

Self-transcendence: An alternative way of achieving human well-being

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It is commonly understood that self-transcendence – going beyond oneself and one’s personal feelings and perspectives – can lead to benefits for health. From this perspective, it is not the longevity of our lives that matters; it is how well we live that matters the most. It is the intention of this study to explore various aspects of self-transcendence that can lead to human well-being. This basically comprises going beyond one’s self, and interacting with the outer world, including other people and our environmental surroundings – all of which can help us achieve a good quality of life. This study also focuses on how these interactions might and should occur, although it will be asserted in the following that it is not easy for individuals that do not possess an “other-orientation” to self-transcend. One of the aspects of the present study is to propose meditation as a strategy to achieve self-transcendence, thus creating human well-being. As an additional note to the study, it will be suggested that the concept of self-transcendence can be a good way to cope with the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: happiness; life; purpose in life; self-transcendence; well-being

Transcendence simply stated is the realization that you are part of a bigger picture, and is the process of aligning one's actions so that you can go beyond any self-imposed limitations and act in accordance with, and respect for, the greater whole. Rising or going beyond oneself can include a wide range of elements, such as transcending your emotions, thoughts, and experiences; transcending nature and the universe; or achieving divinity, which is greater than the self.

Self-transcendence (ST) is an existing concept or theory in psychology and has existed for quite a while above the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and even has a theory made about it (Reed, 1991). Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is one of the most popular concepts in humanistic psychology, which discusses how needs are achieved in a hierarchical order. For example, as lower needs are fulfilled, according to this theory, we are motivated to pursue and meet higher-level (growth) needs, such as self-actualisation. Further according to this line of thinking, physiological needs are vital for our survival and must be satisfied before one can move toward actualization and fulfilment. In Maslow's first model, which he revised later in his life, the fulfilment of one's potential is the highest level of an individual's development. Not everyone is aware that Maslow revised his theory in his later years. According to this later thinking, Maslow argued that there is a higher level of development, which is essentially the pinnacle of human experience. He called this ST, as cited above, which was then placed at the top of his hierarchy of his notion of self-actualisation.

As indicated in his early work, Maslow considered self-actualisation to be the highest point of human development and the highest human need; that is, the realisation of one's full potential. Few would doubt that self-actualisation is an important aspect of one's development. However, but in his revision, we can see that ST is truly becomes the 'next level' of development, concerning goals that are higher than those that are merely self-serving. How can be ST achieved? by focusing on elements of our lives that extend beyond self, including such aspects of living as altruism, spiritual awakening, liberation from egocentricity, and unity of being. As Maslow himself indicated, transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and the cosmos" (Maslow, 1971, p. 269).

According to Maslow, the individual creates for himself or herself what he termed "peak experiences " that transcend the individual's concerns and he or she sees life from a higher perspective. These experiences often bring with them strong positive emotions such as joy, peace, and a strong sense of awareness (Messerly, 2017). Further, it has been asserted by Messerly (2017) that someone that is highly self-transcendent may also experience what can be called "plateau experiences" ; in this scenario, the individual consistently maintains or enters a state of serenity and a higher perspective (Messerly, 2017).

This study will focus on ST as a method of achieving human well-being, first addressing the issues surrounding ST as a type of wisdom that will lead human well-being. Second, the paper will discuss the fact that ST has been viewed in terms of generating human well-being through health; and the third will be, perhaps surprisingly, spending money on others (being other-oriented) as a way by which one can create happiness, both for the giver and the receiver. The fourth topic in relation to being other-oriented will be getting in touch with nature as a means of contributing to human well-being. Fifth, meditation will be suggested as a good way to achieve ST. All of this will be followed by a discussion, and the conclusion will follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wisdom as self-transcendence

Wisdom has been a subject of thought and discussion throughout history and throughout the world (Birren & Svensson, 2005; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Robinson, 1990; Takahashi, 2000). Curnow (1999) for example has identified some of the elements of wisdom that are similar across cultures, contrasting "worldly" or "practical " wisdom with wisdom as ST. The former is exemplified by the work of Baltes and his colleagues (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Baltes & Smith, 1990), who defined wisdom as being knowledge related to "the fundamental pragmatics of life" (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 122). However, ST has been studied by Reed (1991), who defined it as "expanded self-boundaries and awareness of dimensions

greater than self without devaluing the individual" (Reed, 2009, p. 397). Further Piedmont (1999, p. 188) defined spiritual transcendence as "the immediacy of our own individual consciousness that binds all things into a more unitive harmony. " Similarly, Koltko-Rivera (2006, p. 303) used Maslow's conception of ST in stating that the self-transcending individual is one that "seeks to further a cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self. " Further, Tornstam (1994) added another interesting element to the concept of ST, suggesting that with age, individuals become more self-transcendent. This he called 'gero-transcendence'.

Wisdom can be viewed in terms of ST. As we have seen earlier, there are several definitions of ST in the literature, all of which are fairly similar in recognizing a connection to dimensions beyond one's self. Curnow's (1999) approach may be the most complete. He surveyed major religious and philosophical traditions from a wide variety of cultures and argued that, in these cultures, wisdom was defined in terms of ST, which according to him, derived from three factors: self-knowledge, integration (or self-acceptance in all of its aspects), and non-attachment, which can be defined as not identifying oneself with externals (for more details on this topic see Levenson & Aldwin, 2013). Thus, Lee et al. (2015) argue that wisdom in terms of ST may be more alike across cultures than other measures of wisdom.

Levenson et al. (2005, p. 127), continuing with the argument that ST is a form of wisdom, conceptualized it as 'a decreasing reliance on externals increasing interiority and spirituality, and a greater sense of connectedness with past and future generations. ' There is in fact some evidence (Coward, 1995; 1996; Nygren et al., 2005; Ramer et al., 2006; Reed, 1986; 1989; 1991) that ST can have positive effects on one's life satisfaction, mental health, and optimal ageing.

In addition to this, the literature suggests that religion can be a source of wisdom. Despite the fact that few empirical studies have examined the relationship (Le, 2008), it has been asserted that religiousness or spirituality is an essential part of the development of wisdom by encouraging positive human values and behavior. Indeed, religiousness in early adulthood has been significantly linked with the development of wisdom in a person's late life (Wink & Dillon, 2003), and it has also been asserted that the religious practices of Buddhists facilitate the development of transcendent wisdom (Levitt, 1999). Furthermore, the literature indicates that religiousness affects gero-transcendence (Ahmadi, 2001). Finally, Levenson et al. (2005) found that ST was positively related to meditation practice.

Self-transcendence creates human well-being through health

A significant body of research has demonstrated a relationship between ST and some of the factors that have important effects on the well-being of older adults. This includes the facing of terminal or life-changing illnesses, for example women dealing breast cancer (Coward, 2004; 2005, Matthews & Cook, 2009, Thomas et al., 2010), liver transplant recipients (Bean & Wagner, 2006), and women and men dealing with rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis (Neil, 2002; 2005). ST has been studied in multiple populations, and this includes the caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease (Kidd et al., 2011), individuals that are homeless (Runquist & Reed, 2007), and members of the Amish community (Sharpnack et al., 2011). Further, in terms of age groups, Beaumont (2009) examined ST among young adults, while Ellerman and Reed (2001) studied ST and depression among middle-aged adults. Wiggs (2010) on the other hand investigated the developmental aspects of ST among women in their late to middle life in these populations, ST was associated with an overall increase in the person's well-being and quality of life (Bean & Wagner, 2006; Matthews & Cook, 2009; Runquist & Reed, 2007, Sharpnack et al., 2011; Wiggs, 2010), with their acceptance of life (Neil, 2002; Kidd et al., 2011; Ellermann & Reed, 2001), their ability to reach out for support and to cope with the situations that they are facing (Matthews & Cook, 2009; Ogwuche et al., 2020; Runquist & Reed, 2007), and their ability to deal with depression and to reduce it (Ellermann & Reed, 2001). In addition to these elements of ST increased spirituality or spiritual equilibrium (Beaumont, 2009; Coward & Kahn, 2004; 2005; Neill, 2002; 2005; Sharpnack et al., 2011; Vachon et al., 2009), a person's sense of purpose and meaning in life (Coward & Kahn, 2004; 2005; Bean & Wagner, 2006; Neil, 2002; 2005; Wiggs, 2010; Vachon et al., 2009), and feelings of connectedness to one's self, others, and a higher dimension (Coward & Kahn, 2004; 2005; Neill 2002; 2005; Vachon et al., 2009; Wiggs, 2010;) were also cited in the literature as being associated with higher levels of ST.

Similar associations with ST have been seen in samples of older adults, among whom are older adults living in nursing homes, where ST was viewed as being related to the individual's well-being, sense of meaning in life, and the feeling of hope, which helps a person to transcend losses in his or her later life (Bickerstaff et al., 2003; Haugan et al. 2014; Haugan, 2014). Multiple studies have demonstrated that ST is inversely related to depression in community-dwelling older adults (Hoshi, 2008; Lundam, 2012; Moe et al., 2013, Stinson & Kirk, 2006; Nygren et al., 2005). Moreover, higher levels of ST have been seen to be positively correlated with resilience, and a sense of coherence and purpose in life among individuals aged 85 and older (Nygren et al., 2005). ST is seen then to be associated with physical and mental health (Lundam, 2012; Moe et al., 2013) as well as with increased ability to complete one's daily living activities (Upchurch & Mueller, 2005) and the instrumental activities of daily living (McCarthy, 2010).

Reed (2014) theorized that older adults with greater levels of ST are more capable of adapting to and coping with life, and McCarthy and colleagues (McCarthy, 2010; 2011; McCarthy et al., 2013) found that ST and proactive coping significantly predicted successful ageing, which Flood (2002) defined as satisfaction with the ability to cope with changes in later life while maintaining a sense of meaning and spiritual connectedness.

Money spent on others leads to happiness

It may be counterintuitive to think that giving money to others will bring happiness to the giver; but the literature suggests otherwise. Study investigating that a person's well-being and happiness are influenced by prosocial spending has attained a great deal of attention in the academic literature. According to Bausert et al. (2018), for example, though general wisdom has typically associated money with happiness, the notion of prosocial spending suggests that money operates more like a tool—it is likely to increase a person's happiness only if it is used in a wise way. Similarly, a study conducted by Wu et al. (2017) argued that effective use of money can strengthen associations, develop a person's sense of self-mastery, and can eventually create greater individual and social well-being. On the other hand, it has been noted that the inappropriate use of money can have a negative impact on one's happiness. Indeed, several studies have recognised the importance of prosocial spending in relation to increasing one's level of happiness, and the signs of a positive association between prosocial spending and such happiness can be seen to stem from several sources. For example, it can be seen when people spend money on paying their taxes, thus directing a part of their income to their fellow citizens through public goods, thus creating well-being for the society. Moreover, according to the study of Lok and Dunn (2020), a charitable donation also can trigger what they termed actual physical "reward points" within the human brain, for example in the areas of the ventral striatum and orbital frontal cortex.

Additionally, a study by Aknin et al. (2013) investigated the association between charitable giving or donations and happiness in 136 countries, and their findings indicated that out of the 136 countries, a total of 120 displayed a positive association between the two elements of prosocial spending and happiness. Based on these connections, prosocial spending has been found to have a positive influence on the happiness of people in most countries, although the strength of the associations was seen to vary among the rich and poor countries. In this regard, in terms of affecting the emotional benefits of prosocial behavior, it has been argued that living standards and the financial position of the country are the most important factors. As mentioned in a study of Chiva-Bartoll et al., (2020), the emotional benefits of prosocial spending might be dampened or even eliminated in countries where people are struggling to fulfil their basic needs – this notion can be connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs; some needs have to be fulfilled before others. In contrast to this division between the rich and the poor, a study carried out by Dou et al. (2019) argued that even in poorer countries, people can derive emotional advantages from prosocial behavior and spending. This confirms that what might be termed 'the warm glow' of prosocial spending is one of the most important aspects of human nature. Furthermore, a study of Aknin et al. (2018) also indicated that there is a positive association between prosocial behavior and happiness, and the study also suggested that the reward achieved by helping others might be considered to be a deep part of human nature, one that emerges in diverse economic and cultural contexts.

2.4 Getting in touch with nature and human well-being

It has been asserted that there is a connection between a sense of spirituality and exposure to nature, and that connection can be found in the notion of ST. Indeed, the connectedness of nature and spirituality, according to Piedmont (1999) (cf. Seligman et al., 2005) is recognized as a component of ST; in other words, feelings of absorption, awe, and fascination are characteristic of ST. ST involves reducing the boundaries of one's self by connecting to something greater than one's self (Akyalcin et al., 2008; Grouzet et al., 2005), as stated earlier, and connecting oneself with something "greater" can occur, for example, through a connection to a time in the past or future, to a sense of spirituality, to a unified consciousness, or to anything outside the self, such as humanity or even the cosmos (Cloninger et al., 1993). Therefore, the present author proposes that ST can unify these diverse explanations of the well-being of the benefits of exposure to and emersion in nature.

Regarding nature and its relation to ST, this is not the first time that ST has been implicated within the nature framework or that nature is regarded as transcendent or encourages transcendence. For example, Williams and Harvey (2001) asked people that regularly engage with nature to recall a time that they had a transcendent experience in a forest and it was found that being in nature has various effects on people, including transcendent experiences, which can be described, according to Williams and Harvey, as either diminutive feelings or a sense of a deep flow. Diminutive feelings are characterised by a sense of feeling small in comparison to the natural world and feelings of fascination and novelty, while the deep flow experience is characterized by absorption in the natural world. It can be seen then that both diminutive feelings and the feeling of a deep flow are aspects of ST (Yaden et al., 2017), which have been found in experiences with nature in experimental inquiries.

Diminutive feelings are similar to the feeling that the self is small or what has been termed hypo-egoic processes. It is characterized by a sense of humility – the feeling that a person's sense of self is small in comparison to larger or more important things, such as nature or society. The feeling of having a 'small self' is believed to be affected by perceiving something to be 'more vast and powerful than oneself' (Piff et al., 2015, p. 884). Note the similarity between this mechanism and the aforementioned conception of transcendence. Another related concept is what has been termed allo-inclusivity, which is the notion of including other entities (such as nature) in one's identity. When people include the natural world in their identity, they are likely to feel connected to many other aspects of the world, including other people, and they are more likely to have spiritual experiences (Leary et al., 2008).

The idea that these feelings of connectedness are all intimately tied together has been explored in terms of a sense of general connectedness. Zelenski and Nisbet (2014) assessed the feelings of a person's connectedness to his or her country, culture, family, music, home, and friends, and these were all combined into a single factor of general connectedness. They found that connectedness was related to the inclusion of nature in the self and one's relatedness to nature, although the individual's relation with nature was perceived to be less strong. This relationship between nature and human's connectedness with it has also been explored experimentally, as mentioned above. In a daily diary study, the participants that were asked to note the settings of nature reported that they felt a sense of general connectedness more than those that were asked note human-built settings and those that were not asked to take note of anything (Passmore & Holder, 2017). Taking notice of certain natural settings not only inspires a sense of connectedness with nature but can also inspire awe on the part of the experienter. Awe itself in fact has been proposed to be elicited through a feeling of vastness and accommodation (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), which are features of the experience with many types of natural settings, such as mountains, large trees, vistas, and canyons and cliffs to take just a few examples (Shiota et al., 2007; Zhang & Keltner, 2016). In fact, concretely, one study found that standing in a grove of towering trees leads to a sense of awe (Piff et al., 2015). It is important to mention this research because awe has been characterised as an emotional experience of ST (Yaden et al., 2017).

Combining several of the above approaches, Davis and Gatersleben (2013) exposed the participants of their study to different natural settings in order to determine the role of connectedness to nature in the experiences of ST and awe and found that trait connectedness to nature predicted the experience of transcendence and awe when engaging with a wild, as opposed to a "manicured" natural setting.

When taking ST and its relation to a person's well-being into consideration, it can be seen that ST is related to well-being because it includes, as discussed above, numerous positive emotions (i.e., hedonic well-being) and phenomena such as flow and peak experiences (i.e., eudaimonic well-being) (Yaden et al., 2017). A positive, empirical correlation between the feeling of ST and well-being has been seen in homeless adults (Runquist & Reed, 2007). Further, some experimental evidence comes from research among the elderly population, with intervention designed to increase ST that will lead to greater life satisfaction and other indicators of well-being (McCarthy et al. 2015). In another experimental study (Saroglou et al., 2008), the participants watched video clips of childbirth, nature, humor, or beer production – the nature and childbirth videos (ST-activation videos) were more effective than the other videos in terms of increasing a sense of spirituality and positive emotions.

2.5 Meditation as a way to achieve self-transcendence

As is commonly understood, meditation is a solitary practice; it is by definition something that one typically does on one's own, although this private experience can be carried out in a group Factivity (call the sangha in Buddhism). Despite this private experience, the practitioners of meditation can choose to bring the qualities of mind that they have cultivated during different types of meditation to their everyday life (Thera, 2005), and this can enhance their relationships and satisfaction among their friends (Carson et al. 2004) and family members (Coatsworth et al., 2010). Various studies have supported the notion that the solitary practice of meditation can have a positive influence on later social outcomes; that is, mindfulness and lovingkindness/compassion trainings can enhance a person's positive social perception (Kang et al., 2014; 2015, Hutcherson et al., 2008) and feelings of connection with others (Hutcherson et al., 2008; Adair et al., 2018), and support (Fredrickson et al., 2008) while reducing feelings of loneliness (Adair et al., 2018; Creswell et al., 2012). However, data on the prosocial effects of meditation are not conclusive. A recent meta-analysis for example shows that the outcomes of meditation are specific to certain types of prosociality and methodological quality (Kreplin et al., 2018). This highlights the need for more precise operationalization and clarification regarding the specific mechanisms through which certain forms of meditation practices can enhance social outcomes.

Here, the author discusses the role of interpersonal ST, which can be defined as the drive toward the benefit of others beyond one's self (Kang et al., 2018). As a process, ST involves redirecting one's attention from one's self to the well-being of others; as a state, it can be characterized by positive other-directed cognitions and affect. In this way, ST can be seen as both a mechanism and as an outcome. The author proposes that interpersonal ST is a core mechanism and outcome shared across various types of meditation practices, including mindfulness, compassion, lovingkindness, and other forms of contemplative techniques. The self-transcendent quality that people cultivate during these types of meditation practice may diminish their rigid, defensive self-focus and increase their positive focus on others. In this way, their social bonds will be enhanced. This review also emphasises interpersonal ST in order to specifically focus on the social aspect of contemplative practices and to distinguish them from other forms of ST that may involve connecting with non-human entities (Levenson et al., 2005). The author further reviews the neural correlates of ST, with particular focus on the integration of the self, social, and reward processes underpinning ST. It is to be noted that this conceptualization of ST is by no means exhaustive; instead, these key elements of ST have been most consistently relevant to neural studies of ST.

Achieving the mental quality of selfless care for others is a common goal across the most extensive styles of meditation focused on in contemplative science. In this review, the author focuses on mindfulness, lovingkindness, and compassion meditations, which the author argues share the common component of ST. For example, mindfulness meditation involves nonjudgmentally attending to one's present awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), thereby loosening one's attachment to self-serving needs and the defensiveness surrounding the idea of a permanent self (Garland & Gaylord, 2009), which can naturally lead to love and compassion for others (Salzberg, 2011). Likewise, lovingkindness and compassion meditation involves

making direct positive well-wishes and concern for others, independent of self-relevance and the closeness of one's self to the target individuals (Salzberg, 2004). Other psychological interventions, such as value affirmation (Burson et al., 2012) and interventions that increase one's purpose in life (Shin & Steger, 2014) have also been used to bring about the ST of the individual. In short, the specific types of meditation practice addressed in this review can help one to cultivate the skills that can bring people together in later social interactions. In other words, the author examines ST, or the drive to benefit others beyond one's self, as a key mechanism whereby meditation can promote positive social outcomes. ST, cultivated through various types of meditation, can have an impact on social outcomes in basically two main ways. First, ST can turn rigid, defensive self-focusing into flexible and receptive self-construals. Second, it can increase positive other-focusing by integrating rewards and social signals in the brain. These accounts offer practical solutions for positively transforming social relations and highlighting the potential usefulness of considering ST in researching the social effects of meditation.

DISCUSSION

An early and very influential theory of ST was developed by Viktor Frankl, the famous Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, author, and Holocaust survivor (1946/1985). Researchers routinely credit Frankl as the father of meaning-focused therapy, but they sometimes fail to understand the conceptualisation of the meaning of ST from Frankl's point of view. A deep sense of meaning involves the desire to pursue ST for the common good regardless of sacrifice and suffering. Meaning is not only anchored in a person's subjective feelings, but also in the objective behavioral commitment to devoting one's life to loving something or someone greater than oneself, such as loving others or serving society according to one's calling. When it is properly understood, ST represents a beautiful story about what is good and noble about humanity—it is an uplifting story about human beings, individually or collectively, who dedicate and sacrifice themselves in order to lift up others beyond their limitations and suffering to a higher ground of faith, hope, and love. Thus, in addition to this re-orientation, the willingness to suffer for the common good is another defining characteristic of ST because it is not possible for an individual to achieve his or her highest ideal or deepest meaning without any sacrifice or suffering. In short, Frankl attempted to restore the soul or the noetic (spiritual dimension) to psychology and society (Wong, 2021, as cited in Krasovska & Mayer, 2021, p. v-xii). Thus, the meaning of life or ST is about developing the gift an individual has to give his or her best to serve others (Wong, 2016). Research supports Frankl's definition of meaning in terms of a search for ST. For example, Harris et al. (2018) showed that finding meaning is an essential element of ST, and McClintock (2015) reported that self-transcending gratitude may be the very key to how we can become change agents in making a difference in the world. Further, a sense of the self-transcendental motivates individuals to live a meaningful life and to use their gifts to make a positive contribution to society (Wong, 2014; 2016).

In the age of COVID-19, when people all over the world are overwhelmed by loneliness, anxiety, and stress, the practice of ST can lead them to a more compassionate and harmonious society and a return to the virtues of humility and selfless love. In short, the ST paradigm requires a very different way of doing research and intervention in order to promote global well-being.

CONCLUSION

As indicated earlier, ST can be viewed as a form of wisdom and its origins stem from philosophy and religion. ST has the potential to be of extreme benefit to people in terms of their physical and mental well-being, although its underlying concept is something beyond one's self. The ST focus is being other-orientated, and these other concerns are dealing with other people or society and of course the natural environment of which we are an integral. The good interaction of any individuals with others can be through spending money on others or through donations instead of spending money on one's self. As mentioned earlier, the warm glow of feeling of giving will create happiness for the givers.

Another form of interaction with others is with the natural environment – by being a part of the environment or immersing oneself in nature. This action can also create happiness for people that are in touch with nature. Not all people are born to be self-transcendent; however, in order to achieve ST, the practice of meditation can help.

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