

**Positive Suffering Mindset: The Key To Flourishing In Turbulent Times –
A Case Study Of An Old Man’s Adventure In Lalaland (Part One).**

Dr. Paul T. P. Wong



My wife and I were very apprehensive about flying to Redlands, California, to present a paper at the International Interdisciplinary Conference On Clinical Supervision. Our main concern was my health condition. After two near fatal accidents in the last two years, I had difficulties maintaining my balance, and every step could be my last step in the world. In addition, I needed to sit on a donut-shaped cushion or a toilet sit because I had blisters and boils on my buttocks due to many hours of sitting in front of my computer and working all throughout my life. Our minor concern was how to get from LAX Airport to University of Redlands, which is about 70 miles away. The following photo was taken while I was working on this paper.



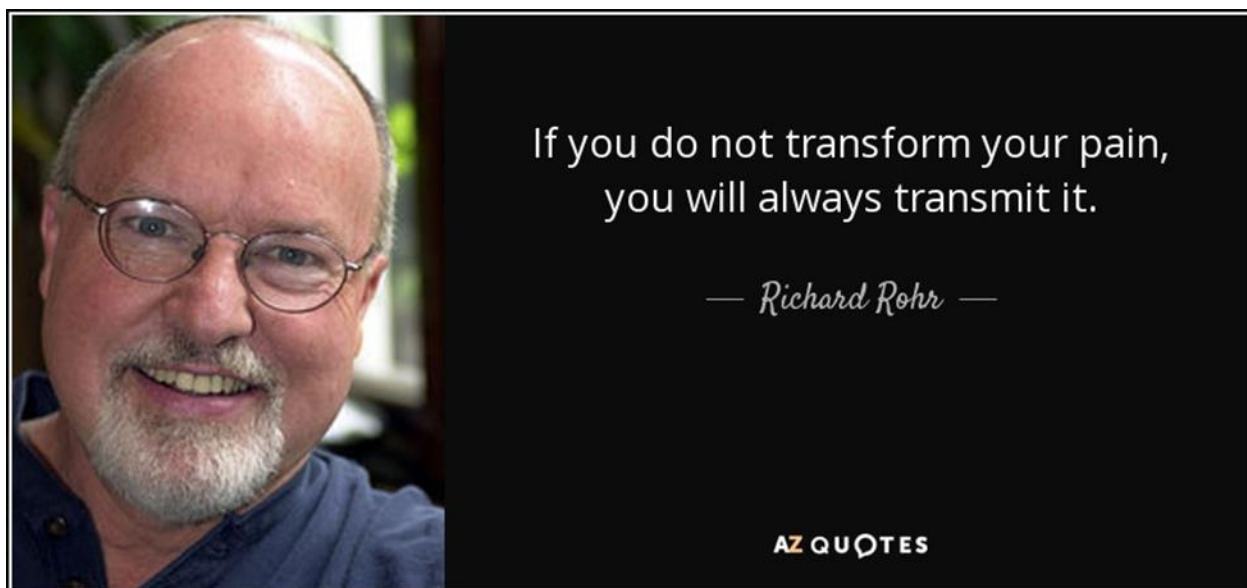
After many days of prayer and serious consideration, we decided to go by faith because my wife wanted to had a reunion with her own friends who, together, started the Clinical Supervision Section in the American Psychological Association more than 20 years ago, and I really wanted to visit my aging sister and sister-in-law in Vancouver right after the Conference.

I was surprised that I was able to walk quite a distance with my 4-wheeled Rollaboard luggage as a walker before I reached the disabled area for a wheelchair. I was also pleasantly surprised that I was able to tolerate the pain and discomfort of sitting on the airplane-seat for about 6 hours. Even without much sleep last night, I was still able to write a draft version of an abstract for the Journal of Positive Psychology (JOPP) on a writing pad.

My Vision For A Positive Suffering

- Do you remember the darkest days of your life, when you found yourself at the bottom of an abyss and the whole world had abandoned you, when God did not seem to answer your urgent cry for help?

- Have you looked at the daily devastation and sounds and sights of human miseries in Gaza and Ukraine?
- Have you thought about all the existential threats to humanity, such as nuclear war and ecological crisis (Wong et al., 2022)?
- Have you considered the how tragic it is that human beings destroy each other as well as themselves with all their greed, pride, and inordinate desires in pursuit of happiness and success?



If we do not overcome and transform the problem of pain and suffering, it will continue to torment us and spread to other people like a virus. With these sad thoughts in my mind, and a fire in my belly, I was inspired to write following draft of the JOPP abstract almost in one breath:

“Positive Suffering Mindset, Ultimate Existential Being And Sustainable Flourishing

Treating wellbeing research as an intellectual game of debating opposing theoretical views may not yield immediate pragmatic results. We think that it may be more productive to reorient towards focusing on solutions to real life existential issues and meet people's basic needs for healing, wellbeing, and wholeness.

This paper is based on meeting the human basic need for agency, community, and spirituality. It provides 3 missing links in positive psychology: (1) The meaning and transformative potential of suffering, (2) How to satisfy our spiritual hunger for sacredness and union with the divine, and (3) How to improve cultural harmony and world peace. At times, our hearts remain restless, constantly in search of healing, liberation, and meaning. We believe that the science of meaning needs to consider how our deep-seated longing for happiness and meaning may be related to our restless soul's yearning for peace and harmony with the self, others, and God.

The above conceptual framework is called existential positive psychology (Wong, 2021) or PP2.0 (Wong, 2011) because it addresses the inescapable aspects of human existence in wellbeing research. Thus, EPP adds the depths of suffering, the heights of spiritual aspirations, and the breadths of compassion for all people from different cultures to positive psychology as usual (PP1.0). It consists of three pillars: meaning of life, meaning of suffering, and meaning of loving your neighbors from other cultures (Wong, 2023a). In sum, EPP takes a holistic and interdisciplinary approach and differs from PP1.0 fundamentally in presuppositions, objectives, and methodology.

This unique approach is rooted in Wong's personal history and culture (Wong & Gonot-Schoupinsky, in press) and represents an integration between East and West. Wong (2019) has researched the positive psychology of suffering for more than 3 decades. The development of EPP benefits from all the opposition and resistance that have forced him to dig deeper and wider (Wong & Worth, 2017) in his search for the truth that can really give meaning and hope to the suffering people.

This research program culminates in his Positive Suffering Mindset (PSM) Hypothesis (Wong, 2024a) which answers fundamental existential questions: How can one find happiness and fulfill one's potential in a chaotic and difficult world? How can we become better and stronger through struggles and suffering? How can we make this world a better place for future generations?

EPP calls for a complete reorientation to the existential crises confronting us (Broderick, 2024; NPPA, 2024): we should not just consider the wellbeing of the individual, but also of society and humanity. Furthermore, it posits that the direct pursuit of happiness will result in unhappiness, and the most promising path to enduring happiness is to overcome and transform suffering into success and triumph. In order to become whole and flourish, one needs to develop a PSM, which represents the ultimate existential resources.

More specifically, PSM consists of a cluster of 5 inter-related mindsets: (1) Mindfulness – How to focus on the present and face life as it is, (2) Meaning – How to discover the hidden goodness and meaning in every situation, (3) Dialectic – How to navigate between two opposites and discover the happy medium. (4) Resilient – How to overcome and transcend adversity, trauma and painful emotions, and (5) Growth – How to grow tall and yield abundant good fruit by developing a deep root system in a fertile land.

We will provide both empirical support from positive psychology research and philosophical insights from classical existential philosophers for the above 5 mindsets and discuss innovative research programs and interventions to resolve a wide range of serious mental health challenges and existential threats.

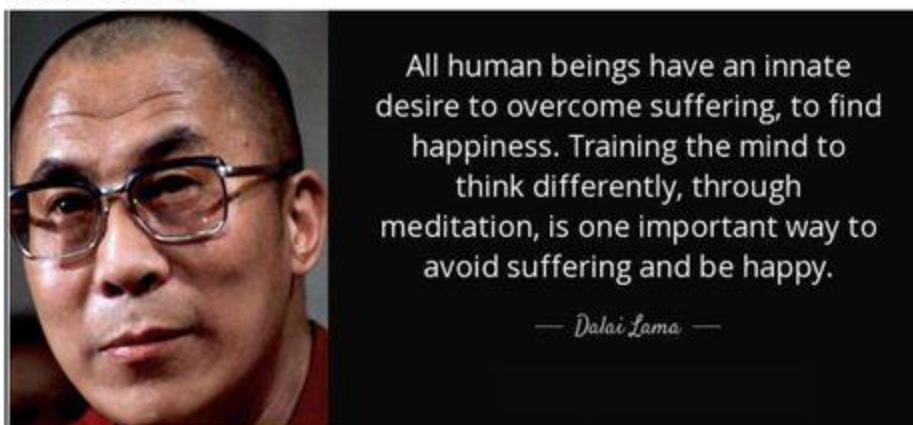
We will also discuss the unique nature of mature happiness (Wong & Bower, 2019) and existential wellbeing (Wong, 2022) as well as the supporting evidence. Different from current concepts of existential wellbeing (e.g., Ryff, 2012), ultimate existential wellbeing is based on all the available existential resources of PSM and is capable of surviving all kinds of traumas and storms of life. Just as PP1.0 is ideal for peace and prosperity, EPP is best for times of suffering. Together, they provide a more complete account of wellbeing and flourishing for the 21st century.”

I felt satisfied that I finally had an undisrupted time to explain why I was compelled to blaze this new trail alone as if guided by an invisible hand. I knew that the above abstract was too long, but at least it was comprehensive enough for my co-authors to understand my views on several major issues.

Turn Suffering into Joy

Indeed, all human beings instinctively seek happiness and avoid suffering. Paradoxically, in this complicated digital age, this natural tendency often brings us more suffering and less happiness.

Training our minds to think differently through mindfulness meditation or cognitive reframing help us overcome suffering and find happiness. But paradoxical interventions and spiritual activation are powerful tools to transform suffering into joy, even when we cannot identify the triggers of our inner pain.



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I am well aware that wise men like William James, Viktor Frankl, and the Dalai Lama proposed similar ideas long before me. My contribution is to expand and translate these powerful ideas into testable scientific principles and useful interventions for the 21st Century and beyond.

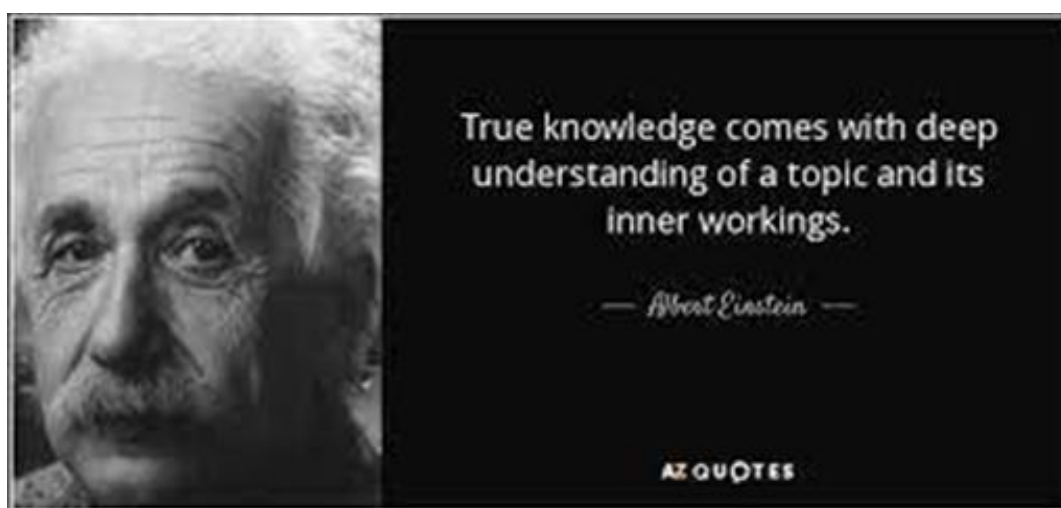
A Big-Tent Approach Towards Integration

Although the above abstract was for an invited paper, I was not confident about how my co-authors and the reviewers would respond to this lone voice from the wilderness because based on my past experience, many of my most cited papers were first rejected for some trivial or trumped-up charges (Wong, 2020), such as: you are unscientific (i.e., you are too religious), your

theory is not consistent with mainstream psychology (i.e., Western imperialism), or your views are not exactly what I have in mind for the journal (i.e., personal bias).

Such negative voices still haunt me because even my [most of cited papers](#) were rejected first. Why are the reviewers so adversarial and nit-picky? Why do they not focus on more important questions such as whether an article makes a significant contribution to the literature and to humanity? Are they on a power-trip? Do they realize that the days of Western hegemony will soon be over? Do they still evaluate manuscripts with their tribal mentality? That is why one important reason for creating the INPM as a Big Tent, with our own journals and conferences, is in order to survive in a culture of systemic racism.

I take comfort from the fact that even Einstein's general theory of relativity was rejected for many years for lacking empirical support. Einstein's deep knowledge of the universe was not based on empirical findings. In fact, it took many years before his general theory of relativity was supported by research. I am not Einstein, but I am encouraged by his experience and believe that the future of scientific progress is towards integration of different factions and different schools.



It is sad that nowadays that most positive psychologists would reject any deep idea or any unconventional hypothesis without empirical support. This blind belief in factualism only leads to superficial knowledge because only simplified and operationalized ideas can be readily tested. Furthermore, there is also the replication problem.

Therefore, how can we accept positive psychology's findings as the true knowledge for making important life decisions in times of suffering and uncertainty? In times like this, would you prefer to make decisions that are aligned with deeply held values and religious beliefs? This has been my main critique of positive psychology as usual (Wong & Roy, 2017) and my main reason for developing an existentially oriented positive psychology.

God's New Ten Commandments

I know very well that this is another unpopular topic because Moses' Ten Commandments have been banned in the US for years, against the Christian values of their founding fathers. Even now, any attempt to revive the ten commandments for the courts and schools would trigger strong condemnations.

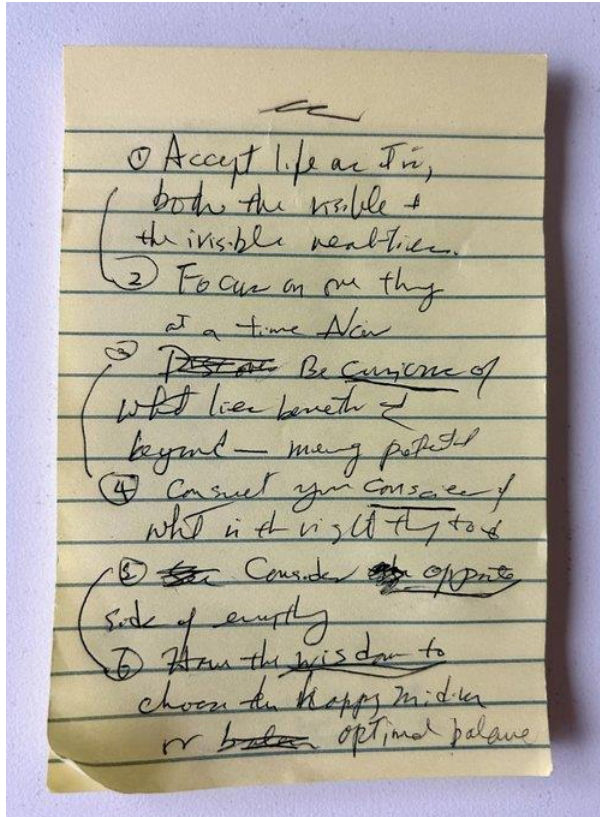
Do people realize that their rebellion against their Creator will only bring disasters and miseries to themselves? We are now living in a polarized and broken world, with people fighting and killing each other. Until we learn to obey the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:37-39), we will continue to be plagued by conflicts and wars. According to Martin Luther King, Jr. "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."



I have been waiting for God's revelation for ten new commandments for suffering people since my painful days in Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto. After praying day and night for an epiphany so that I could move forward, God revealed a new theory of hope to me (Wong, 2023b), but I did not see a burning bush, nor did hear any voice from above.

I continue to seek God's revelation so that people can repent and seek redemption and regeneration. Maybe I was closer to God higher up in the airplane: I suddenly understood the PSM with greater depth and clarity. Now, I am able clarify how it encapsulates the 10 principles of flourishing according to the Bible (Wong et al., 2024).

Before landing in LAX Airport, I was able to quickly jot down these ideas on my writing pad shown as follows. To make it less offensive to my positive psychology friends, I will frame them in scientific terms.



The 10 Principles Of Living An Abundant Life

Now, at home in front of my own computer, I will expand on these rough notes for my readers. Hope that they can consider and practice them so see whether they can transform their life:

Principle 1: Accept Life As It Is With Gratitude

Acceptance encompasses accepting and affirming both the visible and invisible realities; both the material and spiritual world. In fact, according to quantum physics, the world is invisible (World Science Festival, 2014).

How much you do know about acceptance? Do you know that acceptance is more than self-awareness? One can be aware of something without accepting it or taking it seriously. Do

you know the power of acceptance? Do you know that this is the first step towards positive suffering? Consider the following quotes:

- René Descartes: “I think, therefore, I am.”
- Proverbs 23:7: “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”
- Jordan Peterson: “I suffer, therefore, I am.” (Tiago V Faleiro, 2017)
- Arthur Schopenhauer (1851/2020): “Pleasure and well-being is negative and suffering positive.”
- Friedrich Nietzsche: “I love my fate.” (see Han-Pile, 2011)
- Paul Wong: “I suffer; therefore, I rejoice.” (NPPA, 2024)

Is this ironic? After the huge first wave of positive psychology on happiness, the second wave begins with the affirmation of suffering, fate, and death – no matter how painful – as the foundation for happiness and flourishing (Wong, 2024b). Meditate on Jesus’s prayer at Gethsemane before dying on the cross for our sins:

“Then He said to them, “My soul is consumed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with Me.” Going a little farther, He fell facedown and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will.” Then Jesus returned to the disciples and found them sleeping. “Were you not able to keep watch with Me for one hour?” (Matthew 26: 38-40)

I have wrestled with God many several times before surrendering my life to God’s will and accepting a painful and impossible mission to be a lone voice in the wilderness, crying out for the need for repentance, redemption, and regeneration. I know full well that this prophetic voice would be met with opposition because people would rather embrace a regenerative positive psychology without the need for repentance and faith in God’s grace.

It is also impossible to experience genuine transformation without accepting our true self. According to Carl Rogers (1961/1995), “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”

Acceptance means accepting myself and others as flawed human being as well as affirming that are all made in God’s image with a divine spark waiting to be rekindled. Thus, it is not possible to know our true self without accepting both our bright and dark sides.

Acceptance also means accepting my hard fate, my brokenness, my horrible circumstances with gratitude. This is a much tougher demand than expressing gratitude for the positive things. Existential gratitude asks me to be thankful for being alive and for the precious lessons learned from suffering (Jans-Beken & Wong, 2019).

Yes, no matter how hopeless the prospect, how much the physical pain I endure and how unfairly I have been treated, I can still love my fate and find something to be grateful for, such as for the training to grow stronger and for steeling my faith and confidence in my mission in the crucible of suffering.

Principle 2: Focus On The Present Moment

This is another life principle emphasized by all the best minds and supported by a wealth of research on mindfulness. We all can live a happy and productive life by focusing on the present rather than ruminating on past mistakes which could not be undone, or worrying about the future which is beyond our control.

Living for the present means that you do one thing at a time, and focus on what needs to be taken care first, such as an important deadline for your job, or caring for a sick spouse. It also means that that you organize your time around what matters most.

“Putting first things first means organizing and executing around your most important priorities. It is living and being driven by the principles you value most, not by the agendas and forces surrounding you.” (Covey, 1989)

Whatever you focus on, you will pay full attention and do your best. I am always grateful to any sales clerk, waiter, or office worker who serves their customers enthusiastically, but they are so rare.

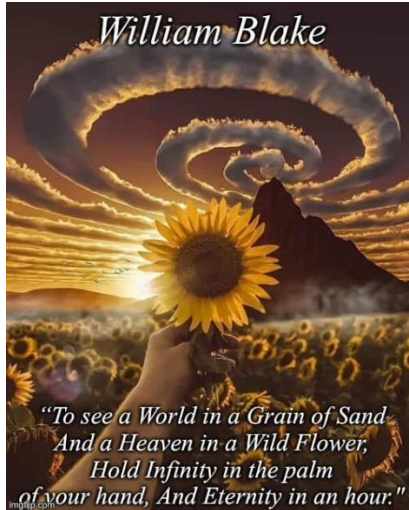
“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” (Colossians 3:23). It is helpful to remind ourselves that we are working for God, so that we don’t get discouraged when our work is not appreciated or recognized.

There is power in acceptance and focusing. If one does not learn the discipline of focusing, one will be easily distracted, switching from one thing to another, without accomplishing anything. One reason why I could be so productive during the five-and-half hour flight on an airplane is because I did not have the usual disruptions and demands for my attention when working in my home office.

Principle 3: Be Curious About What Lies Beyond And What Lies Beneath

There is always some hidden beauty, truth, and goodness in every situation, but we need to discover it. I remember that when I worked in Daniel Berlyn’s lab at the University of Toronto in the late 60s, I watched with fascination when a white rat would move gingerly on a glass table, driven by both the desire to explore and the fear of hidden danger.

We are motivated by the same conflicting motives. Yes, we have the innate desire of curiosity (Kashdan, 2024), but we are also cautious about hidden dangers or concerned about failures (Wong, 1979).



That is why we need to see the world not just with our physical eyes. To discover more about the world and about ourselves, we also need to see the invisible with our spiritual eyes. William Blake could see a world in a grain of sand. Thich Nhat Hanh also said: "The entire cosmos can sing to us with the voice of a wild flower."

Over the years, many people have expressed the view that there is no need to search for meaning; all we need is to live fully. This is only half true because searching for meaning is an inevitable process, according to attribution research (Wong & Weiner, 1981).

Those who say that they don't need to search for the meaning of life most likely have already found their calling or vocation. Another possibility is that they have lived a privileged life and have not experienced any trauma, which will automatically trigger a negative oriented search for the cause or reason for their suffering.

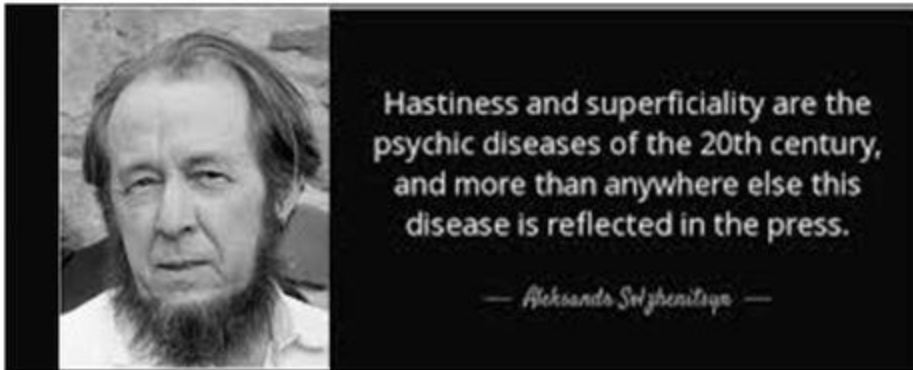
A larger problem is that in a culture that favors a quick and superficial way of life, people have lost the appetite and skills for developing deep relationships or living life at a deeper level.

The Consequences of Shallowness

Shallowness is an inevitable outcome in a culture that favors anything quick and easy, from fast food and instant coffee, to quick money and instant fame. Without taking time to develop deep roots and establish deep relationship, we will suffer from shallow or even fake relationships which can never satisfy our deep-seated longing for love and friendship.

Remember Lady Gaga's song "Shallow"?

"I'm off the deep end, watch as I dive in
I'll never meet the ground
Crash through the surface, where they can't hurt us
We're far from the shallow now"



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Real treasures don't just lie on the ground for anyone to pick up with ease: they are hidden either deep in the earth and sea, or high in the secret places on the mountain tops; such a rare gem can only will be found by those who are seeking it with all their heart and soul and who are willing to give up everything for it.

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*I will give you hidden treasures,
riches stored in secret places.
- Isaiah 45:3*

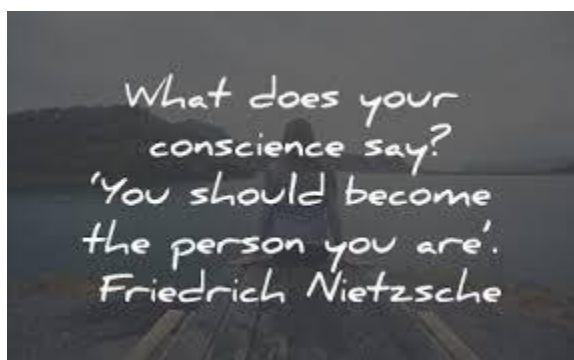
Principle 4: Consult Your Conscience To Decide The Right Course Of Action

As we dig deeper and wider, or explore new territories lying behind a veil of ambiguity and uncertainty, we are confronted with so many options. We need to decide when to stop searching and what is the right course of action, especially when the Devil makes an offer that is too good to refuse.

That is when we need to consult our conscience and ask: “Does it give me inner peace? Is this the responsible thing to do? Can I live with myself if I choose what is profitable rather than what is meaningful?” Ultimately, your conscience will always lead you to the path which you should follow so you could become what you are meant to be.

A decent person with a good heart will never betray her friends or hurt other people in order to gain some personal advantage. A good person will never bargain with the devil. A true Christian will never willingly do things that dishonour and offend God. Be such a person.

You need to follow your conscience not because you just want to be happy but because you want to be a good and trustworthy person who cannot be bribed or corrupted. With this kind of character and integrity, you always win, whatever the circumstances.



In Part 2 of this article, I will present the remaining principles. The entire 10 principles can be seen in the following table:

Mindful Mindset	Principle 1: Accept life as it is with gratitude
	Principle 2: Focus on the present moment
Meaning Mindset	Principle 3: Be curious about what lies beyond and what lies beneath
	Principle 4: Consult your conscience to decide the right course of action
Dialectic Mindset	Principle 5: Consider the opposite because there are always two sides for everything
	Principle 6: The wisdom to choose the happy medium or the optimal balance
Resilient Mindset	Principle 7: The virtue of enduring all things with patience
	Principle 8: The compassion to forgive all things and love even your enemy
Growth Mindset	Principle 9: Transcend all suffering and develop deep roots
	Principle 10: Strive towards the highest ideals, grow, and bear abundant fruit

The Positive Suffering Mindset (PSM)

How to achieve sustainable flourishing



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One needs to go beyond PERMA and cultivate PSM in order to achieve sustainable flourishing because suffering is an inevitable part of human existence.

**Mindful
Mindset**

Focusing on the present moment.

**Meaning
Mindset**

Discovering the hidden meaning and goodness in every situation.

**Resilient
Mindset**

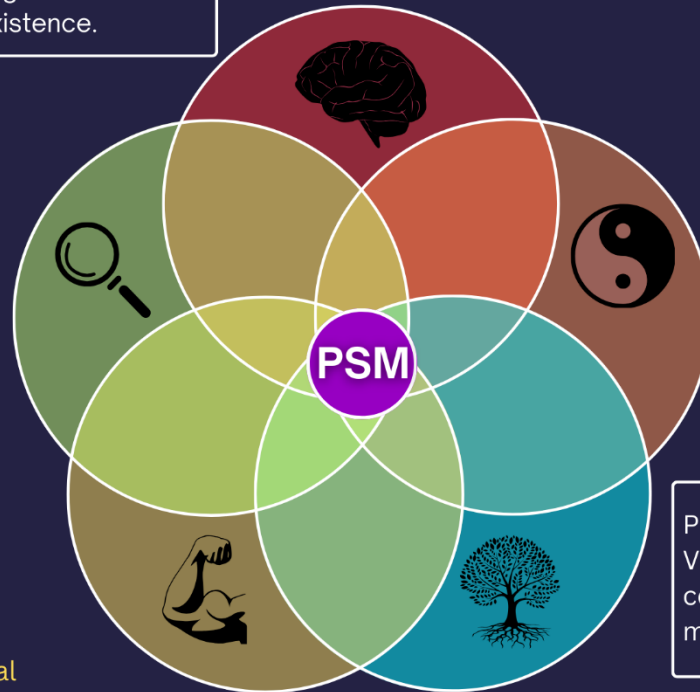
Cultivating mental toughness through endurance and overcoming.

**Growth
Mindset**

Growing taller and bearing fruit though sinking one's roots deeper into the soil of suffering and transcendental values.

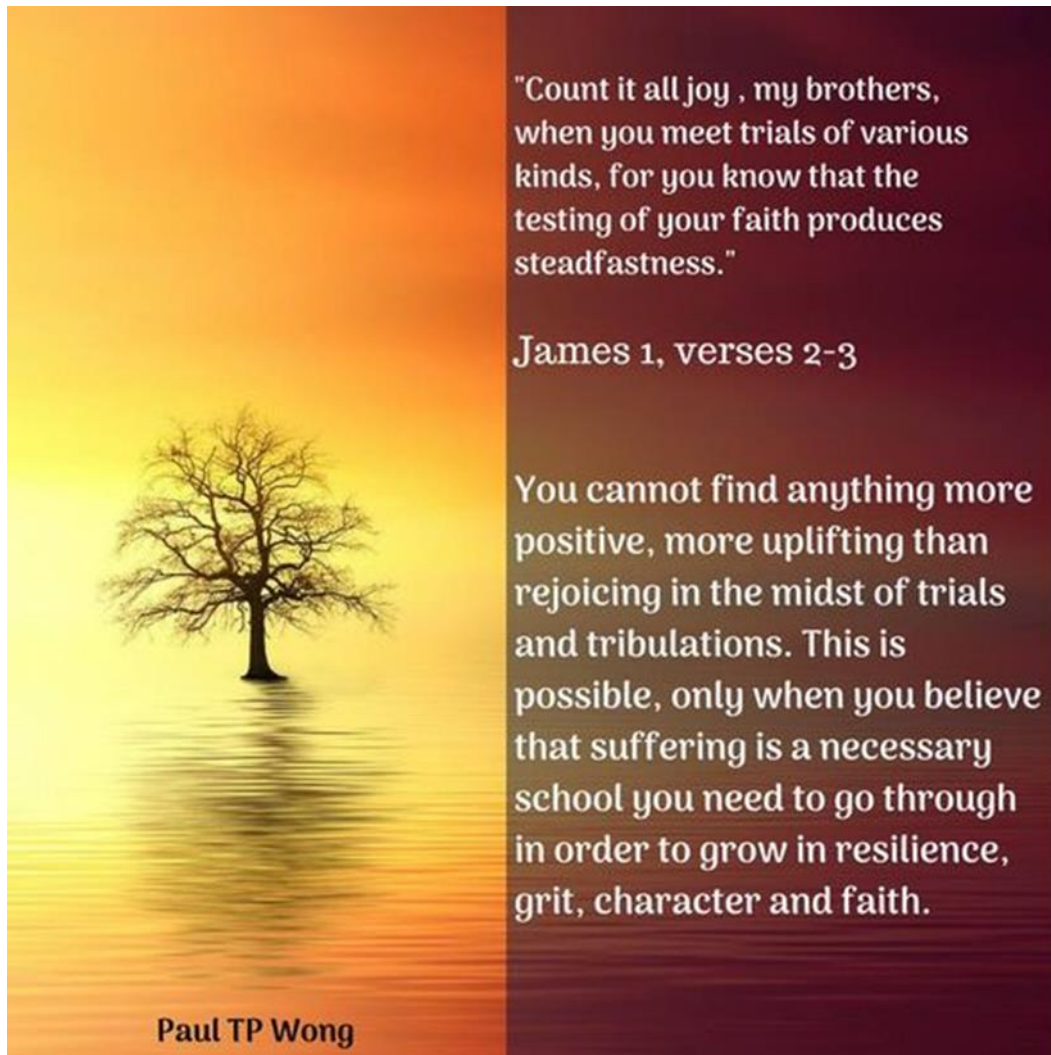
**Dialectic
Mindset**

Finding the optimal balance through Yin-Yang dialectics.



PSM evolved from Viktor Frankl's original conception about the meaning of suffering.

For Part one, I want to conclude on the positive note of suffering with joy: real-life positivity.



Any label is both illuminating and limiting, especially for some holistic fussy concept. Since the label Existential Positive Psychology has been under attack from all sides, as I have described earlier, maybe I should use adjectives, such as Spiritual, Redemptive, Regenerative or Transcendental to describe my approach to positive psychology. I am sure someone will claim credit for any of these descriptive terms. Finally, I have decided to simply call it the Positive Suffering Mindset as a New Paradigm for Sustainable Flourishing. If someone also claims this label, I would say: Why don't we work together under the same banner?

A rose by any other name is still a rose because of its unique features of beauty and fragrance growing from branches of sharp thorns. Similarly, what distinguishes my approach to the science of wellbeing is that one cannot achieve flourishing without embracing suffering.

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