CHAPTER 1

THE ASIAN SAGES: LAO-TZU, CONFUCIUS, AND BUDDHA

Chapter 1 Key Concepts

• Humanism is the name given to any philosophy that emphasizes human welfare and dignity.

• The word sage is derived from the Latin sapiens, meaning wise. Its original meaning was associated with knowing (or tasting) through experience. Today, the term sage is often used to refer to masters associated with religious traditions or the wise elders of a group or tribe. Sages understand and teach the requirements of the good life, when the good life is understood to include peace of mind, compassion, social harmony, and respect for nature. Sages tend to be humanists who believe that human intelligence and effort are capable of improving conditions in the here-and-now.

• In ancient Chinese cosmology, everything was influenced by the harmonious working together of Heaven and Earth following the Tao, literally “way” or “path.” Tao, which cannot be precisely defined, is translated as the source or principle of all existence, the way or path of the universe or moral law. Heaven and Earth constitute a single reality perpetually balancing between two opposing, but not separable, forces: Yin (Earth, passive element) is weak, negative, dark, and destructive; yang (Heaven, active element) is strong, positive, light, and constructive.

• Lao-tzu was a bureaucrat in ancient China, known only by his nickname, Lao-tzu, variously translated as the Old Man, the Old Boy, or the Old Philosopher. Lao-tzu’s Tao te Ching, or The Classic of the Way and the Power, is second only to the Bible in the number of translations available in English.

• Tao means “way” or “path” in the sense of “the way to go.” Rather than present a philosophic system, Lao-tzu struggled to express a sense of the ultimate, underlying great principle, rule, or cause of “the way all things are.” His vision is holistic: It encompasses the totality of the cosmos. When viewed holistically, the universe expresses harmony, purpose, order, majesty, and “calm power.” Error, suffering, and unhappiness accompany all attempts to separate things, to understand the part without the whole.

• Given the cyclic nature of Tao, Lao-tzu found rationalistic, systematic attempts to understand reality fundamentally flawed and, therefore, always doomed to complexity and confusion. Rather than reveal reality, such systematizing obscures it. The system takes on a life of its own as each inconsistency requires a solution. Ultimately, a complex, lifeless, self-referring system emerges—a system that talks about itself, not about life.

• The second great Taoist sage, Chuang-tzu, told some of the richest stories in Taoist literature. One of the finest illustrates two important principles. It shows how the same reality can be described in different ways in order to accommodate various individuals without compromising anything essential. It also shows how the sage “goes with the flow of Tao” rather than insisting that this or that label or description be used. The sage is the sage because he “sticks to fundamentals” and is not “waylaid by the little byways.” The box on page 47 contains the passage in which Chuang-tzu introduces the principle of Three in the Morning.

• According to the early Taoist sages, if there is One ultimate reality, One Way Things Really Are, then neat distinctions are in some sense arbitrary and misleading. Nothing is purely matter or spirit (energy). Nothing is completely male or female, wet or dry. The good and the bad both exist in an everlasting exchange. The good and the bad are relative opposites. As the Stoics and the Buddha saw, things become good or bad according to our reactions.

• The union of relative opposites leads to the Taoist doctrine of inaction, or wu wei. Wu wei is a warning against “unnatural” or “demanding” action. In this case, “natural” action does not mean common or widespread, but natural in the sense of healthy and in harmony with Tao. Concentrating on being a cheerful, helpful, tolerant “friend of Tao,” the sage is consistently nonjudgmental. He “acts” but through his being, not through his specific efforts, words, or attachment to results.

• Manipulation is “action”; possessiveness is “action”; self-righteousness is “action”; harboring hostile feelings is “action”; trying to control or reform others is “action.” The problem with “action” is that our own desires and beliefs interfere with our intuition of Tao.

• Confucius is the Latinized name of K’ung Ch’iu of Lu, a legendary teacher. For much of his life, Confucius sought high political office so that he could initiate a series of governmental reforms. Failing in that quest, he promoted social order based on personal moral cultivation.

• Confucian humanism focuses on moderation according to the Golden Mean.

• The Confucian chun-tzu is the morally superior man, a great and noble soul as well as a cultivated gentleman. His undesirable opposite is the small or vulgar hsiao-jen. The chun-tzu is a “real person” because he has realized jen, general human virtue rooted in empathy and fellow-feeling. Expressed through conscientiousness and altruism, jen is the “one thread” of Confucianism.

• Once Siddhartha’s eyes were opened to sickness, old age, and death, his anxiety grew. How, he asked himself, could anyone be happy, since there is absolutely no escape from suffering, disappointment, sadness, and loss? If no one escapes, why be born at all? How could any woman want to give birth, knowing what awaited her child? No one could answer him.

• After years of searching, Siddhartha realized that no one else had the answer. Legend has it that Siddhartha sat in meditation under a Bo (or banyan) tree and refused to move until he was either enlightened or dead.

• Siddhartha had reached a state of bliss and utter detachment called nirvana. Nirvana is annihilation of the ego, a state of emptiness, or “no-thing-ness.” Nirvana is described as a state of “bliss” because there is only “pure consciousness” with no sense of ego, separateness, discrimination, or intellectualizing. Nirvana is release from suffering while conscious.

• Siddhartha refused ultimate release and, because he chose to stay and help others, became the Buddha, “He Who Awoke,” or “He Who Became Aware.”

• This Buddha who chose to remain among people giving help to other lost souls is known as a bodhisattva in some branches of Buddhism. A bodhisattva is an enlightened being who voluntarily postpones his own nirvana in order to help all other conscious life forms find “supreme release.” A bodhisattva is not a savior. The Buddha did not intercede for others; he showed them a path.

• The Buddha’s basic teachings rest on what are called the Four Noble Truths:

 1. No one can deny that suffering is the condition of all

existence.

 2. Suffering and general dissatisfaction come to human

beings because they are possessive, greedy, and,

above all, self-centered.

 3. Egocentrism, possessiveness and greed can,

however, be understood, overcome, rooted out.

 4. This rooting out, this vanquishing, can be brought

about by following a simple, reasonable Eightfold

Path of behavior in thought, word, and deed.

• The Buddha taught that we can alter our viewpoint by following the Eightfold Path:

 1. Right understanding (or views)

 2. Right purpose

 3. Right speech

 4. Right conduct

 5. Right livelihood

 6. Right effort

 7. Right mindfulness (or awareness)

 8. Right meditation

• The Buddha was a pragmatic and insightful spiritual teacher who believed that questions of theology and complex philosophy only confuse and distract us from our search for wisdom. He believed that we are better served by dealing with the here-and-now in helpful, honest ways rather than in fretting and quibbling over unanswerable metaphysical claims and theological doctrines. The insistence on absolute, ultimate explanations, answers, and proofs gets in the way of living fully in the moment.

Chapter 1 Teaching Tips

1. A major focus of ancient sages was “heightened consciousness” of the simplicity of profound truths. I have found that many students (understandably) do not know how to read wisdom literature. I begin with a few examples designed to show how to approach “pithy sayings.” Example: “The way up is the way down.” This apparent contradictory claim is really simple. When going down a hill, we use the same route we took to go up. The principle here involves seeing what is right in front of us. If I am agitated about something you have done, I can use the same “road” to reach peace of mind. The road is my mind, since agitation is a choice, a judgment.

2. Bring a “finger puzzle” to class to illustrate an aspect of the concept of wu wei. A finger puzzle is a tube of woven bamboo (or plastic today); you put one finger from each hand into it and then pull. The harder you pull, the tighter the tube grabs. The “secret,” of course, is that you have to go against your normal instinct and push to get free. The example is hokey, but it makes a point in a memorable, lighthearted way: When exerting effort in one direction fails, reverse direction. When trying to force change fails, for instance, quit trying. Reverse directions.

3. Another way to illustrate inaction, harmony, or going with Tao is by contrasting judo with wrestling or pushing. In judo, the master merely takes advantage of his opponent’s aggressive momentum and pulls or throws him off balance. The master moves aside and lets the opponent’s energy carry him head over heels.

4. Raise the possibility that there is a Tao of nature (Earth) by citing any number of examples drawn from environmental and urban planning disasters: houses built on hills (where nature does not “want” them) washed downhill by heavy rains; New Orleans built below sea level; luxury homes built and rebuilt in hurricane or flood or fire zones; massive water shortages in California as millions of people continue to move to a natural desert (where nature does not “want” millions of people, as evidenced by the lack of water). Forest fires and floods offer similar examples, as people insist on rebuilding in known flood plains.

5. Use the notion of li (ritual and ceremony) to consider the virtues of civility and decorum in pluralistic societies. Ask students if they agree with social critics who assert that our culture is coarsening due to widespread lack of civility in the classroom, at home, on our highways, in theatres, on television, and the Internet.

6. Contrast Confucian conservatism with contemporary notions of individualism. Have students produce their own descriptions of the “superior individual” and see how they vary from the Confucian chun-tzu.

7. Tie current global unrest to the unstable conditions of the Period of Warring States that led Lao-tzu to develop the doctrine of inaction and Confucius to emphasize courtesy, moderation, and humanity. Remind students that no community is completely safe today. As I write this, the media are full of stories about children murdered by their parents and parents murdered by their children, the kidnappings and murders of young girls and women in resort communities and on city streets, acid attacks on “misbehaving” Muslim women, increasing numbers of random drive-by shootings, the spread of gang violence from cities to rural communities, domestic terrorism, road rage, illegal immigration, and so on. In other words, all times and places are perilous. Some years ago, the same week that Congress passed a national gun-control law called the Brady Bill, an angry individual slaughtered six commuters on a subway—using a legally acquired gun. Floods, forest fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, arson fires, and other natural and not-so-natural disasters remind us again and again that even the most privileged among us cannot guarantee safety or survival. Conditions in parts of Central and South America, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East rival those of ancient China. In the past few years, attempts to improve the American economy have generated crises in housing prices, medical care, and financial institutions.

 You may want to tie this discussion to Chapter 7 by noting similarities between the instability of Epictetus’s life as a slave and Lao-tzu’s and Confucius’s attempts to survive social chaos.

8. Discuss Siddhartha’s searching years in a way that raises profound questions about conflicting duties to others and to ourselves. Ask if the long years of suffering and searching would have been justified if Siddhartha had not received enlightenment.

9. Compare Siddhartha’s willingness to leave his family in order to seek personal enlightenment with what some commentators criticize as Socrates’ willingness to put his family’s material comforts second to his own quest for wisdom (Chapter 4). Remind students that Martin Luther King, Jr. (Chapter 18) also faced similarly difficult decisions regarding the quest for social justice. The tension between seeking either wisdom or a social ideal or meeting family obligations is significant and rich. It makes an excellent discussion, paper, or presentation topic.

10. Compare the relative merits of trying not to think about suffering, aging and disease until forced to by circumstances with learning to deal with them early in life.

11. Have students apply Gerald Heard’s version of the Eightfold Path (page 50) to some present source of unhappiness. Encourage them to be specific. For example, illustrate the injunction to “speak so as to aim at being cured” (path 4) by noting the different effects of saying “Oh, how awful! I have a cold,” and “This is just one of the days I have a cold.” Help students identify the effects of language on states of consciousness.

12. Discuss the fifth path (“Your livelihood must not conflict with your therapy”) in detail. Obviously challenging occupations are defense attorney, advertising executive, and politician. Ask the class to determine whether there are some legal occupations that are off-limits to a person on the Eightfold Path. Which ones? Why?

13. Read aloud and discuss the box “One Day . . .” on page 51. Supplement these interesting tales with others from the many popular collections of Buddhist and Zen literature.

14. Have students interpret the little story in the box “Three in the Morning” on page 47. If you have any social science majors, ask them if Chuang-tzu’s point is an early version of labeling theory, cognitive therapy, or other attitude-oriented counseling practices. You might also call attention to the advantages and disadvantages of using stories and anecdotes to make philosophical observations and express philosophical insights.