

# Theory & Psychology

<http://tap.sagepub.com>

---

## **Toward a Reflexive Positive Psychology: Insights from the Chinese Buddhist Notion of Emptiness**

Louise Sundararajan  
*Theory Psychology* 2008; 18; 655  
DOI: 10.1177/0959354308093400

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://tap.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/18/5/655>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Theory & Psychology* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://tap.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://tap.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://tap.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/18/5/655>

# Toward a Reflexive Positive Psychology

## Insights from the Chinese Buddhist Notion of Emptiness

---

Louise Sundararajan

ROCHESTER, NY

**ABSTRACT.** This paper claims that the missing value dimension in positive psychology's model of the good life is attributable to its focus on the unreflective first-order desires, as exemplified by hope theory, and its misguided claim of scientific neutrality that renders invisible the moral maps of human experiences. It is argued that the solution of the problem lies in self-reflexivity, which is an extra mental space needed for the drawing and redrawing of moral maps. Exposition of self-reflexivity shows how a self-to-self transaction adds a so far neglected intrapersonal dimension to cross-cultural analysis, and how moral maps are rendered visible and transformative in second-order desires, as exemplified by the Chinese Buddhist notions of savoring and 'emptiness.'

**KEY WORDS:** emptiness, first-order and second-order concerns/commentaries, first-order and second-order desires, first-order experience, hope theory, moral map, Novelty-focus and Authenticity-focus cultures, second-order awareness, savoring, self-reflexivity

*Imagine a sadomasochist who comes to savor serial killing and derives great pleasure from it. Imagine a hit man who derives enormous gratification from stalking and slaying. Imagine a terrorist who, attached to al-Qaeda, flies a hijacked plane into the World Trade Center. Can these three people be said to have achieved the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life, respectively? The answer is yes. (Seligman, 2002, p. 303, n. 249)*

Such statements by the founder of positive psychology point to what many critics both within and outside psychology find to be problematic about psychology as a science (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). Seligman has given us a model of the good life ostensibly devoid of a moral map, which is a horizon of significance that anchors and renders intelligible our concerns

and evaluations (for an analysis of positive psychology's myopia with regard to its own moral maps, see Sundararajan, 2005). Excising the value question for the sake of 'scientific neutrality' seriously undermines the credibility of this model, for it is questionable whether any form of life that is considered 'good' can be devoid of a moral map. This paper locates the root cause of the problem in self-reflexive consciousness, which is the extra mental space that allows the drawing and redrawing of moral maps, a dimension of consciousness that is neglected by positive psychology. It is this lack of self-reflexivity that renders invisible the moral maps that subtend our visions of the good life. This is the central argument of the paper.

In what follows, I show, first, how self-reflexivity constitutes a so far neglected intrapersonal dimension in cross-cultural differences in moral maps; and, second, how, at the level of individual consciousness, self-reflexivity can render our moral maps visible, articulate, transformative, and in turn amenable to transformation. For illustration, the Chinese notions of savoring and 'emptiness' will be presented in contrast and comparison with hope theory, an illustrative example of positive psychology. These cross-cultural comparisons will help to bring to light the implicit moral maps to which positive psychology subscribes, despite its neutrality claims. Implications of a self-reflexive turn in psychology are discussed in the concluding section.

## **An Intrapersonal Dimension of Cross-Cultural Differences**

### *A Definition of Self-Reflexivity*

Self-reflexivity, in simplest terms, refers to a recursive loop in which a thing becomes self-referential. In the context of consciousness, self-reflexivity refers to an extra mental space that consists of a combination of two variants of consciousness, distinguished by Lambie and Marcel (2002) as: (a), inward-directed, as opposed to outward-directed attentional focus; and (b), second-order awareness, as opposed to first-order experience. The first component is based on the two foci of cognitive attention, inward toward the self versus outward toward the world. These orientations help shape the nature and content of our emotional experiences (Lambie & Marcel, 2002). Inwardly directed attention in which the self relates to itself, for instance in self-monitoring, may be an unconscious process. Full-fledged reflexive consciousness has a second component—a higher-level consciousness, generally known as second-order awareness. This component will be examined later, as it does not concern us at the level of cultural analysis. In the following paragraphs, I show how self-reflexivity in the sense of inward cognitive attention constitutes a so far neglected intrapersonal dimension of cross-cultural differences, and how this variable can shed some light on the implicit moral maps of positive psychology.

### *Cross-Cultural Differences in Moral Maps*

The moral map is defined by Charles Taylor (1985) as ‘certain essential evaluations which provide the horizon or foundation for the other evaluations one makes’ (p. 39), such as happiness or the good life. Elsewhere, Taylor (1997) refers to the moral map as the ‘horizon’ of significance, or ‘a background of intelligibility’ (p. 37) through which our values can be articulated. Moral maps differ across cultures. To illustrate cultural differences in moral maps, I compare and contrast a formulation of hope in positive psychology (Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 2005) with selected passages from *Cai-gen Tan* (Discourse on Vegetable Roots; for English translation, see Hung, c. 1500/1926). *Cai-gen Tan* is a book of aphorisms written by Hung Ying-ming in the 16th century, and has been an influential book to this day as pop psychology/philosophy (for a contemporary Chinese commentary, see Wang, 2004)—something of a Chinese counterpart of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

The hope theory of Snyder et al. (2005) postulates two essential elements of hope: agency thinking (self as author of causal chains of events) and pathway thinking (plan to meet goal). This model of hope seems to be grounded in what Nisbett (2003) refers to as goal-oriented reasoning, which is to ‘define the goal to be achieved and develop a model that will allow you to attain it’ (p.128). More specifically, ‘this view implies a behavioral sequence whereby a person sets his objective, develops a plan designed to reach that objective, and then acts to change the environment in accordance with that plan’ (p. 75). An important element of this thinking is the belief that ‘man can freely manipulate his environment for his own purposes’ (Mushakoji Kinhide, cited in Nisbett, 2003, p. 75). A diametrically different moral map is found in the *Cai-gen Tan*, which extols mastery within and denigrates mastery without: ‘Those capable of self-reflection turn everything they deal with into medicine for health, whereas those quick to blame others turn every thought into arms for war’ (Wang, 2004, p. 206, item 121).

### *Novelty- versus Authenticity-Focus Cultures*

The contrast between these two moral maps, as illustrated by hope theory and *Cai-gen Tan*, seems to fit the theory of primary versus secondary control, with the former privileging ‘changing the world’ and the latter ‘changing the self’ (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). However, we may gain a deeper understanding if the difference in control is cast in a cross-cultural framework. Novelty- versus Authenticity-focus is a theoretical framework proposed here (Averill & Sundararajan, 2005; Sundararajan, 2002; Sundararajan & Averill, 2007). This theory has an intrapersonal dimension which, as Bacon (2005) points out, is not found in most cross-cultural contrasts, such as collectivism versus individualism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002), or interdependent versus independent cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The intrapersonal dimension refers to difference in self transactions, difference that is

predicated on the two foci of cognitive attention—outward toward the world versus inward toward the self—orientations that profoundly impact on the nature and content of our emotional experiences (Lambie & Marcel, 2002). One direct consequence of the difference in self transactions—self in transaction with the world versus with itself—is a differential emphasis on sameness/similarity and difference/dissimilarity, as we shall see. The stage is now set for a formal definition of Novelty- versus Authenticity-focus transactions.

Novelty-focus refers to an outward orientation, a self-to-non-self relationship in which the partners of the transaction are dissimilar. The dissimilarity of the partners predicts that the self-to-world transaction is characterized by low emotional involvement (psychological distance, instrumentality, objectivity, etc.), and high cognitive differentiation (difference, uniqueness, etc.). Authenticity-focus, by contrast, refers to an inward orientation, a self-to-self relationship in which the partners of the transaction are the most similar 'other,' since neither of the two poles of this transaction is a non-self. The similarity of the partners predicts that the self-to-self transaction is characterized by high emotional involvement (participation, solidarity, integration, etc.) and low cognitive differentiation (similarity, redundancy, etc.). This transactional framework of the self can explain not only the premium placed on instrumentality and objectivity in the contemporary West, but also the difference in self construals across cultures. The atomic self privileged in the West can be predicated from a Novelty-focus self transaction that capitalizes on difference and distance from the other: 'I stand *apart* from all others, protected *against* them, entitled to make demands upon them, concerned with my personal choices, my personal aims or fears *as over against* any other who may threaten to frustrate me' (Fingarette, 1991, p. 192). The self construal predicated on Authenticity-focus, in contrast, is well articulated by Kierkegaard's purely structural definition of the self: 'The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self' (cited in Neville, 1996, p. 204). This self-reflexive self is ubiquitous in Chinese classical texts. Here is one instance from *Mencius*: 'He who is sincere *with himself* is called true' (Tu, 1985a, p. 96, italics added). Neville (1996) has noted that in the writing of many Chinese scholars the term 'self' is 'nearly always used simply in its reflexive form, as in self-cultivation, self-criticism, and so forth, not as a noun substantive' (p. 216, n. 1). Indeed, 'we would do better,' says Fingarette (1991), 'to translate Confucius by use of the reflexive idioms' (p. 199): for instance, instead of 'examine my self' or 'govern the self,' the text should be rendered 'examine myself,' 'impinge on oneself,' 'govern oneself,' 'sacrifice oneself,' and so on (p. 198).

This heightened sense of self and subjectivity in traditional China cannot be explained by the prevalent cross-cultural constructs of either Individualism–Collectivism (Oyserman et al., 2002) or Independent–Interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991)—constructs that predict a relatively marginal role of the self in collectivistic or interdependent cultures. In contradistinction to the received

wisdom that the primary focus in traditional societies falls on the collective life of the group, Tu (1985b) claims that in the Confucian tradition, '[t]he ultimate purpose of life is neither regulating the family nor harmonizing the father-son relationship, but self-realization' (p. 243). Consistent with the construct of Authenticity-focus, the self-reflexive orientation of Confucianism is referred to by Tu (1985a) as 'authenticity': '... the word "authenticity" ... seems to me more appropriate than narrowly conceived moralistic terms such as "honesty" and "loyalty" to convey the original Confucian sense of learning for the sake of the self' (p. 52). It is against the backdrop of the Authenticity-focus in Chinese culture that we may appreciate the fact that savoring, a self-reflexive emotional concept and action, is more developed in China than its counterpart in the West (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007), as we shall see.

At the level of cultural analysis, moral maps are nonconscious assumptions. For moral maps to become explicit and articulate, second-order awareness is required. Second-order awareness consists of 'experience plus an additional experience of that experience' (Zelazo, 1996, p. 73), thanks to an extra recursive loop of consciousness. Whereas first-order experience is implicit and not reportable, second-order awareness is reportable and articulate. An example of first-order experience is when one slams the door without being aware of one's anger. Articulation of one's emotions requires second-order awareness; the same goes for moral maps. To this topic we now turn.

### **Moral Maps and Second-Order Commentaries of Emotion**

In contrast to the implicit moral maps at the level of cultural analysis, Charles Taylor (1985) speaks of the moral map in a more active and dynamic sense. For instance, he talks about the *drawing* of a moral map, which 'involves *defining* what it is we really are about, what is really important to us; it involves *entering* the problematic area of our self-understanding and self-interpretation' (p. 68, italics added). The drawing and redrawing of moral maps is not possible without second-order awareness, which renders them visible and articulate. Second-order awareness of moral maps is manifest in second-order desires (Taylor, 1985) or second-order commentaries (Archer, 2000), to be explained below.

Taylor makes an important distinction between first-order and second-order desires. First-order desires are concerned primarily with the object of desire—the quality of which tends to serve as basis for one's preferences—leaving the quality of desire itself unquestioned. The desire to evaluate our desires, 'to regard some as desirable and others as undesirable' (Taylor, 1985, p. 16), constitutes second-order desire. According to Frankfurt (1971), while all animals exhibit desires, only humans exhibit the desire to have certain kinds of desires and not others. At the level of second-order desires, one may be able to go beyond the object of one's emotions—the person one loves or

hates, for instance—to evaluate one's emotional feelings themselves: one can feel ashamed of one's undue jubilation at the misfortune of one's opponent, proud of one's feeling of guilt, or happy about the devastating impact of one's anger on the wrong-doer. As these instances show, the dichotomy of positive and negative emotions no longer holds at the level of second-order desires, when joy carries a negative and guilt a positive valence, and so on. Second-order desires entail a full-fledged self-reflexivity, which, we may recall, is a combination of inward attention and second-order awareness. In the following paragraphs, I will show how the second-order awareness in full-fledged self-reflexivity renders moral maps visible, potent, transformative, and also amenable to further revisions. With the self-reflexive consciousness, we now approach the central theme of this paper, namely that it is this extra mental space that allows the drawing and redrawing of moral maps, a dimension of consciousness that is neglected by positive psychology. The theoretical framework that lends itself to this exposition is Archer's (2000) notion of emotion as first-order or second-order commentaries, which correspond to Taylor's first-order and second-order desires, respectively.

According to the sociologist Margaret Archer (2000), emotions are continuous running commentaries on our concerns. When there is a mismatch between the anticipation of our concern and our body's relation with the environment, emotional commentaries arise to modify the latter (p. 204). This is emotion at the level of the first-order concerns or commentaries. Second-order commentary arises when we comment on our own commentaries. The notion of emotion as second-order commentary challenges the mechanistic understanding of emotion as 'readout' in mainstream psychology. For instance, Oatley (1992) claims that emotions 'are signals that imply that something needs attention', in a way similar to 'burglar alarms that go off when there is an intruder' (p. 50). In sharp contrast to mechanical signals that terminate once the message is conveyed, emotional commentaries are reflexive and generative: we comment on our own commentaries, which in turn can generate further commentaries *ad infinitum*. The generative nature of emotional commentaries makes it possible for the making and remaking of our moral maps a potentially endless process. The potentially endless cycle of our second-order commentaries bears reiterating. Taylor (1997) argues for the importance of constantly calling into question existing visions of the good life, thereby reminding ourselves that the moral maps we draw always have room for change and growth, as does life itself.

For Archer (2000) also, the importance of second-order commentaries lies in their potential for change and growth, which mechanical signals such as alarm bells do not have. Archer is emphatic about the transformative impact of reflexivity in the commentaries one makes to oneself. Unlike a sports commentator's running commentaries, which have no impact on the game, the second-order commentaries we make about our own concerns can modify the concerns themselves. This transformative nature of second-order commentaries of emotion

forms a sharp contrast to the 'expressive monologue' (recall the alarm bell; Archer, 2000, p.196) that looms large in the cognitive accounts of emotion in mainstream psychology.

The transformative movements of the second-order emotional commentaries have been extensively documented by Archer (2000). Morphogenesis of emotions includes second-order prioritization of emotions, that is, how our concerns are monitored, displaced, and reordered in their priorities by their commentaries. Archer notes in particular how the second-order emotional commentary can modify the power of its constituents, the emotional goal itself. Following Charles Taylor, Archer (2000) refers to such emotional transformations as 'transvaluation' (p. 222). Archer points out that as a result of over-investment in the transvalued feelings, second-order commentaries tend to polarize differences, with one term of the binary opposition over-valued and the other term de-valued. For our purposes, the focus of analysis in the following paragraphs will be on how the drawing and redrawing of moral maps in second-order commentaries contribute to emotional transformation.

The topic of moral maps and evaluations touches upon an important component of emotions, namely cognitive appraisal. According to appraisal theory (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003), information processing in emotion is an intrinsically evaluative process, which entails the encoding of emotional information by certain schemas or templates. This theoretical framework allows us to understand the transformation of emotion in terms of cognitive recoding (Teasdale & Barnard, 1993) of experience. More specifically, in the language of information processing, transformation of emotion entails a process in which a mental code—such as first-order concerns—that initially codes the emotional information is overwritten by a different mental code—such as the moral map. Modification at this high level that pertains to a revision of the cognitive template/map of the world is akin to a shift of the tectonic plates of the soul—the cognitive recoding to be described below is necessarily a very emotional event that should not be confused with intellectualizing or self talk.

### *Transvaluation as Recoding of First-Order Concerns*

To reiterate a distinction made by Archer (2000), emotions come in two varieties: first-order concerns and second-order commentaries. First-order concerns tend to be more tightly coupled with action than are their second-order counterparts. This observation may explain the ancillary role of emotion in hope theory. Emotions, according to Snyder et al. (2005), are 'sequelae' of goal pursuits (p. 114). More specifically, emotions 'reflect the person's perceived success (positive emotions) or lack of success (negative emotions) in goal pursuit activities' (p. 114). This formulation is applicable only to emotion as first-order concern/commentary.

Emotion at the level of second-order commentaries behaves differently. For instance, hope theory (Snyder et al., 2005) predicts that impediments in

pursuit of goals decrease wellbeing. Not so, says *Cai-gen Tan*: frustration is good for you and gratification of desires rots like opium, or, more literally,

Words that grate on one's ears, and things that frustrate one's desires are the foundation stones for self-cultivation in virtue. A life filled with words pleasant to one's ears, and things gratifying to one's desires is a life buried in opium. (Wang, 2004, p. 24, item 5)

Another case in point is the Chinese notion of the golden mean (cf. Legge, 1893/1971), which is a binocular vision that sees two sides of the same coin—thesis and antithesis—at once. When this principle recodes experience, success is not necessarily positive, nor failure negative, because, in the words of *Cai-gen Tan*, 'an extreme engenders its opposite':

In favor the seeds of calamity are sown, thus it is time to stop and turn around when things are going one's way; after failure things may turn in the opposite direction toward success, thus it is important not to give up when frustrated. (Wang, 2004, p. 31, item 9)

Like the hinge that maintains its equilibrium above and beyond the movements of the door, one who follows the golden mean treats success and failure alike, since both require the modulation of a delicate sense of balance and proportion, elements which have become definitive of the Chinese notion of wellbeing. Thus at the level of second-order commentary, the principle of the golden mean can recode the dichotomy of success and failure—values that hold sway in first-order concerns—such that success no longer necessarily correlates with positive emotions, and failure with negative emotions.

To examine further the recoding of experience by the moral map at the level of second-order commentaries, I first introduce the Chinese notion of savoring, then the Buddhist notion of emptiness—the former shall serve as a theoretical framework for the latter, and both will be examined along two axes: self-reflexivity and transformation of emotional intent. Expositions on savoring and emptiness will help to expand the horizon of positive psychology beyond its focus on unreflective first-order concerns, and its misguided claim of scientific neutrality that renders invisible the value dimension of human experiences.

### **The Chinese Notion of Savoring**

In the following analysis, I situate the Chinese notion of emptiness (*kong*) in the cultural/historical context of aesthetic savoring. An investigation of *kong* needs to start with a review of the Chinese notion of savoring for two reasons: (a) phenomenologically speaking, *kong* is a particular case of savoring—the savoring of loss and grief; and (b) as a well-articulated second order commentary, the notion of savoring renders accessible to analysis the cognitive structure and information processing involved in second-order desires such as *kong*.

### *Savoring as Second-Order Commentary of Taste*

The Chinese notion of savoring (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007; Sundararajan, 2004; Sundararajan & Averill, 2007) is broader in scope than the contemporary formulation of this topic in positive psychology (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). Whereas Bryant and Veroff's formulation (2007) is confined to positive experiences, the Chinese savoring includes negative experiences as well, and has a relatively wider scope of temporality that extends to both the after-taste of an experience (Eoyang, 1993) and the subtle incipient phase of things (Sundararajan, 2004).

Cast in the framework of Archer (2000) and Taylor (1985), savoring is a second-order commentary on the first-order taste. One major difference between the first-order desire of taste and the second-order desire of savoring lies in the fact that the latter is a self-initiated action and cannot be imposed from without. Otherwise put, the devil can be made to have a taste of his own medicine, but cannot be made to savor it unless he wants to. This agentic aspect of savoring and its corresponding conative implications loom large in one of the earliest textual references to flavor: the *Chung Yung* stated: 'There is no body but eats and drinks. But they are few who can distinguish [zhi, literally 'cognize'] flavors' (Legge, 1893/1971, Vol. 1, p. 387). The term 'zhi' is difficult to translate. To be cognizant of (zhi) flavors entails knowing that one knows the flavors. Without the reflexive awareness of knowing (knowing that one knows), it wouldn't be possible to manipulate one's experience in ways characteristic of savoring, such as prolonging the experience, making fine discriminations of taste, and so on.

### *Savoring and Transformation of Emotional Intent*

With reflexive awareness, one's attention shifts from the object of emotion to emotion itself as the object of one's reflection and desire. Reflective attending is different from goal pursuits in many respects. Reflective attending tends to foreground the sensations, feelings, and action-readiness that are left out in the calibration of goal pursuits. Reflective attending is also more passive than goal pursuits. Because of its disengagement from goal-oriented reasoning and execution of an action plan, reflective attending is referred to by Frijda and Sundararajan (2007) as 'detachment,' which may be understood as an over-arching mental attitude of receptive observation, of unfocused attention that lets information come in from the outside and elicits meanings from within, without prior selection by expectancies and, perhaps, subsequent selection by relevance.

Of particular relevance for an analysis of emotional intent is 'action-readiness,' which may be defined as a state of readiness to entertain, modify, or abandon a particular relationship to some object of perception or thought, including oneself (Frijda, 2007). Action-readiness can be manifest in overt

action, such as approaching an object of desire, or in mental imagery, such as wishing to slap someone in anger. The action-readiness characteristic of savoring is manifest in the actions that aim at maximizing sensory and affective contact with the object. In gustatory savoring, that includes perceiving the dish as a dish and not as food, inhaling smells, and having the food circulate around one's tongue; in aesthetic savoring, it involves stillness, turning away from distractions, seeking to let imagination flow, relaxing the body so that it allows virtual participation in the scene, and so on. This type of action-readiness is referred to by Frijda (2007) as 'acceptance wriggles'—movements designed to enhance and prolong pleasurable sensations. As such, savoring signifies the emotional intent of acceptance or letting be, which is diametrically opposed to the intent of mastery or control behind agency and goal pursuits (cf. Bryant, 1989). This contrast in inward versus outward mastery, as we may recall, corresponds to the Authenticity-focus and Novelty-focus orientations, respectively.

As noted above, whereas savoring is confined to positive experiences in the West (Bryant & Veroff, 2007), its Chinese counterpart has a broader scope that includes negative experiences as well. The key to understanding savoring as an effective response to negative outcomes in life lies in its function as second-order commentary, which holds the potential for cognitive recoding of emotional experience, resulting in novel appraisals and transformations of the original emotional intent. A case in point is the Buddhist notion of emptiness (*kong*). *Kong* in its original context as part and parcel of Buddhist religious beliefs and practices (cf. Streng, 1967) falls outside the pale of this paper. The focus of analysis in the following section will be on emptiness in its function as a moral map—a pan-cultural template that codes emotional experiences in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from the mundane to the aesthetic, just as Puritan ethics is a moral map that cuts across all religious denominations in its influence on capitalism in the contemporary West. In the present context, the emotional experience of emptiness is not contingent upon religious affiliation to Buddhism, or upon attainment in Buddhist practices such as meditation or the eightfold path, although knowledge and understanding of the concept of *kong* would help.

## **The Buddhist Notion of Emptiness**

### *Kong and Detachment*

The Chinese notion of *kong* can be traced back to the Buddhist concept of '*sunyata*,' meaning 'nothingness' or 'emptiness,' which is the logical conclusion of the Buddhist doctrine of the impermanence of all things. Expressing the Buddhist sentiment of 'vanity, vanity, all is vanity,' the appraisal of *kong* tends to be global, such as '[a]ll glamour is empty in the end' (commentary

on *Cai-gen Tan*, Wang, 2004, p. 80). Typically *kong* entails an appraisal not only of the state of affairs of particular goals, but an appraisal so far-reaching that it calls into question the very possibility of having goals and concerns at all. Otherwise put, *kong* names this existential shudder that shakes up the very foundation of things, the very basis of all goals and concerns that the Buddhists call 'attachment.' Indeed a common expression for the word *kong* is 'ten thousand desires/concerns have become ashes.' Or in the words of *Cai-gen Tan*: 'What's life like before you were born and after you are dead? Upon such reflections all desires are rendered cold ashes' (Wang, 2004, item 184, pp. 303–304). But *kong* does not spell nihilism: with the deconstruction of attachment comes the consolation of 'detachment.'

Detachment entails a very complex emotional state, a phenomenon aptly captured by the following statement of the medieval philosopher and mystic Master Eckhart: 'Therefore, detachment is the very best thing. It purifies the soul, cleanses the conscience, inflames the heart, arouses the spirit, quickens desire, and makes God known' (O'Neal, 1996, p. 193). The above statement of Master Eckhart shows how detachment is different from resignation. Resignation is manifested cognitively as 'hopelessness' and other related themes, and behaviorally as social withdrawal. Functionally, resignation signifies the adaptive aspect of depression as giving up (impossible) goals. Detachment, in contrast, is much more complex in structure. Detachment may be understood as a second-order commentary (in the form of savoring) of disillusionment. It entails transformation of the original emotional intent. In Eckhart's statement above, this emotional transformation takes the form of a creative combination of opposite emotional intent—it 'purifies' (the soul) and 'cleanses' (the conscience), on the one hand, and 'inflames' (the heart) and 'arouses' (the spirit), on the other.

Another possible consequence of radical emotional transformation is hedonic reversal. Hedonic reversal comes in two varieties: one is the taste aversion of disgust (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000); the other is the narrower definition of hedonic reversal by Rozin (1999) in the sense of liking objects that initially give rise to aversion, such as the acquired taste for chili pepper. In the Buddhist tradition, salience of mortality has often been the trigger for *kong*, with its characteristic hedonic reversal from liking to disgust: 'Fame and material gain are sweet, but upon the thought of death they both taste like chewing wax' (*Cai-gen Tan*, Wang, 2004, p. 267, item 160). For individuals with sufficient understanding of the Buddhist notion of impermanence, hedonic reversal can set in on seemingly innocuous occasions such as when the party is over:

The guests are crowded in the hall and the revelry is at its height. What a happy occasion! All of a sudden, the water in the clepsydra comes to an end, the candles and the incense go out, and the tea grows cold. What a dreary scene! Disgusting and utterly tasteless. This is the way most things are. (*Cai-gen Tan*, adapted from Hung, c. 1500/1926, p. 202)

In the following paragraphs, selected poems from classical Chinese poetry are presented to examine more closely emotions associated with *kong* and detachment.

*Emptiness in Classical Chinese Poetry*

Consider first the three poems by Meng Chiao (751–814) lamenting the premature death of his child (translation mine; for a more literal rendition by Steven Owen, see Meng, c. 800/1975):

*Apricots Die Young*

The fallen apricot blossoms, buds cut by the frost and die in infancy.  
Grieving my late child, I wrote these poems.

A

Don't let freezing hands play with these pearls—  
These pearls fly loose easily.  
Don't let the sudden frost cut off spring—  
Frost bitten spring has no splendor.  
Frozen, falling, tiny young buds  
In colorful array like my baby's robe.  
Picking them from the ground—not yet a handful,  
The sun setting, I go home in hopeless [*kong*] sorrow.

B

The ground is strewn with stars that I picked up in vain [*kong*],  
The branches are bare with no flowers in sight.  
Sad is one solitary old man,  
Melancholy is a childless home.  
Much better are the diving ducks,  
Much better are the nest building crows.  
Ducklings fly defying the waves,  
Fledglings brace the wind, boasting to one another.

Not so resilient are flowers and infants—once gone they come back to life  
no more,  
Facing all these creatures, I sigh in vain [*kong*] with sorrow.

C

Cold and raw, the frost kills the spring,  
Sharpening branches of the tree into delicate knives.  
Dead is the heart of the tree,  
The mountain hollows wail loudly in vain [*kong*].  
Dot by dot, the fallen blossoms on the ground,  
Gleaming like specks of light from drops of oil.  
I am beginning to realize that between heaven and earth,  
All things are fragile.

Emotions depicted in all three poems by Meng Chiao are variants of the loss and grief theme. Translated as ‘hopeless’ (‘The sun setting, I go home in hopeless [*kong*] sorrow’) in the first poem, *kong* is not just the ‘hopelessness’ or ‘helplessness’ of depression. Indeed, there is a structural difference between *kong* and the rest of the terms in the loss and grief cluster: *kong* is the second-order commentary on loss and grief. The instances of *kong* are as follows:

The sun setting, I go home in hopeless [*kong*] sorrow.

The ground is strewn with stars that I picked up in vain [*kong*].

I sigh in vain [*kong*] with sorrow.

The mountain hollows wail loudly in vain [*kong*].

*Kong* expresses the futility (‘emptiness,’ ‘uselessness,’ and ‘meaninglessness’) of having sorrow, of gathering the fallen blossoms from the ground, of expressing grief by sighing, or of grieving like the mountain hollows wailing in the wind. In all these instances, the term *kong* is a feeling about feeling, a higher-order representation of emotions made possible by the recursive loop of self-reflexivity.

Another crucial difference between *kong* and the rest of the loss and grief cluster is that the latter is univocal in its negative valence, whereas the former is not. *Kong* is loss with a consolation. The consolation of illumination or enlightenment is expressed in the realization of impermanence in the envoi of poem C: ‘I am beginning to realize that between heaven and earth,/ All things are fragile.’

Consider another example. The following lyric is written by the last ruler of Southern T’ang, Li Yü (937–978), who, in addition to personal tragedies—the death of his wife and their young son—lost his throne and was taken as a captive to the new capital of the usurping Sung dynasty, where he stayed for the rest of his life till his 41st birthday, upon which occasion he was forced to drink poisoned wine and died. The following lyric (entitled Tune: ‘Ripples Sifting Sand’) was written during Li Yü’s captivity away from his palace (translation mine; for a more literary rendition by Daniel Bryant, see Li, c. 950/1975):

The past can only be lamented,  
 Confronted by the scene, I find it hard to evade.  
 Autumn wind, courtyards, the steps encroached by moss;  
 Unrolled, the beaded screens hang idly,  
 All day long, who comes?  
 Buried deep is my golden sword,

So is my youthful vigor in the weeds.  
 In the coolness of the night, against the tranquility of the sky, the moon  
 shines forth with all its splendor.  
 Calling to my mind the reflections of jade terraces and marble halls,  
 How they shimmer emptily [*kong*] in the River Ch’in-huai.

As can be expected, there is much nostalgia, loss, and grief in the last emperor's reminiscences, but the sense of *kong* that concludes the poem is not simply all that. The last emperor thought of the gleaming reflection of his palaces in the river Ch'in-huai, and felt 'empty' ('*kong*'). The translation 'in vain' would do as well here. In vain is the beauty of the former palaces—all their grandeur in reminiscence only mocks the dethroned ruler. Yet, there is more. *Kong* is the feeling that everything is 'empty' to the very core. Indeed the imagery of the shimmering reflections of grandeur captures well this Buddhist sense of emptiness: all that splendor of towers and palaces, of the gleaming jade and marble, turns out to be sheer reflection on water, a mirage shot through and through with 'nothingness.'

In the present context, the poet/emperor's detachment is manifest in a paradoxical combination of antithetical emotions: on the one hand, the 'empty' reflections on water suggest the sentiment of disillusionment and emotional withdrawal; on the other, there is a hint of consolation, an appreciation—so characteristic of savoring—for the aesthetic beauty of things, without which it would not have been possible for the poet to capture that enchanted moment, when the moon shines forth in full splendor against the coolness and serenity of the evening sky. We may recall the insight from Master Eckhart cited before that this paradoxical combination of emotions is characteristic of detachment.

To explore further the structure of detachment, consider the following lines of a lyric by Ou Yang Hsiu (1007–1072) (translation mine; for translation of the whole poem by Jerome P. Seaton, see Ou Yang, c. 1050/1975):

*Recollections of West Lake*

Flocks of blossoms gone, West Lake is good,  
 In total disarray, the shattered remains of red  
 Misty rain, flying willow catkins;  
 Hanging over the railings, the willow sways in the wind all day long.

Dispersed without a trace are the pipe songs,  
 Gone are the tourists of the lake,  
 Not till then do I realize the emptiness [*kong*] of spring,  
 Rolling down the thin gauze curtain;  
 I am delighted to see a pair of swallows, coming home in the fine rain.

It is quite common, at least in the Chinese tradition, for a sense of *kong* to follow on the heels of the feeling that the party is over—tourists are gone and music bands dispersed at the famed West Lake. But more than the realization that spring has come to an end, *kong* entails a self-reflexive appraisal of one's attachment to spring as well. The concomitant detachment consists of, again, a paradoxical combination of emotions: on the one hand, there are the sentiments of resignation and emotional withdrawal, as suggested by the gesture of pulling down the curtain; on the other, there is an appreciation of affective ties, as suggested by the return (presumably out of attachment to the nest site) of the mated swallows. Detachment also entails the emergence of a psychological space. It is

from this psychological space, cordoned off, as it were, by layers of diaphanous screens—the gauze curtain and the fine rain—that the poet welcomes the returning swallows with renewed appreciation but without attachment. Note the profound transformation of the poet's emotional intent from tenacious attachment to spring ('not until' all the merry-making of the season has come to an end will he give up the hope) to quiet resignation (letting down the curtain), from a sense of loss marked by the departure of spring to a sense of gain as suggested by the returning swallows. But things do not necessarily go full cycle—the poet has come to approach loss and gain alike with a grain of detachment.

Along with the emergence of psychological space is the transformation of time. The impetuosity of spring with its festivities—the tourists and the music bands—is transformed, with the realization of *kong*, into a leisurely, contemplative time, embodied by the willow that sways gently in the wind all day long. Note the absence of 'goal-directed energy' characteristic of 'agency thinking' (Snyder et al., 2005) in this picture. What we have instead are 'acceptance wriggles' (Frijda, 2007): the willow hangs in the wind languidly with as little self-determination and purposeful pursuit as the contemplative poet behind the gauze curtain.

Lastly, in its movement from attachment to disillusionment, *kong* mimics the taste aversion of disgust, except that in the present context the realization of *kong* entails a double reversion of taste from good to bad, and back again. Shweder and Haidt (2000) found in medieval Hindu texts a subtype of disgust that entails 'horror and disillusionment, as well as world-weariness associated with the quest for detachment, transcendence, and salvation' (p. 403). The possible connection between disillusionment and disgust as 'the rejection response to bad-tasting foods [and, by extension, experiences]' (Rozin et al., 2000, p. 644) is intimated at the beginning of the poem in reference to the spoliation of spring: 'Flocks of blossoms gone. . . . In total disarray, the shattered remains of red' (lines 1 and 2, first stanza). But the implicit disillusionment is countered with the opposite evaluation: contrary to conventional wisdom, the scene of devastation at West Lake is pronounced 'good' (line 1), a hedonic reversal reminiscent of liking objects that initially give rise to aversion, such as preference for the fiery chili pepper (Rozin, 1999). Read along this line, this poem concerns a redefinition of pleasure, and draws the distinction between conventional pleasure, which does not survive the spring (or symbolically youth), and refined pleasure, which does (for more details on emotion refinement, see Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007).

Taken together, this selection of classical Chinese poems shows how the Buddhist notion of emptiness can recode experience to allow for a paradoxical combination of opposite emotional intent—savoring of loss and bereavement—an interdigitation of the positive emotion of contemplative appreciation (savoring), on the one hand, and the negative emotion of grief and sorrow, on the other. Because of its radical recoding of experience, *kong* signifies a creative response to severe loss, failure, and frustration, a response in terms of acceptance,

but not resignation; letting be, but not giving up; savoring rather than coping (cf. Bryant, 1989).

The foregoing analysis offers the leverage for an incisive critique of positive psychology. It suggests that positive psychology has been preoccupied, on the one hand, with false dichotomies such as positive and negative emotions, dichotomies that may apply to first-order desires but not second-order desires. On the other hand, positive psychology has failed to factor in real individual and cultural differences in moral maps such as Novelty-focus and Authenticity-focus orientations, a difference in self-transaction that is reflected in the outward mastery of coping versus the inward mastery of savoring, respectively. Between false dichotomies and real differences, moral maps have fallen through the cracks in positive psychology.

### Summary and Conclusion

This study showcased the Buddhist notion of emptiness to flesh out two inter-related themes: (a) moral maps are important in shaping our emotional experiences; and (b) the drawing and redrawing of the moral map requires an extra mental space known as self-reflexivity, which in the domain of emotions is variously referred to by theorists as second-order desires, or second-order commentaries. The late Ted Sarbin (1989) made the important distinction between emotions and emotional lives. One important characteristic of emotional lives, but not necessarily of lab-induced emotions, is the hierarchy of concerns. At any given moment, one may find the need to prioritize the multiple pleasures of life—to go out on a beautiful sunny day, or to remain indoors to finish an interesting book. The more serious conflicts of concerns usually involve the ontological question: the unimpeded functioning of a prostitute's professional skills ('can I do') may not tally with her ontological question of 'can I be (this way).' Acceptance and avowal of experience may not coincide either: the rape victim's orgasm may not be graced by avowal of the experience, as the question of avowal concerns not the pleasure of bodily functioning so much as the integrity of being. To the extent that, as Archer (2000) points out, conflict of concerns pushes toward second-order commentaries, and to the extent that 'life is unlivable at first-order with contradictory emotional commentaries' (p. 220), second-order commentaries can be expected to be commonplace in our emotional lives. Yet, the study of emotion as second-order desires and commentaries has so far been neglected in mainstream psychology (Archer, 2000).

In its uncritical acceptance of the mainstream approach, positive psychology tends to focus on unreflective first-order concerns; and to make matters worse, it touts the misguided neutrality claim of science that renders invisible the value dimension of human experiences. One important consequence of this myopia is ethnocentrism, in the sense of researchers mistaking their own culturally specific categories to be universal (Christopher & Hickinbottom,

2008; Teo & Febraro, 2003). As Danziger (1997) points out, it is 'cultural embeddedness' (in Euro-American cultures) that accounts for the taken-for-granted quality that so many psychological concepts possess.

By way of conclusion, implications of this study may be adumbrated as follows:

1. Our understanding of the good life is incomplete without factoring in the value dimension. This is especially true in cross-cultural studies of the good life, where the moral map of another culture may be drastically different from that of the researcher's.
2. The Buddhist notion of emptiness offers an alternative response to the vicissitudes of life. Instead of the rhetoric of coping, which privileges agency and goal pursuit, the Buddhist *kong* advocates letting be and acceptance that facilitates savoring of experiences, even negative ones.
3. Solution to the undesirable consequences of misguided belief systems, such as 'terrorism', lies not in 'value-free' neutrality so much as in fostering reflexivity in our emotional commentaries. As Archer (2000) points out rightly, emotional concerns are corrigible not because it is possible for reason to reign supreme (as Kant claims), but because we are 'dealing with a reflexive being who not only has (first-order) concerns but who also has the (second-order) capacity to evaluate her concerns and to arrive at her ultimate concerns' (p. 209).
4. Lastly, the moral map has been rendered invisible by the neutrality claim of the scientist. To restore to the moral map its proper place in the scientific vision of a good life, psychology needs to develop, in addition to its empirical prowess, a self-reflexive consciousness. The inauguration of reflexive psychology can be traced back to Saint Augustine, who claimed that the road to God (read 'Truth') is 'passing through our own reflexive awareness of ourselves' (cited in Taylor, 1997, p. 27). From this perspective, what psychology as a science needs in order to achieve the goal of objectivity is not naïve neutrality but reflexivity that renders more transparent and accountable the researcher's own moral maps (cf. Sundararajan, 2005).

## References

- Archer, M.S. (2000). *Being human: The problem of agency*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Averill, J.R., & Sundararajan, L. (2005). Hope as rhetoric: Cultural narratives of wishing and coping. In J. Elliott (Ed.), *Interdisciplinary perspectives on hope* (pp. 133–165). New York: Nova Science.
- Bacon, S.F. (2005). Positive psychology's two cultures. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 181–192.
- Bryant, F.B. (1989). A four-factor model of perceived control: Avoiding, coping, obtaining, and savoring. *Journal of Personality*, 57, 773–797.

- Bryant, F.B., & Veroff, J. (2007). *Savoring: A new model of positive experience*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Christopher, J.C., & Hickinbottom, S. (2008). Positive psychology, ethnocentrism, and the disguised ideology of individualism. *Theory & Psychology, 18*, 563–590.
- Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the mind: How psychology found its language*. London: SAGE.
- Ellsworth, P.C., & Scherer, K.R. (2003). Appraisal processes in emotion. In R. Davidson, K.R. Scherer, & H.H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of the affective sciences* (pp. 572–596). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eoyang, E.C. (1993). *The transparent eye*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Fingarette, H. (1991). Comment and response. In M.I. Bockover (Ed.), *Rules, rituals, and responsibility* (pp.169–220). La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Frankfurt, H. (1971). Freedom of the will and the concept of a person. *Journal of Philosophy, 67*, 5–20.
- Frijda, N.H. (2007). *The laws of emotion*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Frijda, N.H. & Sundararajan, L. (2007). Emotion refinement: A theory inspired by Chinese poetics. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 2*, 227–241.
- Hung, Y.-M. (1926). *Musings of a Chinese vegetarian* (Y. Isobe, Trans.). Tokyo: Yuhodo, Kanda. (Original work published c. 1500)
- Lambie, J., & Marcel, A. (2002). Consciousness and emotion experience: A theoretical framework. *Psychological Review, 109*, 219–259.
- Legge, J. (1971). The doctrine of the mean. In *The Chinese classics* (Vol. 1, pp. 382–434). Taipei, Taiwan: Wen Shih Chi. (Original work published 1893)
- Li, Y. (1975). Ripples sifting sand. In W.C. Liu & I.Y. Lo (Eds.), *Sunflower splendor: Three thousand years of Chinese poetry* (D. Bryant, Trans., p. 303). Garden City, NY: Anchor. (Original work published c. 950)
- Markus, H.R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*, 224–253.
- Meng, C. (1975). Apricots die young. In W.C. Liu & I.Y. Lo (Eds.), *Sunflower splendor: Three thousand years of Chinese poetry* (S. Owen, Trans., pp. 160–161). Garden City, NY: Anchor. (Original work published c. 800)
- Neville, R.C. (1996). A Confucian construction of a self-deceivable self. In R.T. Ames & W. Dissanayake (Eds.), *Self and deception: A cross-cultural philosophical enquiry* (pp. 201–217). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Nisbett, R.E. (2003). *The geography of thought*. New York: Free Press.
- Oatley, K. (1992). *Best laid schemes: The psychology of emotions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Neal, D. (1996). *Meister Eckhart from whom God hid nothing: Sermons, writings, and sayings*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Ou Yang, H. (1975). Recollections of West Lake. In W.C. Liu & I.Y. Lo (Eds.), *Sunflower splendor: Three thousand years of Chinese poetry* (J.P. Seaton, Trans., p. 331). Garden City, NY: Anchor. (Original work published c. 1050)
- Oyserman, D., Coon, H.M., & Kimmelmeier, M. (2002). Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin, 128*, 3–72.

- Richardson, F.C., Fowers, B.J., & Guignon, C.B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J.R., & Snyder, S.S. (1982). Changing the world and changing the self: A two-process model of perceived control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 5–37.
- Rozin, P. (1999). Preadaptation and the puzzles and properties of pleasure. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 109–133). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Rozin, P., Haidt, J., & McCauley, C.R. (2000). Disgust. In M. Lewis & J.M. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (2nd ed., pp. 637–653). New York: Guilford.
- Sarbin, T.R. (1989). Emotions as narrative emplotments. In M. Packer & R. Addison (Eds.), *Entering the circle: Hermeneutical studies in psychology* (pp. 185–201). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Seligman, M.E.P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.
- Shweder, R.A., & Haidt, J. (2000). The cultural psychology of the emotions: Ancient and new. In M. Lewis & J. M. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (2nd ed., pp. 397–416). New York: Guilford.
- Snyder, C.R., Cheavens, J.S., & Michael, S.T. (2005). Hope theory: History and elaborated model. In J. Elliott (Ed.), *Interdisciplinary perspectives on hope* (pp. 101–118). New York: Nova Science.
- Streng, F. (1967). *Emptiness: A study in religious meaning*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.
- Sundararajan, L. (2002). The veil and veracity of passion in Chinese poetics. *Consciousness & Emotion*, 3, 197–228.
- Sundararajan, L. (2004). Twenty-four poetic moods: Poetry and personality in Chinese aesthetics. *Creativity Research Journal*, 16, 201–214.
- Sundararajan, L. (2005). Happiness donut: A Confucian critique of positive psychology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 25, 35–60.
- Sundararajan, L., & Averill, J. R. (2007). Creativity in the everyday: Culture, self, and emotions. In R. Richards (Ed.), *Everyday creativity and new views of human nature* (pp. 195–220). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Taylor, C. (1985). *Human agency and language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1997). *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Teasdale, J.D., & Barnard, P. (1993). *Affect, cognition, and change*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Teo, T., & Febraro, A.R. (2003). Ethnocentrism as a form of intuition in psychology. *Theory & Psychology*, 13, 673–694.
- Tu, W.M. (1985a). *Confucian thought: Selfhood as creative transformation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Tu, W.M. (1985b). Selfhood and otherness in Confucian thought. In A.J. Marsella, G. DeVos, & F.L.K. Hsu (Eds.), *Culture and self: Asian and Western perspectives* (pp. 231–251). London: Tavistock.
- Wang, Q.J. (2004). *The wisdom of life in Cai-gen Tan* (in Chinese). Taibai, China: Cong-wen Guan.
- Velazco, P. D. (1996). Towards a characterization of minimal consciousness. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 14, 63–80.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. A draft of this paper was presented at the 113th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, August 2005, Washington, DC. Thanks are due all the reviewers for their valuable feedback and helpful suggestions.

LOUISE SUNDARARAJAN received her Ph.D. in History of Religions from Harvard University, and her Ed.D. in Counseling Psychology from Boston University. Currently a forensic psychologist, she was President of the International Society for the Study of Human Ideas on Ultimate Reality and Meaning. A member of the International Society for Research on Emotions, she has authored over 40 articles in refereed journals and books, on topics ranging from Chinese poetics to alexithymia. ADDRESS: 691 French Road, Rochester, NY, 14618, USA. [email: [louiselu@frontiernet.net](mailto:louiselu@frontiernet.net)]