Eastern Perspectives on Positive Psychology 3

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A Matter of Perspective

"A good fortune may forebode a bad luck, which may in turn disguise a good fortune." This Chinese proverb exemplifies the Eastern perspective that the world and its inhabitants are in a perpetual state of flux. Thus, just as surely as good times occur, so, too, will bad times visit us. In turn, life's challenges may be harbingers of our triumphs. This balance of good and bad is sought throughout life. Indeed, this expectation of and desire for balance distinguishes Easterners' views of optimal functioning from the more linear path taken by Westerners to resolve problems and monitor progress (see Chapter 2). Easterners thereby seek to become one with the march of changes, finding meaning in the natural ups and down of living. Ever adaptive and mindful, Easterners move with the cycle of life until the change process becomes natural and **enlightenment** (i.e., being able to see things clearly for what they are) is achieved. Unlike Westerners, who search for rewards in the physical plane, Easterners seek to transcend the human plane and rise to the spiritual one.

Positive psychology scholars aim to define human strengths and highlight the many paths that lead to better lives (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2002; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). As Western civilization and European events

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and values shaped the field of psychology as we know it today in the United States, it is not surprising that the origins of positive psychology have focused more on the values and experiences of Westerners. Increasingly, however, scholars are taking the broader historical and cultural contexts into account to understand strengths and the practices associated with living well (see, e.g., Leong & Wong, 2003; Schimmel, 2000; Sue & Constantine, 2003). The previously neglected wisdoms of the Eastern traditions are being consulted to add different viewpoints about human strengths.

In this chapter, we discuss Eastern perspectives and teachings in terms of their influences on positive psychology research and applications. First, we introduce the main tenets of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism and demonstrate how each tradition characterizes important strengths and life outcomes. Next, we discuss some of the inherent and fundamental differences between Eastern and Western value systems, thought processes, and life outcomes sought. We also articulate the Eastern idea of the "good life" and discuss the associated strengths (embedded more in Eastern cultures than in Western ones) that assist Easterners in attaining positive life outcomes. We then close with a discussion of Eastern views of the concepts of compassion and harmony as the two primary and necessary qualities for achieving the good life.

Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism

To summarize thousands of years of Eastern ideology and tradition is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, we highlight the basic tenets of the four influential Eastern disciplines of **Confucianism, Taoism** (traditions generally associated with China), **Buddhism,** and **Hinduism** (rooted in traditions of Southeast Asia). As is the case in the Western historical context, the concept of the "good life" has existed within the Eastern tradition for many centuries. Contrary to the Western culture's idea of optimal functioning as occurring intrapsychically, Eastern cultures hold that an optimal life experience is a spiritual journey involving transcendence and enlightenment. This latter search for spiritual transcendence parallels the Westerner's hopeful pursuits for a better life on Earth.

CONFUCIANISM

Confucius, or the Sage, as he is sometimes called, held that leadership and education are central to morality. Born during a time when his Chinese homeland was fraught with strife, Confucius emphasized morality as a potential cure for the evils of that time (Soothill, 1968). Confucian

ethics, which have been compared to the works of the Western philosopher Immanuel Kant, have clear definitions and relatively inflexibile meanings (Ross, 2003; e.g., "Your job is to govern, not to kill," *Analects*, 12:19, in instructions to rulers who resort to force). The tenets of Confucianism are laden with quotations that encourage looking to the welfare of others. In fact, one of Confucius's most famous sayings is a precursor of the Golden Rule and can be translated, "You would like others to do for you what you would indeed like for yourself" (Ross, 2003; *Analects* 6:28). Such teachings are collected in several books, the most famous of which is the *I Ching* (the *Book of Changes*).

The attainment of virtue is at the core of Confucian teachings. The five virtues deemed central to living a moral existence are *jen* (humanity, the virtue most exalted by Confucius); *yi* (duty); *li* (etiquette); *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (truthfulness). The power of *jen* stems from the fact that it was said to encapsulate the other four virtues. The concept of *yi* describes appropriate treatment of others and can be defined as the duty to treat others well. The concept of *li* promotes propriety and good manners along with sensitivity for others' feelings (Ross, 2003). Finally, the ideas of *zhi* and *xin* define the importance of wisdom and truthfulness, respectively. Confucian followers must strive to make wise decisions based on these five virtues and must be true to them as well. Continual striving for these virtues leads the Confucian follower to enlightenment, or the good life.

Confucius

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TAOISM

Ancient Taoist beliefs are difficult to discuss with Western audiences partly because of the untranslatable nature of some key concepts in the tradition of Taoism. Lao-Tzu (the creator of the Taoist tradition) states in his works that his followers must live according to the Tao (pronounced "Dow" and roughly translated as "the Way"). The Chinese character portraying the concept of the Way is a moving head and "refers simultaneously to direction, movement, method, and thought" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 42; Ross, 2003); moreover, it is meant to embody the ubiquitous nature of this force. Tao is the energy that surrounds everyone and is a power that "envelops, surrounds, and flows through all things" (Western Reform Taoism, 2005, p. 1). In this regard, Lao-Tzu (1994) described the Way in the following lines:

The Way

> The Way can be spoken of,
> But it will not be the constant way;
> The name can be named,
> But it will not be the constant name.
> The nameless was the beginning of the myriad creatures;

> The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
>
> Hence constantly rid yourself of desires in order to observe its subtlety;
>
> But constantly allow yourself to have desires in order to observe what it is after.
>
> These two have the same origin but differ in name.
>
> They are both called dark,
>
> Darkness upon darkness
>
> The gateway to all is subtle. (p. 47)

Lao-Tzu

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Although Lao-Tzu is eloquent in depicting his views on the Way, many readers of these lines are left with some uncertainty about their actual meaning. According to Taoist traditions, the difficulty in understanding the Way stems from the fact that one cannot teach another about it. Instead, understanding flows from experiencing the Way for oneself by fully participating in life. In this process, both good and bad experiences can contribute to a greater understanding of the Way. It also is said to encapsulate the balance and harmony between contrasting concepts (i.e., there would be no light without dark, no male without female, and so on) (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2004). On this latter point, the *yin* and *yang* symbol (described in more detail subsequently) reflects this ever-changing balance of opposing forces and desires.

Achieving naturalness and spontaneity in life is the most important goal in the Taoist philosophy. Thus, the virtues of humanity, justice, temperance, and propriety must be practiced by the virtuous individual without effort (Cheng, 2000). One who has achieved transcendence within this philosophy does not have to think about optimal functioning but behaves virtuously naturally.

BUDDHISM

Buddha

Seeking the good of others is woven throughout the teachings of "the Master" or "the Enlightened One" (i.e., the Buddha). In one passage, the Buddha is quoted as saying, "Wander for the gain of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world" (Sangharakshita, 1991, p. 17). At the same time, the Buddha teaches that suffering is a part of being and that this suffering is brought on by the human emotion of desire. Such desire is reflected in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism:

1. Life is suffering, essentially painful from birth to death.
2. All suffering is caused by ignorance of the nature of reality and the resultant craving, attachment, and grasping.

3. Suffering can be ended by overcoming ignorance.
4. The way to relief from suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path (right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right-mindedness, and right contemplation).

As long as craving exists, in Buddhist ideology, true peace cannot be known, and such existence without peace is considered suffering (Sangharakshita, 1991). This suffering can be lessened only upon reaching **nirvana**, which is the final destination in the Buddhist philosophy. Accordingly, nirvana is a state in which the self is freed from desire for anything (Schumann, 1974). It should be noted that both premortal and postmortal nirvana states are proposed as possible for the individual. More specifically, the premortal nirvana may be likened to the idea of the ultimate "good life." Postmortal nirvana may be similar to the Christian idea of heaven.

Like the other Eastern philosophies, Buddhism gives an important place to virtue, which is described in several catalogs of personal qualities. Buddhists speak of the *Brahma Viharas*, those virtues that are above all others in importance (described by Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 44, as "universal virtues"). These virtues include love (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksa*) (Sangharakshita, 1991). The paths to achieving these virtues within Buddhism require humans to divorce themselves from the human emotion of desire to put an end to suffering.

HINDUISM

The Hindu tradition differs somewhat from the other three philosophies discussed previously in that it does not appear to have a specific founder, and it is not clear when this tradition began in history (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). In addition, there is no one text that pervades the tradition, though many refer to the *Upanishads* as the most commonly used set of writings. Instead of following written guidelines, many followers of Hindu "think of their religion as being grounded in a way of action, rather than a written text" (Stevenson & Haberman, p. 45). The main teachings of the Hindu tradition emphasize the interconnectedness of all things. The idea of a harmonious union among all individuals is woven throughout the teachings of Hinduism that refer to a "single, unifying principle underlying all of Earth" (Stevenson & Haberman, p. 46).

The *Upanishads* discuss two possible paths after death: that of reincarnation (or returning to Earth to continue to attempt to achieve necessary enlightenment), or that of no reincarnation (meaning that the highest knowledge possible was achieved in life). The latter path, no reincarnation, is the more glorified path and the one that Hindu followers would attempt

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to attain. One's goal within this tradition would be to live life so fully and so correctly that one would go directly to the afterlife without having to repeat life's lessons in a reincarnated form (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). Hindu teachings are very clear about the qualities one must embody to avoid reincarnation: "To return to this world is an indication of one's failure to achieve ultimate knowledge of one's self" (Stevenson & Haberman, p. 53). Thus, the quest of one's life is to attain ultimate self-knowledge and to strive for ultimate self-betterment (notably also a Western concept). This emphasis on personal improvement echoes Buddhist teachings but contrasts sharply with the Confucian belief that citizenship and group good are much more important than self-improvement (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This is not to say, however, that the focus is solely on the individual within the Hindu tradition. Individuals are encouraged to be good to others as well as to improve themselves; the *Upanishads* state, "A man turns into something good by good action and something bad by bad action" (Stevenson & Haberman, p. 54).

"Good action" is also encouraged in the sense that, if one does not reach ultimate self-knowledge in one's life and thus does have to return to Earth via reincarnation after death, the previous life's good actions correlate directly with better placement in the world in this life (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). This process is known as *karma*. In this next life, then, the individual must again strive for self-betterment, and so on throughout his lives until the goal of ultimate self-knowledge is attained. The good life in the Hindu tradition, therefore, encompasses individuals who are continually achieving knowledge and continually working toward good actions (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Stevenson & Haberman).

SUMMARY OF EASTERN PHILOSOPHIES

Each of the Eastern philosophies discussed here incorporates ideas about the importance of virtue, along with human strengths, as people move toward the good life (i.e., transcendence). Similarities also can be drawn among the four, especially in the types of human qualities and experiences that are valued. These are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections, but first it is important to contrast these Eastern beliefs with Western ideology to understand the differences in positive psychology viewed from each perspective.

East Meets West

Eastern and Western ideologies stem from very different historical events and traditions. These differences can be seen explicitly in the value systems

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of each cultural approach to living, their orientations toward time, and their respective thought processes. These cultural differences give more information about strengths identified in each culture and ways in which positive life outcomes are pursued and achieved.

VALUE SYSTEMS

Cultural value systems have significant effects on the determination of strengths versus weaknesses (Lopez, Edwards, Magyar-Moe, Pedrotti, & Ryder, 2003). Whereas most Western cultures have *individualist* perspectives, most Eastern cultures (Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, and others) are guided by *collectivist* viewpoints (see also Chapter 18). In **individualist** cultures, the main focus is the single person, who is held above the group in terms of importance. Competition and personal achievement are emphasized within these cultures. In **collectivist** cultures, however, the group is valued above the individual, and cooperation is accentuated (Craig & Baucum, 2002). These different emphases on what is valued determine which constructs are considered strengths in each type of culture. For example, Western cultures value highly the ideas of personal freedom and autonomy. Thus, the person who "stands on her own two feet" is seen as possessing strength within this worldview. In an Eastern culture, on the other hand, such assertiveness on behalf of the self would not be viewed as an asset, as society seeks to foster *inter*dependence within the group.

Closely related to the interdependence that is prized within collectivist cultures are the concepts of sharing and duty to the group. In addition, value is placed on staying out of conflict and "going with the flow" within the Eastern ways of thinking. The Japanese story "*Momotaro*" ("Peach Boy," Sakade, 1958) gives an excellent example of the cultural importance of the traits of interdependence, the ability to avoid conflict, and duty to the group. The story begins with an elderly couple who have always wished for a child, although they are not able to conceive. One day, as the woman is washing her clothes in a stream, a giant peach floats to where she is standing and, upon reaching the woman, splits open to reveal a baby! The woman takes Momotaro ("Peach Boy") home, and she and her husband raise him. Momotaro grows into a fine young boy and, at age 15, tells his parents that the ogres in the nearby country have tormented the people of his village long enough. To the great pride of his parents, he decides to go to fight the ogres and bring back their treasure to his village.

Along the way, Momotaro befriends many animals one by one. The animals want to fight each new animal they meet, but at Momotaro's urging, "The spotted dog and the monkey and the pheasant, who usually hated each other, all became good friends and followed Momotaro faithfully" (Sakade, 1958, p. 6). At the end of the story, Momotaro and his animal

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friends defeat the ogres by working together and bring the treasure back to the village, where all who live there share in the bounty. As the hero, Momotaro portrays the strengths valued in Japanese and other Asian cultures: (a) He sets out for the good of the group, although in doing so risks individual harm (collectivism); (b) along the way, he stops others from petty squabbling (promoting harmony); (c) he works with them to achieve his goal (interdependence and collaboration); and (d) he brings back a treasure to share with the group (interdependence and sharing). In comparison to this tale of Momotaro, the story of a Western hero might differ at several points, especially that of the hero needing help from others, because individual achievement often is valued above group achievement. Thus, the cultural orientation determines which characteristics are transmitted as the valued strengths to its members.

ORIENTATION TO TIME

Differences also exist between East and West in terms of their orientations to time. In Western cultures such as the United States, we often look to the future (see Chapters 2 and 9). Indeed, some of the strengths we seem to value most (e.g., hope, optimism, self-efficacy; see Chapter 9) reflect future-oriented thinking. In Eastern cultures, however, there is a greater focus on, and respect for, the past. This past-oriented focus is revealed in the ancient Chinese proverb, "To know the road ahead, ask those coming back." Thus, certain personality characteristics might be defined as strengths in terms of their compatibility with a particular time orientation. For example, certain types of problem solving might be viewed as more advantageous than others. In a well-known Chinese fable, "Old Horse Knows the Way," a group of soldiers travels far from their home in the mountains and, upon trying to find their way home, they become lost. One of the soldiers comes up with this solution: "We can use the wisdom of an old horse. Release the old horses and follow them, and thereby reach the right road" (Pei, 2005, p. 1). Thus, Eastern cultures value the strength of "looking backward" and recognizing the wisdom of their elders.

THOUGHT PROCESSES

When considering the unique aspects of Western and Eastern thought, we often focus on the nature of specific ideas, but we do not reflect on the process of linking and integrating ideas. Indeed, as researchers (e.g., Nisbett, 2003) have noted, stark differences exist in the very thought processes used by Westerners and Easterners, and this results in markedly divergent worldviews and approaches to meaning making. Richard Nisbett, a professor at the University of Michigan who studies social

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psychology and cognition, illustrates how he became aware of some of these differences in thinking during a conversation he had with a student from China. Nisbett recalls,

> A few years back, a brilliant student from China began to work with me on questions of social psychology and reasoning. One day early in our acquaintance, he said, "You know, the difference between you and me is that I think the world is a circle, and you think it is a line." . . . The Chinese believe in constant change, but with things always moving back to some prior state. They pay attention to a wide range of events; they search for relationships between things; and they think you can't understand the part without understanding the whole. Westerners live in a simpler, more deterministic world; they focus on salient objects or people instead of the larger pictures; and they think they can control events because they know the rules that govern the behavior of objects." (p. xiii)

As Nisbett's story shows, the thinking style used by the Chinese student, and not just the ideas themselves, was vastly different from Nisbett's. This more circular thinking style is best exemplified by the Taoist figure of the *yin* and the *yang*. Most people are familiar with the *yin* and *yang* symbol. This figure represents the circular, constantly changing nature of the world as viewed by Eastern thought. The dark part of the symbol represents the feminine and passive, and the light side represents the masculine and active. Each part exists because of the other, and neither could exist alone, according to Taoist beliefs. As one state is experienced, the other is not far to follow; if hard times are occurring, easier times are on the way. This more circular thinking pattern affects the way in which the Eastern thinker maps out his or her life and therefore may influence the decisions a person makes in the search for peace.

Yin Yang

An example of the effects of such different ways of thinking may be found in the life pursuits of the Westerner as compared with those of the Easterner. Whereas in the United States we give high priority to the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," the goals of the Easterner might have a different focus. Take, for instance, the positive psychological construct of happiness (see Chapter 7). Researchers have posited that happiness (whether group or individual) is a state commonly sought by Easterners and Westerners alike (Diener & Diener, 1995). The difference in the philosophical approaches to life, however, may make the searches look very different. For example, a Westerner whose goal is happiness draws a straight line to his goal, looking carefully for obstacles and finding possible ways around them. His goal is to achieve this eternal happiness. For the Easterner who follows the *yin* and the *yang*, however, this goal of happiness may not make sense. If one were to seek happiness and then achieve it, in the Eastern way of thinking, this would only mean that unhappiness was close on its heels. Instead, the Easterner might have the

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goal of balance, trusting in the fact that, although great unhappiness or suffering may occur in one's life, it would be equally balanced by great happiness. These two different types of thinking obviously create very different ways of forming goals to achieve the good life.

EAST AND WEST: IS ONE BEST?

There are substantial differences in the types of ideas and the way in which they are put together that emerge from Eastern and Western traditions. It is important to remember, however, that neither is "better" than the other. This is especially relevant for discussions regarding strengths. Therefore, we must use culture as a lens for evaluating whether a particular characteristic might be considered a strength or a weakness within a particular group.

Different Ways to Positive Outcomes

So far, we have discussed how thinking styles influence the development of goals in the lives of both Westerners and Easterners. Differences also exist, however, in the routes that each group uses to move toward its goals. Western-oriented thinking focuses on the individual's goal, whereas Eastern philosophers suggest a different focus, one in which the group is highlighted. For example, Confucius said, "If you want to reach your goal, help others reach their goal" (Soothill, 1968, *Analects 6:29*). Accordingly, although hope may be the primary tool of the "rugged individualist" (i.e., Westerner; see Chapter 2) in moving toward the good life, other tools might take precedence in the life of the Easterner. For example, qualities that help to create and sustain interdependent relationships for Easterners may be more valuable in helping them to reach their goals. These virtues may be most important in helping Easterners to develop pathways that ensure that group goals are achieved, thereby assisting Easterners in completing their individual goals.

In the main Eastern philosophical branches of learning (Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism), repeated mention is made of the two constructs of compassion for others and the search for harmony or life balance. Thus, each has a clear place in the study of positive psychology from an Eastern perspective.

COMPASSION

The idea of **compassion** has origins in both Western and Eastern philosophies. Within the Western tradition, Aristotle often is noted for early writings on the concept of compassion. Likewise, compassion can be

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traced in the Eastern traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In Confucian teachings, compassion is discussed within the concept of *jen* (humanity) and is said to encapsulate all other virtues. Within the Taoist belief system, humanity also reflects behaviors that must occur naturally, without premeditation. Finally, the Buddha often is described as "perfectly enlightened, and boundlessly compassionate" (Sangharakshita, 1991, p. 3). As such, the idea of compassion, or *karuna*, also is woven throughout Buddhism as a virtue on the path toward transcendence. Finally, within the Hindu tradition, compassion is called for in good actions toward others, which will direct followers upon the path that will not require them to return to Earth after death.

In recent writings in positive psychology, physician Eric Cassell (2002) proposes the three following requirements for compassion: (a) the difficulties of the recipient must be serious; (b) the recipient's difficulties cannot be self-inflicted, and (c) we, as observers, must be able to identify with the recipient's suffering. Compassion is described as a "unilateral emotion" (Cassell, p. 435) that is directed outward from oneself. In Buddhist teachings, the attainment of compassion means being able to "transcend preoccupation with the centrality of self" (Cassell, p. 438)—to focus on others rather than merely on ourselves. The ability to possess feelings for something completely separate from our own suffering allows us to transcend the self and, in this way, to be closer to the achievement of the good life. In fact, transcendental compassion is said to be the most significant of the four universal virtues, and it often is called Great Compassion (*mahakaruna*) to distinguish it from the more applied *karuna* (Sangharakshita, 1991). Similarly, although discussed in somewhat different ways as Confucian, Taoist, and Hindu principles, the capacities to feel and to do for others are central to achieving the good life for each of these traditions as well.

Possessing compassion helps the person to succeed in life and is viewed as a major strength within the Eastern tradition. Feeling for fellow group members may allow identification with others and development of group cohesion. Furthermore, acting compassionately fosters group, rather than personal, happiness.

Compassion also may come more naturally to the person from a collectivist culture than to someone from an individualist culture. On this point, researchers have argued that a collectivist culture may breed a sense of compassion in the form of its members' prosocial behaviors (Batson, 1991; Batson, Ahmad, Lishner, & Tsang, 2002). When a group identity has been formed, therefore, the natural choice may be group benefits over individual ones. More information from qualitative and quantitative studies in this area would be helpful in defining the mechanisms used to foster such compassion.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) indicate that "humanity" may be viewed as a "universal strength" in their book, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. For both Western and Eastern traditions,

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they hold that the ability to feel for others is a necessary part of the search for the good life. Compassion, an aspect of humanity, involves looking outside ourselves and thinking about others as we care for and identify with them. This other-than-self focus is needed to transcend one's physical body, according to Eastern traditions. Thus, nirvana can be attained only when one's independent identity and the self-motivated desires that accompany it are eradicated completely.

In moving toward the good life, therefore, compassion is essential for dealing with daily life tasks. As one walks along the path toward this good life, the continual goal is to transcend the human plane and to become enlightened through experiences with others and the world. Compassion asks people to think outside themselves and to connect with others. Additionally, as the person comes to understand others, she or he comes closer to self-understanding. This is yet another key component in attaining transcendence.

HARMONY

In Western history, the Greeks are said to have viewed happiness as the ability "to exercise powers in pursuit of excellence in a life free from constraints" (Nisbett, 2003, pp. 2–3). Thus, the good life was viewed as a life with no ties to duty and the freedom to pursue individual goals. There are clear distinctions in comparing this idea of happiness to Confucian teachings, for example, in which duty (*yi*) is a primary virtue. In Eastern philosophy, happiness is described as having the "satisfactions of a plain country life, shared within a *harmonious* social network" (Nisbett, p. 5–6, emphasis added). In this tradition, **harmony** is viewed as central to achieving happiness.

In Buddhist teachings, when people reach a state of nirvana, they have reached a peacefulness entailing "complete harmony, balance, and equilibrium" (Sangharakshita, 1991, p. 135). Similarly, in Confucian teachings harmony is viewed as crucial for happiness. Confucius had high praise for individuals who were able to harmonize; he compared this capacity to "a good cook blending the flavors and creat[ing] something harmonious and delicious" (Nisbett, 2003, p. 7). Getting along with others allows the person to be freed from individual pursuits and, in so doing, to gain "collective agency" (Nisbett, p. 6) in working out what is good for the group. Thus, the harmonizing principle is a central tenet of the Eastern way of life. The balance and harmony that one achieves as part of an enlightened life often are thought to represent the ultimate end of the good life. In Hindu teachings, one also can see that, as all humans are interconnected by a "single unifying principle" (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998, p. 46), harmony must be pursued. If an individual walks through life without thought of others as connected to him, the effects may be far-reaching for both the individual and the group (Stevenson & Haberman).

The concept of harmony has received minimal attention in the field of positive psychology to date, although some attention has been given to

the idea of appreciating balance in one's life in reference to certain other constructs (e.g., wisdom; see Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, and Chapter 10). Moreover, Clifton and colleagues (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005) include a harmony theme in the Clifton StrengthsFinder (see Chapter 4); they describe this construct as a desire to find consensus among the group, as opposed to putting forth conflicting ideas. Little more scholarly attention has been paid to harmony in American psychological literature. Given the central role of harmony as a strength in Eastern cultures, more research may be warranted on this topic in the future. First, the concept of harmony often is mistakenly equated with the notion of conformity. Studies to ferret out the differences between these two constructs could be beneficial in defining each more clearly. Because the term *conformity* has somewhat negative connotations in our independence-oriented culture, it is possible that some of these same negative characterizations have been extended to the concept of harmony.

Second, qualitative research methods could be used to develop a better definition of harmony. At present, the concept of harmony is reflected in the virtue of justice as discussed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) in their classification of strengths. These authors note that the ability to "work well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share" (p. 30) may be a subset of the idea of civic strength. Although this may be one way to classify this strength, it might be argued that the idea of harmony is broader than this particular definition and may be thought of separately from loyalty and "pitching in." Furthermore, the phenomenon of harmony may be both an interpersonal strength (as described in the previous paragraphs) and an intrapersonal strength.

Finally, after more conceptual work is completed, positive psychology scholars interested in harmony would benefit greatly from the development of reliable and valid measuring devices. Such tools would help researchers to uncover the primary contributors and correlates of harmony.

Final Thoughts

It is important to recognize that, in discussing Eastern thoughts in this chapter, a central tenet of Eastern ways of life is broken, in the decidedly Western, didactic teaching method used to bring this information to students of positive psychology. The traditional Easterner would object to the notion that the concepts here could be learned from mere words and would argue that only life experience would suffice. As part of Eastern teachings, self-exploration and actual hands-on experience are essential for true understanding of the concepts that are presented in only an introductory fashion in this chapter. Thus, you are encouraged to seek out more experience of these ideas in everyday life and to attempt to discover the relevance to your

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own lives of strengths such as compassion and harmony. Although these ideas may stem from Eastern ideology, they are relevant for Westerners who want to discover new ways of thinking about human functioning. As a student of positive psychology, you can to continue to broaden your horizons by considering ideas from the East. Challenge yourself to be open minded about the types of characteristics to which you assign the label *strength*, and remember that different traditions bring with them different values.

Key Terms

Buddhism: A philosophical and religious system based on the teachings of Buddha: Life is dominated by suffering caused by desire; suffering ends when we end desire; and enlightenment obtained through right conduct, wisdom, and meditation releases one from desire, suffering, and rebirth.

Collectivism: A cultural value that prizes the concepts of sharing, cooperation, interdependence, and duty to the group.

Compassion: An aspect of humanity that involves looking outside oneself and thinking about others as we care for and identify with them. In positive psychology, compassion requires (a) that the difficulty of the recipient be serious; (b) that the recipient's difficulties are not self-inflicted; and (c) that we, as observers, are able to identify with the recipient's suffering.

Confucianism: A philosophical and religious system developed from the teachings of Confucius. Confucianism values love for humanity, duty, etiquette, and truthfulness. Devotion to family, including ancestors, is also emphasized.

Enlightenment: A human's capacity to transcend desire and suffering and to see things clearly for what they are.

Harmony: A state of consensus or balance. Eastern traditions view harmony as essential to happiness.

Hinduism: A diverse body of religion, philosophy, and cultural practice native to and predominant in India. Hinduism is characterized by a belief in the interconnectedness of all things and emphasizes personal improvement with the goal of transcending the cycle of reincarnation.

Individualism: A cultural value that emphasizes individual achievement, competition, personal freedom, and autonomy.

Nirvana: A state in which the self is freed from desire. This is the final destination in the Buddhist philosophy.

Taoism: A philosophical and religious system developed by Lao-Tzu which advocates a simple, honest life and noninterference in the course of natural events.

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