

Flourishing Through the Lens of Indian Traditions

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ABSTRACT

Flourishing is a relatively new concept in the field of Positive Psychology focusing on positive mental health and the life well lived. It is a comprehensive form of well-being that encompasses emotional, psychological and social well-being. The present paper is a comparative analysis of Western and Eastern perspectives on Flourishing. It analyses concepts described in ancient Indian traditions that are equivalent of Flourishing and their relevance in present times. While the mainstream psychological literature describes flourishing in terms of flow, growth, thriving and resilience. In Indian Traditions flourishing at the individual level constitutes virtues such as ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truth), Nishkama karma, Santosa (contentment) and attainment of the state of Sat-chit-ananda and Stithpragya, in developing of sattvic guna and following the path of ashtangamarga and so forth. Similarly at the collective level flourishing can be explained lokasamgraha (taking care of people) and Vasudev Kutumbham (the world is a family), and in Sarvodaya (rise of all). The paper also attempts to see flourishing from the Sufi perspectives of unity to God and annihilation of self.

Keywords: *Sat-chit Ananda, Nishkama karma, Stithpragya, Trigunas and Loksamagraha*

A common existential question that kept humanity wondering for a long period of time is what constitutes a good life and what is the goal of human life. Philosophers all over the world tried to define the goal of human existence and that resulted in a number of schismatic explanations. Although there is no perfect answer to this question and the idea of what life can be considered as a good life is still evolving, there are some influential lines of thoughts embedded in both western and eastern cultures that need to be explored.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that the end or purpose of human life is flourishing. Flourishing, as described by Aristotle, is a state of living well and doing well and a stage where an individual can fully express their human capacities. In other words, Aristotle's conception of a flourishing life is inspired by the eudemonic happiness derived from life. Eudaimonia is, "activity expressing virtue" (Arjoon, Turriago-Hoyos and Braun, 2017). Thus, according to Aristotle, instead of focusing on immediate, short-term pleasure, an individual should work on developing one's character and virtue which leads to greater good and that leads to the path of a flourishing life.

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On the question of human flourishing, the Western perspectives lean on the well-being of individual while the eastern perspectives lean on the well-being of the community. Thus, the answer to the question of what constitutes a happy and flourishing life get mired into the dilemma of individualism and collectivism. Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher proposed that human flourishing is grounded in the community of people who share the commitment to do ethical self-cultivation (Lobel, 2017).

Another influential eastern line of thought was of Dao who penned his thoughts in the classic Zhuangzi (Kim, 2019). Daoism insists that the major cause of human suffering is the constant yearning for the fulfillment of many desires. The blind pursuits of these desires create inner psychological conflicts (Kim, 2019). Thus, Daoism preached to follow the path of the heavenly perspective which calls for detachment from one's preconceived judgements and values. The heavenly perspective help in creating an unbiased and open-minded attitude among individuals. Thus, Daoism proposes that flourishing comprises a life that is natural and spontaneous (Kim, 2019).

In the present times it has been observed that the modern psychological literature on flourishing is heavily influenced by the philosophies of the western thinkers. This is why the earliest conception of flourishing is derived from the Greek conception of hedonic and eudemonic perspectives. This seemingly biasness towards western school of thought prevents the understanding of flourishing from the eastern perspectives. A comprehensive understanding of the concept of flourishing cannot be done without dwelling through the writings of ancient Indian scriptures and the religious traditions. These scriptures and traditions can be considered as a sacred treasure trove of knowledge.

Thus, there is an indispensable need to understand the concept of flourishing through the lens of Indian traditions. The present paper attempts to explain flourishing through the perspectives of Indian philosophies and ethos. The paper also presents a comparative outlook of the similarities and differences of the modern theories of flourishing and the concepts mentioned in Indian scriptures. A brief description of the modern conceptualization of Flourishing and its components was discussed in the next paragraph.

Flourishing: The Gold standard measure of Well-being

Seligman (2011) termed Flourishing as the gold standard measure of well-being. For many years, many theories of well-being have been conceptualized however, Flourishing can be considered as relatively a new concept with its origins in the Positive Psychology movement.

The modern psychological literature describes flourishing as a state of complete mental health something that goes beyond happiness and life satisfaction (Keyes, 2002). It reflects a state of comprehensive well-being, however the empirical approach towards it makes it an abstract and individual psychological matter ignoring the philosophical leanings to it. Keyes (2002) described it in terms of three types of well-being which are psychological, emotional and social well-being and broadly divided individuals in terms of flourishing and languishing.

Seligman (2011) described flourishing in terms of PERMA model where the five components of positive emotions, engagement, relationship, meaning and achievement constitute well-being. While **Diener et al. (2009)** explains flourishing as a multidimensional construct comprising self-acceptance, vitality, optimism, resilience and personal growth.

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Vanderweele (2017) included the materialistic aspect in the conception of flourishing by including financial and material stability as an important component to it.

In western models the concept of well-being is simplified and broadly classified in terms of hedonia and eudemonia which addresses all the biological, psychological and social aspects of human nature. However similar comparative concepts are also found in ancient Indian philosophies. One such line of thought in ancient India was called the Lokaayata or Charvaka Philosophy which reflects the hedonic aspect of happiness. The Charvaka advocated that the ultimate goal of life is to seek pleasure in life (**Kumar, 2002**). The followers of the Charvaka philosophy rejected the notion of dharma, atman or the transmigration of soul. The underlying belief is that life exist in the present and therefore one must strive for those actions that give pleasure and avoid pain (**Kumar, 2002**).

As against to it the Indian perspective comparable to eudaimonia was embedded in the Buddhist and the Vedic philosophy. The Vedas advocate to follow what is permanent (satya) and eternal (nitya) and to avoid the momentary pleasures which they termed as illusion or mithya (**Kumar, 2002**).

While the modern conceptualizations of flourishing or well-being are based on scientific evidence of research on individuals in different settings but they are devoid of the philosophical leanings. The philosophical aspects of flourishing as explained in the Indian traditions now also have backing of empirical evidence. This can be understood in the subsequent paragraphs where a comparative analysis was presented.

Flourishing through the lens of Buddhism

Buddhism defines that the goal of human life is following the life of Bodhi or awakening (**Segall, 2021**). Buddhism differs from western psychological approaches in a sense that it did not focus on individual self-actualization. Instead, it believes that flourishing can arise by embracing a collective sense of shared identity. Thus, flourishing encompasses in itself compassion, altruism and self-awareness (**Ekman and Thomas, 2021**).

Buddha advocated to follow the middle path avoiding extremes as a way to attain enlightenment. **Keyes (2016)** a pioneer in the field of flourishing research, focused on the similarity between his two continua model of mental health and the **four noble truths** proposed by Buddhism. These four noble truths are the key dimensions of existence that are necessary to achieve the path of enlightenment. The first truth is to acknowledge the presence of **Dukkha**, that all human beings experience pain and misery in their lifetime which manifests in the form of stress, unhappiness and pain. The second truth is called **Prattiya sampuda** which emphasizes that there is need to understand that desire is the cause of all Dukkha.

At present in Capitalistic societies, people are attached to their materialistic desires to earn more money, power, social status and this greed for more, manifest in the form of a poor quality of life, mental health disorders, hatred and environmental damage. The third noble truth advocate the cessation of these desires in order to attain *nirvana* and the last noble truth called for following the path of *ashtanga marga*, the eightfold path which would lead to true happiness according to Buddha.

Aristotle believed that happiness has been intricately tied with virtue and wisdom, as opposed to it the Buddhist teachings propose *silā* (moral conduct) and *prajna* (wisdom) as a

part of ashtanga marga (Segall, 2021). Keys (2016) used the four noble truths and *ashtanga marga* to explain the principles and implications of his two continua model of mental health. He believed that like *dukkha* all human beings are prone to mental illness, which is also a form of suffering. However, treating the mental illness is not enough to attain a flourishing life. In order to flourish, one must gain wisdom to develop mental faculties which will help in feeling good about themselves and doing good to others by contributing to society (Keyes, 2016).

Apart from Buddhist thoughts, the ancient texts of Hinduism such as Vedas, Upanishads, the holy book of Bhagavad Gita also propounded many notions of flourishing centuries before its modern conception. The Bhagavad Gita preaches that a flourishing life can be achieved by identifying and embracing one's dharma (duty) and once identified this duty should be performed with the highest character without attaching any concern for the results (Bhawuk, 2011). Some other notions embedded in Hindu philosophy have been described under the following headings-

Sat-Chit-Ananda: The Indian Gold standard measure of Well-being

In Indian Psychology, the spiritual element of human consciousness is emphasized, this concept is explained in Hindu philosophy in the form of *sat-chit-ananda*. *Sat-chit-ananda* means absolute bliss and consciousness. This indigenous construct has been closest to flourishing (Singh, et.al, 2018). *Sat* means being truthful, *chit* refers to being aware and *Ananda* meaning the bliss. The unity of all three conquers the egocentric emotion of pleasure and pain and leads to a state of ego free state and true empathy (Singh et.al, 2017). The element of *sat* reflects the tendency of being truthful and the nature of seeking positivity and goodness in others. The element of *chit* reflects the cognitive component where an individual tries to take responsibility of one's thoughts, feelings, speech and actions (Singh, Raina and Oman, 2022). While the state of Ananda reflects the ability of an individual to observe the events around them but still be unaffected by the outside and inside events. *Ananda* is a state of pure bliss which is completely independent of any attachment and reactivity (Singh, Raina and Oman, 2022).

The concept of *sat-chit-ananda* and its relationship with flourishing have a strong empirical basis with the development and validation of sat-chit ananda scale. The sat-chit ananda scale measures this construct in terms of four dimensions which are Chit (consciousness), Antah shakti (inner strength), Sat (truthfulness) and Ananda (blissfulness) (Singh, Khari, Amonkar, Arya and Keshav, 2013). It has been found that all these dimensions are positively correlated with flourishing, experience with positive emotions show direct positive correlation with flourishing while experience with negative emotions shows inverse relationship with it (Singh et.al, 2018).

The empirical study on the concept of sat-chit-Ananda found a fourth factor strongly correlated with the given three which is Antah-shakti or inner strength. Antah-shakti refers to the quality of an individual to take initiative, standing up for oneself and others and deal with life challenges diligently (Singh, Raina and Oman, 2022). The statistical results show that sat-chit-ananda along with antah-shakti significantly relate to the concept of flourishing (Singh et al. 2018). Thus, it can be concluded that sat-chit-ananda reflect closest with flourishing and it can be termed as the Indian version of the gold standard measure of well-being.

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The path to *ananda* can be achieved through the notion of nishkama karma and also by the practice of karma yoga which also leads to the path of nirvana and true actualization and ultimately to flourishing. The inter-relationship of these notions needs to be explored further for in depth understanding of the flourishing construct.

Nishkama Karma and Stith Prajna: The Pathways to Flourishing

The theoretical frameworks and models of flourishing such as Diener's model, and Seligman's PERMA model of flourishing, found engagement as a significant predictor of flourishing. **Seligman (2012)** conceptualized engagement as a state in which an individual is completely immersed in the task at hand. **Seligman (2011)** equated engagement with the concept of flow which involves a state characterized by loss of self-consciousness and complete absorption in an activity. The construct of engagement relates with the philosophy of nishkama karma in many aspects.

The construct of *Nishkama karma* originates in Vedanta school of thought of Indian philosophy. Action performed in accordance with *nishkama karma* is karma yoga (**Pathak, 2014**). While nishkama karma means selfless action, a karma yogi according to Upanishads is one who does his work dutifully with full detachment and no expectation of any personal gains (**Berry, Mishra and Tripathi, 2003**). When one detaches the expectation of fruits resulting from action, it enhances the intrinsic value of the given task at hand. It leads to the experience of flow where an individual immerses oneself in a challenging task and found so much of joy that it leads to loss of self-awareness. This state is very much similar to the concept of work engagement (**Sathiyaseelan and Verma, 2020**).

Upanishads emphasize that an individual has no choice but to engage in action but the action must not be linked from any attachment linked to the fruits of action or ego. Such action (karma) flourishes in knowledge (jnana). The Bhagvad Gita also proposes the three paths of salvation through raja yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga and karma yoga which contributes in supreme consciousness.

Karma Yoga has three dimensions of which are duty orientation, indifference to rewards and equanimity (**Mulla and Krishnan, 2006**). While duty orientation reflects one's acknowledgement of obligation to others in a social setting and the willingness to contribute in a positive way. Indifference to rewards refers to the indifference towards the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards associated with a task. Equanimity refers to the ability to maintain a calm composed and stable dispositional tendency towards all experiences of objects regardless of it being pleasant or unpleasant.

There have been few empirical research studies that explained the philosophy of nishkama karma and described how it relates to the western notions of work engagement and flourishing. **Sathiyaseelan and Verma (2020)** conducted a study understanding how the philosophy of nishkama karma act as a personal resource to flourishing. The results of the study found that nishkama karma is positively related with work engagement and flourishing.

The practice of karma yoga leads to a state of complete equanimity embedded with unwavering wisdom. This state is termed as Stithprajya. The state of stithprajna goes beyond the binary opposites or dualities. One who has attained the state of stithprajna is not affected from the struggles and sorrows of life and the feelings of pleasure or pain have no bearing on them (**Kumar, 2004**). Stithprajya refers to a state of balance between positive

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and negative, and refers to a state of equanimity in both happiness and crisis, thus it promotes sustainable happiness.

The conceptualization of psychological well-being in Indian philosophy has been described in terms of a sense of balance or 'sama' (Swaminathan, Crea and Formella, 2021). Sama refers to a sense of equilibrium, combining the psychological, social and cultural aspects of life. It contends that flourishing exists when an individual adapts effectively with the environment. Thus, sama comprises of a state of balance in health, moral values, personal characteristics and also social well-being (Swaminathan, Crea and Formella, 2021). This balance is reflected in stithprajna as well as in the concept of samyavastha which refers to the balance of all the three gunas. Thus, the above discussion indicates that karma yoga and sama in the form of stithprajna help in achieving a flourishing life for individuals.

As flourishing involves psychosocial functioning, personality is one element that contributes significantly in flourishing life. This led to the need to explore how the Indian traditions have conceptualized a flourishing personality. This can be done through the understanding of the triguna theory of personality and its relationship to flourishing.

The Triguna Personality and Flourishing

In Indian Psychology the concept of Trigunas was mentioned in the Atharva Veda as well as in the holy text of Bhagavad-Gita. The trigunas have also been explained in terms of domains of personality and also as pathways to Sukha. The trigunas are Sattva Guna, Rajas Guna and Tamas Guna. The first mentioned Guna that is Sattva Guna symbolizes purity, honesty, dutifulness, detachment and mental equilibrium. It enables people to lead a life with positive orientation towards worldly affairs and to adopt a restrained and detached view towards successes and failures (Dasgupta, 1961).

Pandey and Dubey (2021) found that personality orientations as illustrated in triguna model are significantly correlated with the components of human nature that are helpful in the enhancement of flourishing as outlined in **Seligman's (2011)** PERMA model. The study concluded that sattvic guna demonstrated significant positive correlation with the four PERMA components which are positive emotions, relationships, meaning in life and accomplishments, whereas scores on rajas guna show significant negative correlation with only one PERMA component which is positive emotion, whereas no significant correlation exhibited between rajas guna with the four PERMA components namely engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (**Pandey and Dubey, 2021**).

The Rajasika guna reflects the tendency of immediate gratification, dissatisfaction with life, high egotism and strong inclination towards materialistic pleasures (**Agrawal, 2021**). The tamasika guna is symbolized by lack of knowledge, effort, carelessness and psychological imbalance. All three gunas remain present in all human beings in lesser or greater degree and their dominance and interplay is influenced by individual differences (**Verma et al. 2020**). **Salagame (2006)** mentioned that Indian Psychology devotes itself with the development of sattvic guna, because it acts a pathway to achieve ananda which itself is a pathway leading to flourishing. Other contemporary studies also found that trigunas acts as predictor of flourishing. **Verma and Tiwari (2017)** reported that dominance of sattva guna results in self-compassion and flourishing. Sattvic guna also found to be strong predictor of wisdom and well-being (**Sharma et.al, 2016**).

Loksamagraha and Flourishing

Flourishing not only encompasses emotional and psychological well-being of an individual in itself but it also includes social well-being (Keyes, 2002). Keyes (1998) considered as the pioneer of flourishing research defined social well-being as a state incorporating the components of social acceptance, social actualization, social contribution and social coherence and integration. The component of social contribution found parallels in Indian Psychology in the form of *Sarvodaya*. Similarly, the components of social coherence and social integration was explained in Indian ancient texts in terms of *Vasudev Kutumbkam* and *Lokasamagraha*.

Lokasamagraha means welfare of all and it manifests in the performance of karma that aims to do betterment of all (Dao, 2019). The concept of Lokasamagraha originated in the Bhagvad Gita and it preaches that one should work for the well-being of humanity, social integration and peaceful society, thus lokasamagraha is a path for restoring harmony in society (Dao, 2019). The notion of *Lokasamagraha* is very similar to “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*”, of Maha Upanishad, whose literal meaning is “The world is one family”. It proposes that the whole world and its beings are related to each other. It’s ideal is that human life must be dedicated not only to one’s family but also for other people of the society. It enjoins the humans to exhibit the highest sense of brotherhood discarding the differences in terms of caste, color, ethnicity, nationality and religion (Dao, 2019).

As social well-being is an important part of flourishing, this concept is reflected in Indian philosophy in the form of *Sarvodaya* which means well-being of everybody. Sarvodaya advocates the striving for collective happiness and an ideal society where everyone work for maintaining harmony and growth. Sarvodaya proposes the practice of shramadana and other social work which leads to social coherence and social awareness and enhances the overall social well-being (Agrawal and Pareek, 2022).

Flourishing in Sufism

The philosophy of Sufism is deeply embedded in Indian cultural traditions. Sufism embodies the principles of spiritual happiness. The major tenet of Sufism is the unity of self with the divine being (Joshnloo, 2014). According to the proponents of Sufism, when an individual’s soul is completely absorbed by the presence of the god, it leaves no room of individuality and creates spiritual upliftment. (Joshnloo, 2014). This unfolds the pathway for a flourishing life that focuses on the purity of the soul and contentment.

Another concept within Sufism that is similar to the practice of gratitude that promotes flourishing is the concept of ‘shukr’ (Arikhah et al.2022). The phenomena of shukr in Sufism comprises of three components which are ‘ilm’ meaning knowledge, ‘hal’ meaning condition and ‘amal’ meaning action. The components draw parallels to the stages of gratitude proposed by Schimmel (2011). Gratitude was expressed by Schimmel (2011) in three ways which is gratitude for the gift, gratitude for not giving and the capacity to be grateful. Sufism preaches the practice of gratitude not only for getting the gifts from God but also for not receiving them as it preaches that in non-receiving of the desired reward is also a blessing from God.

Like Hinduism, Sufism also emphasizes on balance. According to Sufism, if there is disharmony in thought, body and external environment, it leads to physical and mental illness (Joshnloo, 2013). Sufism also discredits the hedonic pathway to happiness, it believes that in order to maintain balance one must whole heartedly love God, surrender

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one's ego and accept miseries and hardships (Vaughan-Lee, 1994). Travelling the path of love: Sayings of Sufi masters. California: The Golden Sufi Center. These miseries, struggles are necessary elements of eternal happiness and help in the realization of the full spiritual potential of a human being. Thus, the Sufi definition of flourishing comprises a combination of inner harmony, contentment, self-transcendence and the union with the almighty.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the above discussion on the various conceptions of Indian ancient traditions have aptly explained the richness of Indian traditions in understanding of human nature and holistic health. While the modern academia on flourishing traces the origin of its roots to ancient Greek traditions. The various notions of Indian philosophy from Buddhism, to Bhagavad Gita to Sufi philosophy as discussed above prove how the wisdom of holistic health has been described in ancient India years before the Greeks and other western traditions. It would not be an overstatement to say that the present theoretical frameworks on flourishing, well-being and happiness have been largely inspired by the tenets of ancient Indian knowledge instilled in the tenets of Buddhism, Bhagavad-Gita and Vedanta and also in the Sufi Islamic traditions.

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