Honestly, you cannot really understand Ancient Egypt without a background in the cultural mindset all Egyptians shared from the start to the finish of their civilization known as MA’AT. Ma’at is one of those words that is very, very difficult to translate because it can actually mean a lot of things.

Sometimes Ma’at is shown as a goddess Ma’at. Notice the feather on her head. The feather is actually “balancing” on her head. Try to balance a feather on your head sometime. Is it easy? You are right it is not easy and neither is understanding this concept. Ma’at’s feather being balanced symbolized to the Egyptians that doing the “right thing” and keeping balance in your life is not always easy. I think we can all relate to this fact.

Again you must understand the importance of Ma’at to understand why this civilization was able to last over 3,000 years. Ma’at is one of the reasons and it is almost like glue which held them together for so long. I am going to give this “a go” and try to translate Ma’at. Ma’at is the balance between night and day, happiness and sadness, good and bad, order and chaos, tradition and innovation and life and death. Every Egyptian believed that Ma’at needed to be maintained in their daily lives and if they managed to balance their lives correctly by doing the “right things,” all of their fellow Egyptians would be able to as well including their revered, honored god-king the pharaoh. The Egyptians shared a common responsibility in matters large and small to promote, protect and maintain their culture and civilization. They understood they had to do their part. I guess you could call this a “team” approach to life.

Do you want an example of Ma’at in Egyptian culture? During the months June through September the Nile flooded and inundated Egyptian farmland. Ninety percent of Ancient Egyptians were farmers and this flood basically made the entire land “unemployed.” This flood season was known as Akhet and from its earliest times Egyptian kings took full advantage of this Akhet season and his unemployed farmers. Egyptians were required to pay an annual grain tax, but they were also required to work for the pharaoh during the flood season. This work tax was later known as “corvee.” The work completed was at the discretion of the pharaoh. He made the rules and he decided what was done. It could be to maintain or build the world’s first dams, irrigation canals or it could be to train and go to war and yes, even build a pyramid. The pharaoh in turn would do his part and would feed, cloth and shelter his workers and their families during this time. This arrangement and cooperation amongst all Egyptians regardless of social levels is evidence of Ma’at.

The great accomplishments and longevity of the Ancient Egyptians is in my amateur historical opinion a direct result of Ma’at. Imagine today if our president, our government asked all males in our American society between the ages of 12 to 60 to leave their homes and go and do whatever they were told to do and get this: No payment for service. We are very different than the Egyptians no doubt because a vast majority of us would simply say, "No way." This does not mean we do not cooperate, but it does show us clearly we cooperate very differently than the Ancient Egyptians. What would make them do as the pharaoh asked? I think you would have to believe he was a living god and you were doing your part in maintaining the "delicate balance of Ma’at." I will explain a negative side to Ma’at and one that will get the Egyptians in trouble as the course progresses, but I think it is very good that we have tried to tackle this cultural mindset from the start of our study. Why do the Egyptians do what they do? Ma’at. That is the very simple yet very complicated answer. How lucky are we to get a chance to study such a fascinating civilization.