

highest wisdom is to cease striving and break all attachments to the cares of this world, instead focusing on the brevity of life and preparing for death.

The Jewish wisdom tradition goes back about 3,000 years and is represented in the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the “Old Testament”). Mentions of wisdom abound in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs (Birren & Svensson, 2005). Job’s wisdom is said to be in his submission to the will of God despite all the disasters that befall him. Ecclesiastes preached that “all is vanity” and advised withdrawing from worldly attachments, much as the Greek philosophers would a few hundred years later. Proverbs is a collection of wisdom statements, such as these:

Take my instructions instead of silver and knowledge rather than choice gold.

For wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. (Proverbs 8:10–11).

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Proverbs 9:10).

Like the Jewish tradition, the Christian tradition that began about 2,100 years ago emphasized faith in God as the basis of wisdom (Takahashi, 2000). The apostle Paul scorned the worldly wisdom that regards Christian beliefs as foolish and advocated the Christian wisdom that has faith in Jesus as its focus. For many centuries afterward, and even still today, Western wisdom tradition has contained a tension between the Greek’s advocacy of reason and the Christians’ advocacy of faith, along with many attempts to reconcile the two (Birren & Svensson, 2005).

#### The Eastern Wisdom Tradition

The Eastern wisdom tradition began over 3,500 years ago in India with the Hindu holy writings called the *Vedas*, which can be translated as “wisdom” (Takahashi, 2000). The *Vedas*, and other holy writings called the *Upanishads*, contain many different observations on wisdom from many different authors, but the common theme is that there is an unseen spiritual world that is different from the

sensory world we know in our daily lives, and wisdom is cultivated by recognizing this truth and seeking knowledge of the unseen world.

Later, around the same time as the Greek philosophers were pondering wisdom in the West about 2,500 years ago, two influential contributors to the history of wisdom arose in the East. In India, the Buddha proclaimed the principles of what later became known as Buddhism: (1) all life is suffering; (2) suffering arises from desire; and (3) wisdom lies in extinguishing all desire (Shen, 2008). Meanwhile in China, Confucius developed a contrasting philosophy of wisdom. Unlike Buddha, whose view of wisdom advocated rising above entanglements with the world, Confucius propounded a wisdom that was very involved with the world, focusing on how to be a moral person by recognizing your role in society—spouse, parent, ruler, servant—and fulfilling its responsibilities well (Birren & Svensson, 2005).

Is there any common thread or theme in these different perspectives on wisdom through the ages? Psychologists today think so, as this chapter describes (Staudinger, 2008). One persistent theme across East and West is that the wise person learns to rise above the distractions and momentary passions of human affairs, instead focusing on maintaining a certain distance from all the things that people usually care about, such as status, power, and the love and respect of others.

Yet there are many variations as well in ancient views of wisdom (Takahashi & Overton, 2005). Some perspectives view reason as the basis of wisdom; others are skeptical of reason and advocate insight or divine inspiration. The Sumerians thought it was wise to spend money freely, since you can’t take it with you, but the Greeks, Buddhists, Christians, and others believed that a wise person pays no mind to money and is not interested in buying things or in the temporary pleasures of this life. Buddha and the Greeks believed in detachment from the whirl of human activity and striving, but Confucius believed the wise person should serve useful roles in society. Maybe the only safe conclusion about ancient wisdom is that Socrates was right that the first step toward wisdom is to realize that our wisdom is limited.

## Responding to Cognitive Decline

11

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Describe the effect of intervention studies on cognitive decline, and explain how older adults adapt to physical and cognitive changes.

As we have seen, some of the decline in cognitive functioning that takes place in late adulthood is due to primary aging, including the shrinking of the brain and the decline in levels of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine. But persons in late adulthood not only have older brains than younger persons do, the level of their daily cognitive tasks and challenges is usually different as well. In developed countries most people have retired from work by the time they reach late adulthood (although there is increasing variability in the timing of retirement, as we will see later in the chapter). This means that they do not receive the daily cognitive stimulation that is part of performing most work tasks.

So, how much of the cognitive changes in late adulthood is due to primary aging, and how much is due to secondary aging—specifically the decline in cognitive stimulation that often accompanies late adulthood? In recent decades several major intervention studies have taken place seeking to stem or reverse cognitive decline in late adulthood, and they show surprising and promising results.