and the connection or relationship between two people.

The character èr 二 can also be interpreted visually as a reference to heaven (the top line) and earth (bottom line), which is seen as being a reference to the world. And in this case, the combination of the characters for person and the world could extend to be about our relationship with nature. Taking in both interpretations, Rén 仁 represents the coexistence of people with each other and with the world.

RÉN IS LOVE

When teaching the principles of Rén, Confucius understood that our lives are intricately connected to, and that we coexist with, the world around us. His teachings focus on the action of the individual, but emphasise its impact on



society and nature. He knew that in order for us to thrive as individuals, we need our environment – society and nature – to thrive too. This creates three layers of experience for achieving a positive co-existence:

- In the first layer, we do something good directly for our own gain. This gives us a sense of accomplishment.
- In the second layer, we do something good directly for someone else's gain. This gives us a sense of accomplishment and through empathy, we share the other person's happiness.
- In the third layer, we do something good to improve our environment (from local to international communities and nature). An improved environment allows us to thrive as individuals, which benefits ourselves and others in the affected community.

Knowing that we directly affected a positive change also gives us a sense of accomplishment, which shows how interlinked these three layers are.

The connectedness of experiences we have highlights another translation of Rén 仁, which is 'love' or 'universal love'. Here, 'love' is not a romantic feeling but a need to be kind – to treat everyone and the world around us with basic compassion and care. Because our individual feeling of fulfilment is directly affected by our world, the love of Rén 仁 is both 'human kind' as well as of

'humankind'. Confucius saw love as a fundamental value and reminded us in his teachings that doing good is what we are built for.

WHY DO WE NEED RÉN NOW?

One who is not Rén can neither be content in poverty nor be happy for long in wealth. The learned are attracted to Rén because they feel at home in it. The wise are attracted to Rén because they find it to their advantage.

THE ANALECTS 4:2

There is no doubt that our lives now in the twenty-first century are a very different experience to those in the fifth century BCE when Confucius was alive. While there has been much development over the 2,000 years in many aspects of the world around us, our fundamental needs and what gives us fulfilment haven't really changed. Learning about the philosophy behind Rén and being guided by Confucius will ground us and give us space to engage with society and nature – and, ultimately, help us to become happier people.

In our fast-paced, technology-laden lives, we are constantly distracted by the day-to-day rhythms of work and social events, often without pause. As a society, we are only now starting to practise more self-care and learning to protect our mental health, but these rituals are often scheduled into our day, like classes or workouts. Much like life itself, Rén requires a lifelong commitment to experience its rewards. Unlike specific mindfulness techniques or self-development courses (which are wonderful and can be undertaken while studying Rén), Rén isn't prescribed through daily routines or progressive exercises. As a philosophy, Rén requires a focus and understanding which through time, engagement and application will grow and strengthen in you.

Having firm and clear ethics drawn from Confucius's teachings of Rén will also alleviate the anxieties of modern social expectations that demand our energy now more than ever before. When engaging with online media and news, we are expected to make regular moral judgements, often without the time or resources to clearly research and understand the issues at stake. Being able to understand how our actions affect ourselves and the world around us through Rén brings reassurance and allows us to contain any doubts and anxieties we might have – a lesson anyone living today will no doubt find useful.

DIFFERENT MINDSETS

It is common to learn in history, especially in Western philosophy, that humans are naturally selfish and governed by self-interest. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes said in his work *Leviathan*, which discusses the concept that, of the 'voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself'. While the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud went further to say in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* that civilisation is a 'human achievement that stands in opposition to human nature, [where] humans are inherently unhappy as they are forced to surrender their true instinctual/selfish nature under the oppressive but necessary civilizing forces'.

There has been some pushback against this idea that people are bad. In his book *Human kind: A Hopeful History*, Rutger Bregman examined the historic claims that led to this assumption and actually came to the conclusion that 'it is realistic, as well as revolutionary to assume that people are good'. Bregman is one of a number of Western thinkers who have mooted the idea that humans are intrinsically good. These include Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who influenced the progress of the Enlightenment throughout Europe with his political theory on 'General will' and believed that 'one man by nature is just as good as any other; [and] a man could be just without virtue and good without effort'.