

Chapter 14

Positive Psychology and Buddhism



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“Buddhism” refers to a broad range of traditions, beliefs, and practices that originated approximately 2,500 years ago in the teachings of Gautama Buddha and that have been instantiated in diverse cultures across history since then. Although these instantiations share several core ideas in common (e.g., the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, and Dependent Origination), they also differ in significant and meaningful ways.

At the same time, within all of Buddhism’s variations, we find beliefs and practices that do not fit easily within the culturally constructed Western category of “religion.” Even though traditional forms of Buddhism have religious, spiritual, and supernatural elements, they also have elements of a cosmology, a philosophy, a psychology, and an ethical–spiritual path (i.e., way of life; Kristeller & Rapgay, 2013). In this way, Buddhism shares similarities with the ancient Confucian, Daoist, and Greco–Roman traditions which also were ways of life aimed at cultivating well-being derived from living in accordance with virtue and wisdom (Hadot, 1995).

Although positive psychology (PP) is an empirically grounded secular undertaking, it shares an interest in promoting well-being that is common across the Confucian, Daoist, Greco–Roman, and Buddhist ways of life. Yet the question of how to incorporate the insights of a religious, philosophical, and ethical tradition like Buddhism into a secular, empirical undertaking like PP is fraught with difficulties. Helderman (2019) has explored the history of modern psychology’s attempts to

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incorporate Buddhist insights, including the difficulties these attempts have entailed. Such difficulties include the negotiation of culturally constructed boundaries among religion, secularity, empiricism, medicine, spirituality, psychotherapy, and well-being. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is enlightenment (*bodhi*), which both resonates with and diverges from PP's emphases on eudaimonia, well-being, and psychological health.

With such richness in mind, the current chapter begins by reviewing the main trajectories of Buddhist thought throughout Asian history and during its transmission to the West, focusing on themes that are common to most forms of Buddhism and are most relevant to PP. Then we summarize how mainstream psychology and PP have incorporated these themes and modalities, how fruitful this cross-pollination has been, and issues that call for further inquiry.

Early Buddhism

Buddhism developed on the Indian subcontinent between 400 and 100 BCE, when its core tenets were first elaborated, orally transmitted, and transcribed. Although Buddhist beliefs and practices continued to develop over subsequent millennia, all classical schools of Buddhism agree on the core doctrines of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, and Dependent Origination. Each of these doctrines is concerned with human suffering and how to remediate it.

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha noted that human lives are suffused with suffering (*dukkha*). Some of this suffering is due to the existential contingencies of old age, sickness, and death. We also all must face situations in which our desires are frustrated or we must confront unwanted circumstances. Even when our desires are met, pleasure is fleeting given that everything is impermanent.

The First Noble Truth states that suffering is an inextricable part of life. The Second Noble Truth avers that the cause of most suffering is our craving for pleasant sensations and our aversion to unpleasant sensations. We try to cling to pleasures that cannot last and to avoid unavoidable unpleasantness. The Third Noble Truth indicates that it is possible to eliminate craving and aversion by learning to observe them rather than react to them. The Fourth Noble Truth identifies the Eightfold Noble Path as the path leading to the elimination of craving and aversion and, thereby, to the cessation of suffering (Gethin, 1998, pp. 59–80).

The Eightfold Noble Path

The Eightfold Noble Path is the path to *nibbana* (*nirvana* in Sanskrit), an enlightened state in which craving, aversion, ignorance, and the cycle of rebirth are ended. The Path's eight elements are right view, intention, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. *Right view* is understanding the laws of *karma*—that our thoughts and actions have consequences for our well-being, both in this lifetime and future lifetimes. *Right intention* refers to intentions of nongreed, nonhatred, and nonharming. *Right speech* means desisting from lying, gossiping, and causing discord. *Right conduct* means avoiding killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication. *Right livelihood* means not engaging in harmful occupations. *Right effort* means initiating and maintaining wholesome mental states and preventing and stopping unwholesome ones. *Right mindfulness* means maintaining present-moment awareness of wholesome and unwholesome mental factors and their consequences. *Right concentration* refers to maintaining one-pointed concentration in meditation practice (Gethin, 1998, pp. 80–84).

Dependent Origination

Dependent Origination is the causal process through which ignorance, craving, and attachment lead to suffering. In this formula, sense contact with the external world leads to pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings (*vedenas*). Pleasant feelings lead to craving (*tanha*) and attachment (*upadana*). In turn, craving and attachment embroil us in an endless cycle of suffering. Mindfulness of cravings and aversions can allow us to break free of this chain of causation (Williams, 2000, pp. 62–72). Dependent Origination shows we can release ourselves from the control of previously conditioned reactions and shift towards greater flexibility and wiser choices. We learn to pause and mindfully respond to situations rather than just react to them.

Buddhist Virtues

Early Buddhism outlines sets of virtues to be cultivated. Chief among these virtues are the Divine Abodes (*Brahmaviharas*) of compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity, and joy in the good fortune of others (Rahula, 1959). There is also an additional set of virtues (*Paramis*) that, in addition to those already named, includes generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, and resolve (Bodhi, 2011), each of which is clearly aligned with PP.

Non-Self (Anatta)

The Buddha taught that human beings were bundles of psychophysical processes (*kandhas*) that were subject to continuous change and impermanence (and hence that there can be no unchanging soul or self [*atman*] that defines one's inner essence; Williams, 2000). We arise out of complex sets of causes and conditions that undergo change as a result of our actions and experiences. Our adult selves, for example, are quite different from our childhood selves.

Later Indian Buddhism (100 BCE–1,100 CE)

Over the next millennium, Buddhism underwent significant elaborations on the Indian subcontinent as it dialogued with other Indian schools of thought that were developing alongside it. These elaborations included the emergence of *Mahayana* Buddhism; the *Madhyamika*, *Tathagatagarbha*, and *Yogacara* schools of thought; and *Tantric* practice. This chapter cannot explore all these complex developments, but we will highlight a few aspects of some of them.

Mahayana Buddhism emerged between 100 BCE and 100 CE. It is marked by changes in the motivation for and the envisioned endpoint of the Buddhist path. Mahayana Buddhists aspire to free all beings from suffering. Rather than seeking personal *nibbana*, they aim at becoming *bodhisattvas* who delay their personal liberation until all beings first are saved. Mahayana Buddhism became the dominant school of Buddhism in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and laid the foundation for the development of *Vajrayana* Buddhism in Tibet (Harvey, 1990).

Nagarjuna (c. 150–250 CE) developed the *Madhyamika* school that taught that all phenomena (*dharmas*) are empty (*sunyata*) of self-existence (Westerhoff, 2018). No phenomenon has an inner essence that makes it what it is; instead, phenomena arise out of their complex relationships with everything that exists. For example, people exist because of their historical relations to the sets of past causes and conditions from which they arose and their ongoing relations with their social, cultural, and natural worlds. Humans have no fixed inner essence apart from these. The same is true for all phenomena. Additionally, concepts only mean something as part of an interrelated web of concepts (e.g., something can only be big if something else is small).

Yogacara Buddhism taught that our thoughts and actions leave karmic seeds (*bija*) that can develop, lie fallow, or wither in an unconscious storehouse (*alaya vijñana*) as a consequence of cultivating or abandoning them. It emphasized that our experience of reality is not simply out there—it is interpreted, constructed, and projected by the mind (Westerhoff, 2018). *Tantric* Buddhism introduced sets of *mantras* (ritual phrases), *mudras* (body postures/gestures), energy meditations, visualizations, and devotional and antinomian practices designed to speed the path

to enlightenment. Tantra had its greatest influence on *Vajrayana* Buddhism in Tibet and *Shingon* Buddhism in Japan, but tantric practices can be found throughout all of Asia (Skilton, 1994).

Buddhism Beyond India

Early Indian Buddhism traveled southward to Sri Lanka (c. 300 BCE) and became the basis for the *Theravada* Buddhism of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. Mahayana Buddhism spread northward along the Silk Road from India to China (c. 50–200 CE) and Tibet (c.700–900 CE; Skilton, 1994). Buddhism took on the local coloration of indigenous cultures in each country to which it was transmitted. Chinese Buddhism, for example, was influenced by Daoism and Confucianism. New sects quickly arose as Buddhism adapted to the needs of East Asian and Tibetan culture. Japan, for instance, saw the emergence of the *Pure Land*, *True Pure Land*, *Tendai*, *Kegon*, *Shingon*, *Soto Zen*, *Rinzai Zen*, and *Nichiren* Buddhist sects. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate on the differences among these new sects, except to note the important influence of Theravada vipassana, East Asian Zen, and Tibetan Vajrayana on Western culture, mainstream psychology, and PP.

The nineteenth century saw attempts to modernize Asian Buddhism, largely as part of a complex response to Western colonialism (McMahan, 2008). The Sinhalese Buddhist revival (Prothero, 1996), Southeast Asian Vipassana (Braun, 2013), and Japanese Meiji Era Zen (Rutschman-Byler, 2014) are examples of modernized forms of Buddhism that came to influence Western mainstream psychology.

Buddhism came to America primarily through successive waves of Asian immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most American Buddhists are Asian-descent Buddhists whose temples and churches provided a venue where their immigrant forbears could practice and intergenerationally transmit their culture (Han, 2021). Buddhism also came to America through European-descent travelers to Asia who brought Buddhist practices and beliefs back with them, as well as Asian-born teachers who taught Westerners in newly established practice centers. Early interest was also stimulated by the publications of Anglo-American popularizers, Beat Generation poets and novelists, and psychotherapists like Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, and Karen Horney (Fields, 1986).

The predominantly non-Asian American Buddhist communities that arose from these later influences tend to emphasize lay meditative practices that include extended meditation retreats. They tend to be skeptical of Buddhism's supernatural elements and to focus more on its psychological aspects, viewing Buddhism as a way to enhance people's well-being in meaningful ways (Segall, 2020).

Positive Psychology and Buddhism

Enlightenment and Human Flourishing

Although Buddhism and PP both aim at human flourishing, they have somewhat different conceptions of what flourishing entails. From its inception, PP has drawn on a conception of human flourishing that includes elements of subjective well-being, virtue, and meaning. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a neo-Aristotelian classification of character strengths and virtues that they imagined might lie at the heart of human flourishing. Seligman's (2011) later PERMA model proposed a list of factors purported to be the core constituent elements of human flourishing: **P**ositive emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, and **A**ccomplishments.

The Buddhist ideal of enlightenment—a state of subjective well-being marked by inner peace, nonhatred, nongreed, and the virtues of generosity, equanimity, and compassion—has elements in common with PP's conception of flourishing. Yet Buddhist enlightenment also includes metaphysical, transcendent, and supernatural connotations beyond what an empirical, naturalistic psychology can embrace (see Nelson & Cauty, Chap. 2, this volume). Contemporary authors (Batchelor, 1997; Flanagan, 2011; Segall, 2020) have proposed naturalized models of enlightenment that bring it more in line with PP. They view enlightenment as a set of positive mental states and virtues that jointly constitute flourishing. Even though this conception of enlightenment is compatible with PP, it probably is not the view of most Buddhists today, and critics worry that naturalizing enlightenment diminishes it as an ideal.

Buddhist Influences on Positive Psychology

Buddhist ideas have had a major impact on PP, especially the ideas that: (a) mindfulness, loving-kindness, and compassion are cultivatable qualities that enhance well-being; (b) attachment and aversion are causes of surplus suffering that can be remediated through attitudes of acceptance; (c) notions of a single "true self" can benefit from increased fluidity and relationality; and (d) self-transcendent spiritual experiences can enhance meaning and growth.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness found its way into contemporary Western psychology through the work of psychologists and scholars who pursued Buddhist practices and sought to share their application through accessible writings and clinical interventions (Helderman, 2019). One of the most influential has been Jon Kabat-Zinn (1982, 1990, 2005), who defined *mindfulness* as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (2005, p. 4), a definition that combines metacognitive awareness with an attitude of nonjudgmental acceptance. Even though this definition differs from the classical Theravada formulation (Bodhi, 2011; Gethin, 2011), it adheres closely to the Zen understanding.

Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) offered mindfulness meditation as a vehicle for health and wellness. His 8-week MBSR format became the prototype for Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for recurrent depression (Segal, et al., 2013), Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training for eating issues (Kristeller, 2019), and many other mindfulness-based interventions designed to address a large variety of mental disorders and medical conditions. Other interventions with mindfulness components include Marsha Linehan's (1993) Dialectical Behavioral Therapy for borderline personality disorder (which grew out of her experiences with Zen Buddhism) and Steven Hayes's Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (which had an independent origin; Hayes et al., 2003).

Mindfulness has had a profound influence on clinical and neuropsychological research. The American Mindfulness Research Association's database has tracked over 7,000 articles on mindfulness in scientific publications through February 2020 (AMRA Library, 2021). This field has grown so large that Goldberg et al. (2021) recently reviewed results from 44 meta-analyses representing 336 randomized controlled trials of mindfulness-based interventions ($N = 30,483$).

The integration of mindfulness with cognitive-behavioral therapy led to the emergence of the so-called third wave of cognitive-behavioral therapy. However, as Ivtzan (2016) has pointed out, most mindfulness-based intervention studies measure outcomes in terms of symptoms and problems (not growth, flourishing, and well-being). Although mindfulness studies relevant to PP (rather than clinical psychology) are exceptions to the rule, there are now several promising mindfulness-based PP interventions designed to promote well-being in nonclinical populations, including Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (Niemiec & Lissing, 2016) and the Mindfulness-Based Flourishing Program (Ivtzan et al., 2016b).

Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice is a manualized 8-week program that integrates Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths approach with Kabat-Zinn's MBSR. It encourages participants to reflect on their signature character strengths during formal meditation and throughout the day. Participants learn to appreciate and celebrate their character strengths; recognize when these strengths are operating, overused, or underused; and utilize their strengths to solve problems and navigate life. The program emphasizes developing authenticity and virtuous character. Niemiec and Lissing (2016) have reported promising results from three case studies and two nonrandomized pilot studies examining its efficacy. Similarly, a pilot study of an online version of the intervention (Ivtzan et al., 2016a) found significant medium-to-large improvements in life satisfaction, flourishing, engagement, and signature strengths. In sum, Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice is a promising mindfulness-based PP intervention that merits further testing with randomized assignment, active controls, and larger sample sizes.

The Mindfulness-Based Flourishing Program is an 8-week online program consisting of videotaped presentations and guided meditations. It combines mindfulness training with didactic content on self-awareness, positive emotions, self-compassion, self-efficacy, autonomy, relationships, and savoring. Research suggests the program significantly improves mindfulness, well-being, gratitude, compassion, self-efficacy, autonomy, meaning, and savoring compared to waitlist

controls (Ivtzan et al., 2016b, 2018), as well as work-based meaning, authenticity, flow, self-efficacy, and athletic motivation and training satisfaction (Young & Ivtzan, 2019). The Mindfulness-Based Flourishing Program is a promising PP intervention that requires further validation in studies with active control comparators.

Several studies demonstrate the impact of more traditional mindfulness-based interventions on spiritual well-being. These studies find mindfulness practice can lead to meaningful increases in people's spiritual engagement even when presented in a secular context, and this engagement plays a key role in improving its practitioners' well-being and self-functioning. These studies find that mindfulness training increases love, spirituality, gratitude, and appreciation of beauty (Pang & Ruch, 2019), as well as an increased spirituality that contributes to reduced distress and self-reported medical symptoms (Carmody et al., 2008). Greeson et al. (2011) found a significant proportion of the improvement in post-MBSR depressive symptoms was uniquely explained by changes in spirituality and mindfulness. Geary and Rosenthal (2011) found that MBSR improved health care workers' spirituality and well-being, and Garland et al. (2007) found cancer patients who received MBSR improved more in spirituality than controls. A study on coping with early-stage cancer (Henderson et al., 2012) found MBSR superior to both nutritional and usual-care controls in terms of quality of life, spiritual well-being, and meaningfulness. Kristeller and Jordan (2018) found participation in a mindfulness-based eating intervention resulted in marked improvement in spiritual well-being that explained mindfulness's impact on eating regulation.

Self-Compassion Kristin Neff (2003) introduced self-compassion to mainstream psychology and PP. Neff's conception of self-compassion is deeply rooted in Buddhist psychology. Self-compassion has three facets, which Neff calls *self-kindness*, *common humanity*, and *mindfulness*. Self-kindness is the capacity to look at one's failings and suffering with compassion and understanding and without critical self-flagellation. Common humanity is the recognition that one's failings and sufferings are common to all humankind. Mindfulness is the ability to observe one's failings and sufferings intimately without suppression, minimization, or exaggeration.

Neff (2014) and Germer and Neff (2019) summarized a large body of research on self-compassion. This research shows people higher in self-compassion are happier, more optimistic, and more satisfied with their lives and their relationships. They also are more emotionally connected, accepting, autonomy-supporting, willing to compromise, and concerned for others. A meta-analysis of 27 randomized controlled trials of self-compassion interventions found these interventions promote substantial increases in self-compassion and mindfulness and decreases in rumination, self-criticism, disordered eating, stress, depression, and anxiety (Ferrari et al., 2019).

Importantly, Neff (2003) has differentiated self-compassion from self-esteem, the latter of which she views as being more closely linked with narcissism, inflated self-views, and the need to perceive oneself as superior to others. By comparison,

levels of self-compassion are more closely associated with measures of happiness and optimism than levels of self-esteem are.

Neff and Germer (2013) developed an 8-week Mindful Self-Compassion training program based on the MBSR structural model that includes mindfulness, loving-kindness, and compassion meditation practice and emphasizes compassionate listening, meeting difficult emotions, exploring challenging relationships, and embracing life with savoring, gratitude, and self-appreciation. Research shows Mindful Self-Compassion training can increase self-compassion, compassion for others, mindfulness, personal self-efficacy, and life satisfaction and can decrease stress, anxiety, depression, negative self-directed thinking, and diabetic distress (Bluth et al., 2016; Dundas, et al., 2017; Friis et al., 2016; Neff & Germer, 2013). These studies, which are described and summarized more fully in Appendix 14.S1, suggest that self-compassion is a teachable skill that can substantially enhance people's well-being.

Loving-kindness The Theravada practice of loving-kindness (*metta*) meditation, introduced to the English-speaking West by Thich Nhat Hanh (2014) and Sharon Salzberg (1995), focuses on opening the heart to love and caring for others (Kristeller & Johnson, 2005). It heightens the ability to experience empathy, benevolence, and compassion toward oneself and others and is similar to compassion meditations in Tibetan Buddhism that have also received empirical attention (see Davidson & Harrington, 2002; Goleman, 2003; Lutz et al., 2007, 2009).

The practice of loving-kindness meditation involves the silent self-recitation of the wish that sentient beings be happy, healthy, safe, and well. These wishes for well-being are first directed to oneself and then in turn to loved ones, neutral parties, people one finds difficult, and all beings. As one recites each wish, one mindfully observes the mind, heart, and body's reactions to each wish before proceeding to the next meditative focus of loving-kindness. Buddhists consider loving-kindness to be one of the four *Brahmaviharas* (heavenly abodes) that help practitioners develop attitudes of benevolence and nonharming towards others. Loving-kindness meditations are often incorporated into mindfulness-based interventions of various kinds, including MBSR, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and the Mindful Self-Compassion Program.

Several studies have examined the effects of loving-kindness meditation on well-being. In a seminal study, Fredrickson et al. (2008) found workplace loving-kindness meditation training led to significantly higher daily levels of amusement, awe, contentment, gratitude, hope, interest, joy, love, and pride relative to a no-treatment control. Increases in daily positive emotions led to increases in mindfulness, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, purpose in life, and positive relations with others, which in turn led to increases in life satisfaction. More broadly, Zeng's (2015) meta-analysis of 24 loving-kindness studies found medium-sized effects on increases in daily positive emotions. Studies have also found associations between loving-kindness practice and self-compassion, perceived social integration, decreased self-criticism, and altruistic behavior (Fredrickson et al., 2019; Leiberg et al., 2011; Shahar et al., 2015). Two studies suggest a possible link between

practicing loving-kindness meditation and preserving telomere length (Hoge et al., 2013; Le Nguyen et al., 2019), suggesting loving-kindness meditation promotes people's physical health too.

Although the above studies support the benefits of loving-kindness meditation, only Le Nguyen et al. (2019) compared loving-kindness meditation to an active control. Two studies suggest loving-kindness-based improvements in well-being may not be superior to improvements in well-being resulting from physical exercise (Galante et al., 2016) or listening to classical music (Sorenson et al., 2019). Although loving-kindness and self-compassion interventions show the promise of testing Buddhist ideas and techniques with modern research methodology, both require future testing with active controls. All the studies in this section are described and summarized in greater depth in Appendix 14.S1.

Self and Self-Transcendence Many humanistic and psychodynamic approaches to meditation (Epstein, 2001; Fromm, 1994; Rubin, 1996) entail a shift in self-experiencing that reveals a more porous, ephemeral, and relational self that is in line with the Buddhist idea of nonself. This changed self-experiencing typically emerges with meditative practice over time. This perspective runs counter to Western beliefs in an unchanging “true self.” Letting go of rigid, essentialist notions of a “true self” can free one from limiting self-narratives, opening one up to deepening connections with others and with nature.

There are also rapid, dramatic shifts in self-perception that emerge from self-transcendent spiritual experiences (James, 1902/1936). As Stace (1961) states, an experience “of only a few moments’ duration” can transform a life previously felt to be “meaningless and worthless” into one imbued with “meaning, value, and direction” (pp. 60–61). Mahayana Buddhism employs a variety of meditative techniques to help practitioners attain self-transcendent experiences that evoke a vital sense of connection to the world and act as renewed sources of meaning.

Because it is hard to induce self-transcendent states experimentally through meditation—meditation may pave the way for them but can never produce them on demand—experimental psychology has turned to psychedelic experiences as possible analogues to Buddhist meditative states of self-transcendence. This is not without controversy, as Buddhism eschews intoxicants, and some Buddhist teachers suggest that these experiences are not good analogs to meditative self-transcendent states. Nevertheless, Buddhist ideas concerning emptiness and self-transcendence have had a major impact on how these experiences are often interpreted (Huxley, 1954; Leary et al., 1964; Watts, 1962).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review the vast literature on psychedelics and well-being. Although early studies (Grof, et al., 1973; Pahnke, 1963) demonstrated the value of psychedelic spiritual experiences for personal growth, changes in how the law classified psychedelics in the 1970s put a temporary halt to research. Studies by researchers at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research and the New York University Langone Center have recently revived this field of scientific inquiry (Pollan, 2018).

Researchers at the Johns Hopkins's group (Griffiths et al., 2008, 2011, 2018; MacLean et al., 2011) have found psilocybin reliably produces self-transcendent, sacred, and ineffable experiences that participants rate as among the most significant spiritual experiences of their lives. Participants report long-lasting improvements in mood, attitude, life satisfaction, altruism, interpersonal closeness, gratitude, forgiveness, meaning, purpose in life, optimism, death transcendence, sanctification of strivings, daily spiritual experiences, religious faith, and coping. These studies are described and summarized in greater detail in Appendix 14.S1.

Conclusion

The Buddhist tradition has had a strong influence on PP, especially with regard to mindfulness, self-compassion, loving-kindness, and self-transcendence. It has encouraged psychologists to think of mindfulness, altruism, compassion, and kindness as teachable skills that can foster personal and collective flourishing. Engaging in these skills often enhances spiritual well-being, even when spiritual well-being is not explicitly addressed. These ideas have been integrated into interventions that have demonstrated promising potential for helping people lead flourishing and fulfilling lives.

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