

# The Surprising New Science of Suffering:

What is Suffering? How Can We Turn it  
into Flourishing?

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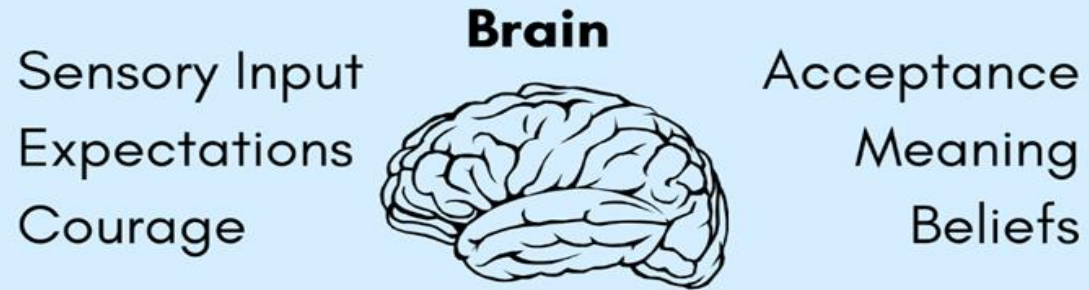
# Overview

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- Introduction – Why do I study suffering?
  1. What is suffering? A taxonomy of suffering
  2. Why is suffering the foundation for flourishing?
  3. How do we turn suffering into flourishing?

# THE NEW SCIENCE OF SUFFERING

## INJURY OR NOXIOUS STIMULUS



**Detrimental  
Response**

OR



**Personal  
Growth  
and Joy**

Suffering is a fact of life: how we respond to it can make us bitter or better.

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

# ? EVER SINCE MY CHILDHOOD IN CHINA,

I have been obsessed with two questions:

**(1) Why do bad people prosper and good people suffer?**

**(2) How can I find happiness when life is so hard & unfair?**

All my research in the last 50 years has been designed to answer these two fundamental questions. This is the origin of my **Existential Positive Psychology** or **PP 2.0**, not to be confused with American positive psychology.



No matter how  
your **heart is grieving**,  
if you keep on **believing**,  
the **dream** that you wish  
will come true.

- Cinderella

My view of suffering was shaped by my culture and life experience.

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# DON'T PAMPER YOURSELF!

**If you are not hard on yourself, you will find life will very hard and everyone is hard on you.**

**Paradoxically, if you constantly demand yourself to do your best and make continuous improvement, life will treat you much better.**

A GREAT MAN IS HARD ON HIMSELF; A SMALL MAN IS HARD ON OTHERS.

– CONFUCIUS

## What I've learnt about suffering

- Suffering is not something undesirable to be avoided or tolerated.
- Suffering is not only an inescapable part of life, but also essential for flourishing.
- In fact, it is not possible for anyone to flourish without learning to embrace suffering.
- My animal research shows that some suffering is better than no suffering.
- My aging research shows that prior experience of overcoming contributes to successful aging .







**Even if you know everything about nature,**

**if you don't know how to live, you will waste your life. Existential positive psychology explores how you can live in a way that is resilient and meaningful.**

Dr. Paul T. P. Wong ♦ 2020



**everything about the science of happiness,**

EVERYTHING HAS BEEN FIGURED OUT,  
EXCEPT HOW TO LIVE.  
—JEAN-PAUL SARTRE—

All I want is to be happy.

All I want is to marry someone who will make me happy.

Why am I so miserable?

# The Self-transcendence Paradigm of Global Wellbeing & Flourishing

The golden triangle of mental health and wellbeing is about how to live a meaningful life through expanding one's innate capacity for connections in 3 life domains in spite of hardships.

**FAITH**  
*(Spirituality)*

Connecting with God, a higher power, or nature by transcending doubts and disbelief.

**AGAPE**

**HOPE**

*(Agency)*

Connecting with one's soul, calling, or authentic self by transcending one's limitations and egotism.

**LOVE**

*(Communion)*

Connecting with others and loved ones by transcending relational conflict and frustrations.

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- Without faith, hope, and love, we would be like fish without water.
- People do not realize that lacking any of the above connections is a source of suffering.



# THE MOST DIFFICULT LESSON IS TO CHANGE OUR VIEW ABOUT SUFFERING



**FROM BEING  
A PROBLEM**

**TO BEING A BLESSING  
IN DISGUISE.**

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Most people do not realize that denying or avoiding suffering is a major source of suffering.



# Sources of Suffering

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	Internal	External
<i>Controllable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Bad habits</li><li>- Bad attitudes</li><li>- Selfishness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Toxic workplace</li><li>- Abusive people</li><li>- Unsafe neighborhood</li></ul>
<i>Uncontrollable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Disease</li><li>- Disability</li><li>- Developmental challenges</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Natural disasters</li><li>- Pandemics</li><li>- An unjust system</li></ul>

Figure: 2x2 Contingency Table of Suffering

**A FOOL CREATES PROBLEMS AND SUFFERING,  
EVEN WHEN HE HAS ALL THE GOOD THINGS  
WHICH PEOPLE WANT FOR HAPPINESS.**

**A WISE PERSON CREATES HAPPINESS,  
EVEN WHEN HE HAS ALL THE PROBLEMS  
PEOPLE AVOID AS SOURCES OF SUFFERING.**

What really matters is whether one  
has a clear head, a loving heart,  
and a correct attitude towards life.

Dr. Paul T. P. Wong ◆ 2020

"I believe all suffering is caused by ignorance."  
-14th Dalai Lama-

# What does the Bible have to say about Human Flourishing?

Seeing so much unhappiness and misery in my clinical practice and in my observation of all the well-to-do families, I have been struggling with this question: Why?

I discovered that the main causes of their unhappiness are the **7 deadly sins**. Therefore, the most promising path to human flourishing is through the gates of overcoming sin and suffering. Paradoxically, these are what people habitually do in order to be happy: the ambition to be number one, the insatiable desire to have more, carnal desires for sex, wanting to ruin those who are better than they are, anger towards anyone preventing them from getting what they want, avoiding work and seeking pleasure, and indulging in consuming what makes them happy. Therefore, adaptation or returning to the baseline is not the real problem for decreasing happiness; it is the natural sinfulness which positive psychologists dismiss as negative thinking.

**PP 2.0 takes the opposite view**—we can be happy and **virtuous** to the extent that we are able to overcome the deadly sins and other human weaknesses through pursuing truly meaningful and worthy life goals according to our conscience.

	vs	
<b>Pride</b>		<i>Humility</i>
<b>Greed</b>		<i>Generosity</i>
<b>Lust</b>		<i>Chastity</i>
<b>Anger</b>		<i>Meekness</i>
<b>Envy</b>		<i>Kindness</i>
<b>Sloth</b>		<i>Diligence</i>
<b>Gluttony</b>		<i>Temperance</i>

Trying to satisfy these carnal desires brings us misery.

Some of the richest people are most miserable.

The legend of Faust.



- Humanity is facing many existential crises—the pandemic, climate change, polarization, nuclear war, and the evil use of digital power.
- Egotism and the dark triad are the sources of much human suffering.
- What one does can affect humanity because we are all connected.
  
- Self-transcendence is the antidote to the existential crises. That's the trumpet call of existential positive psychology.

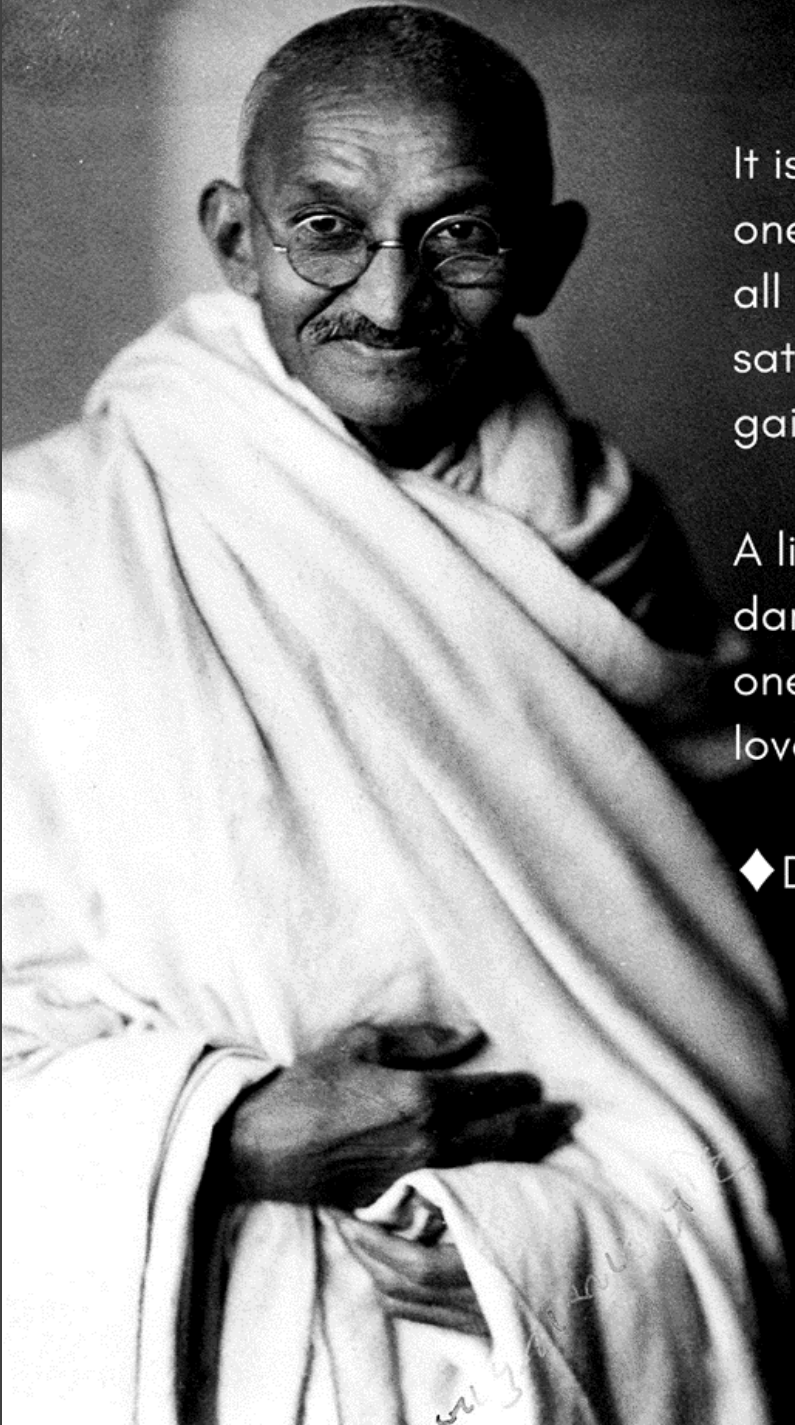
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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

– *Margaret Mead*

Existential suffering is not something we can avoid or work around because it is within us.

That is why flourishing requires inner transformation.



It is very unlikely that one can find one's true self or meaning in life, if all one could think about is how to satisfy one's greed for worldly gains.

A light begins to shine through the darkness of ignorance, as soon as one begins to think about how to love and serve others.

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The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

–Mahatma Gandhi

We need a mega shift in mindset, from the self to others, in order to understand the value of suffering.

# A MOMENT OF RUDE AWAKENING

is needed for transformation. Most people just go about their daily business until they are unexpectedly awakened to the dark side of human existence – the horrors of human evil, suffering and death. The "Why" questions of "Why is life so painful?" "Why am I here?" "Why struggle and die?" will push people to search for a reason or purpose for living. One does not need to use the word "meaning" to live a meaningful life. The reality of life and the human nature conspire to nudge us to search for a deeper and more authentic way of life.

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Suffering is essential  
for flourishing

- Diagnostic value
- Curative value
- Redemptive value
- Transformative value



## Here are three powerful ideas that can transform both psychology and society for the betterment of humanity:

1. Polarity--all things in nature exist not as opposite poles on the same dimension but as two complementary and opposite dimensions.
2. Transcendence--the creative force or tension holds the opposites together.
3. Balance and Harmony--Inner peace and wellbeing result from navigating a balance between opposites.

The **Self-transcendence paradigm**, based on the above three inter-related tenets, charts a new path towards global wellbeing, world peace, and individual flourishing even in turbulent times.

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"In the self good and evil are indeed  
closer than identical twins!"

– *Carl Jung, CW 12, Para 24*

# How to turn suffering into flourishing



Happiness is rooted in  
misery.  
Misery lurks beneath  
happiness.  
Who knows what the  
future holds.

*Tao Te Ching, 58  
(Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English)*

## Suffering is the foundation for flourishing

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- We need the dark night in order to see the shining stars.
- Sadness is necessary for happiness.
- All the good things in life are on the other side of suffering.



The new science of flourishing through suffering consists of the dialectical process of (a) sinking one's roots to the deepest parts of hell through level of processing, and (b) spreading one's branches to the highest parts of Heaven and the broadest parts of earth through self-transcendence.

This is the less travelled road to finding joy and peace on earth through the vertical dimension of human existence of reaching downward to face and transform suffering, and reaching upward through self-transcendence and connections with the highest ideals of faith, hope, and love.

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*"No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven  
unless its roots reach down to hell."*

*—C.G. Jung*

We need to sink  
our roots into  
suffering in order  
to grow & flourish



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# A Man of Sorrows

Jesus was a man of sorrows who bore all our pains and griefs, yet deep inside him was a deep well of inexhaustible joy for all those who come to him. Come; let's weep as Jesus wept, so that we may know the fellowship of his suffering, and the joy of the Lord as our strength.




He was despised and forsaken of men,  
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
- Isaiah, 53:3, NASB

A prototype of  
voluntary  
suffering and  
flourishing.

# The principle of polarity

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Recognition of the reality of evil necessarily relativizes the good, and the evil likewise, converting both into halves of a paradoxical whole.

C.G. Jung

quotefancy

- PP1.0: We need to focus on flourishing and treat suffering as secondary.
- PP2.0: Flourishing and suffering are two sides of the same coin.

	Seligman's (2011) Model of Flourishing	Wong's (2021) <b>Self-transcendence Model of Flourishing Through Suffering</b>
<b>P</b>	Positive Emotions	<b>Positivity through embracing the dark side of life.</b>
<b>E</b>	Engagement	<b>Engagement through painful discipline.</b>
<b>R</b>	Positive Relationships	<b>Strong relationships through forgiving and enduring the foibles of others.</b>
<b>M</b>	Meaning	<b>Meaning through transcending egotism and external obstacles.</b>
<b>A</b>	Accomplishments	<b>Achievement through transcending sacrifices and failures.</b>

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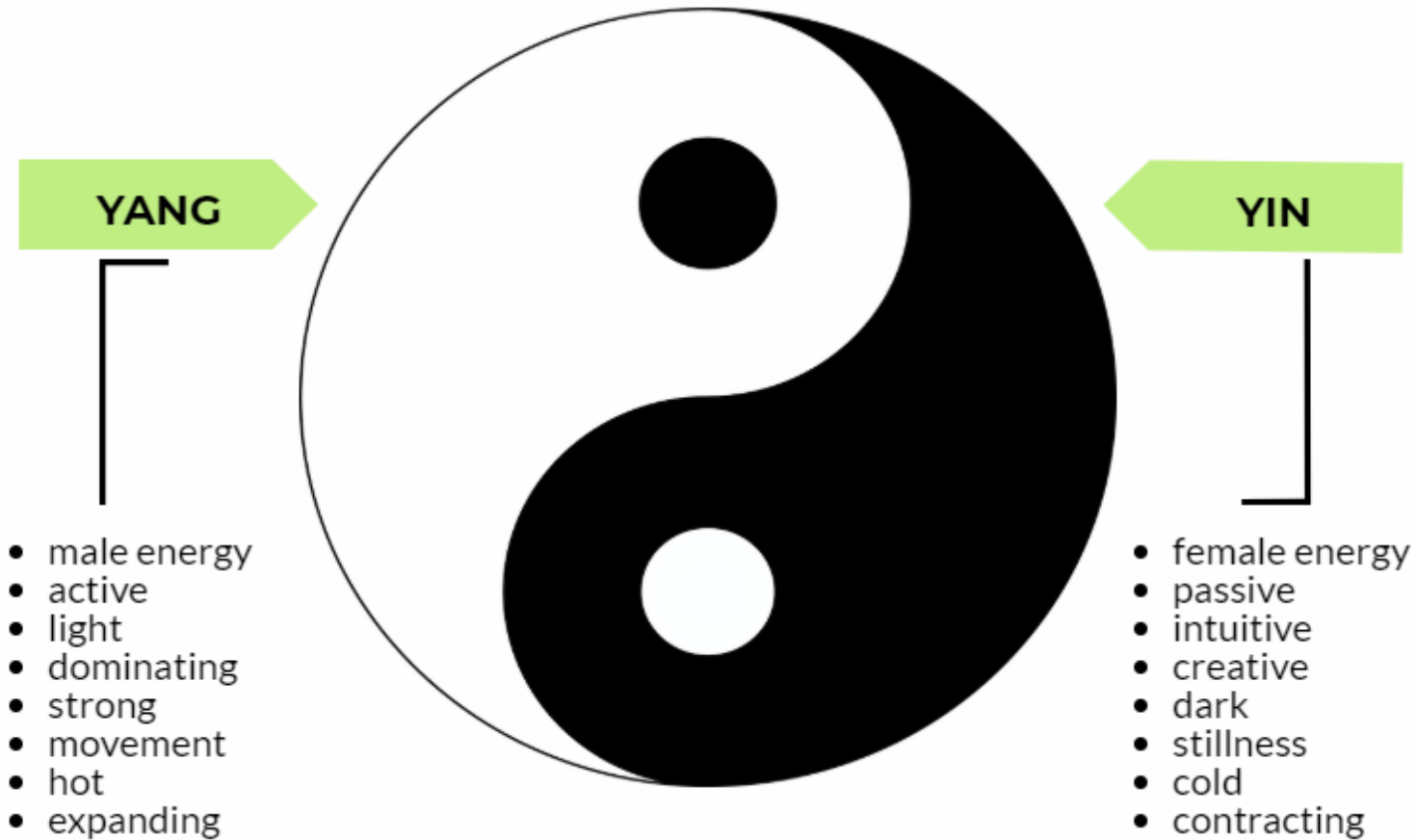
This comparison illustrates the need for suffering to fully implement PERMA.

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# Meaning of Yin Yang Symbol

THERE IS DUALITY IN EVERYTHING



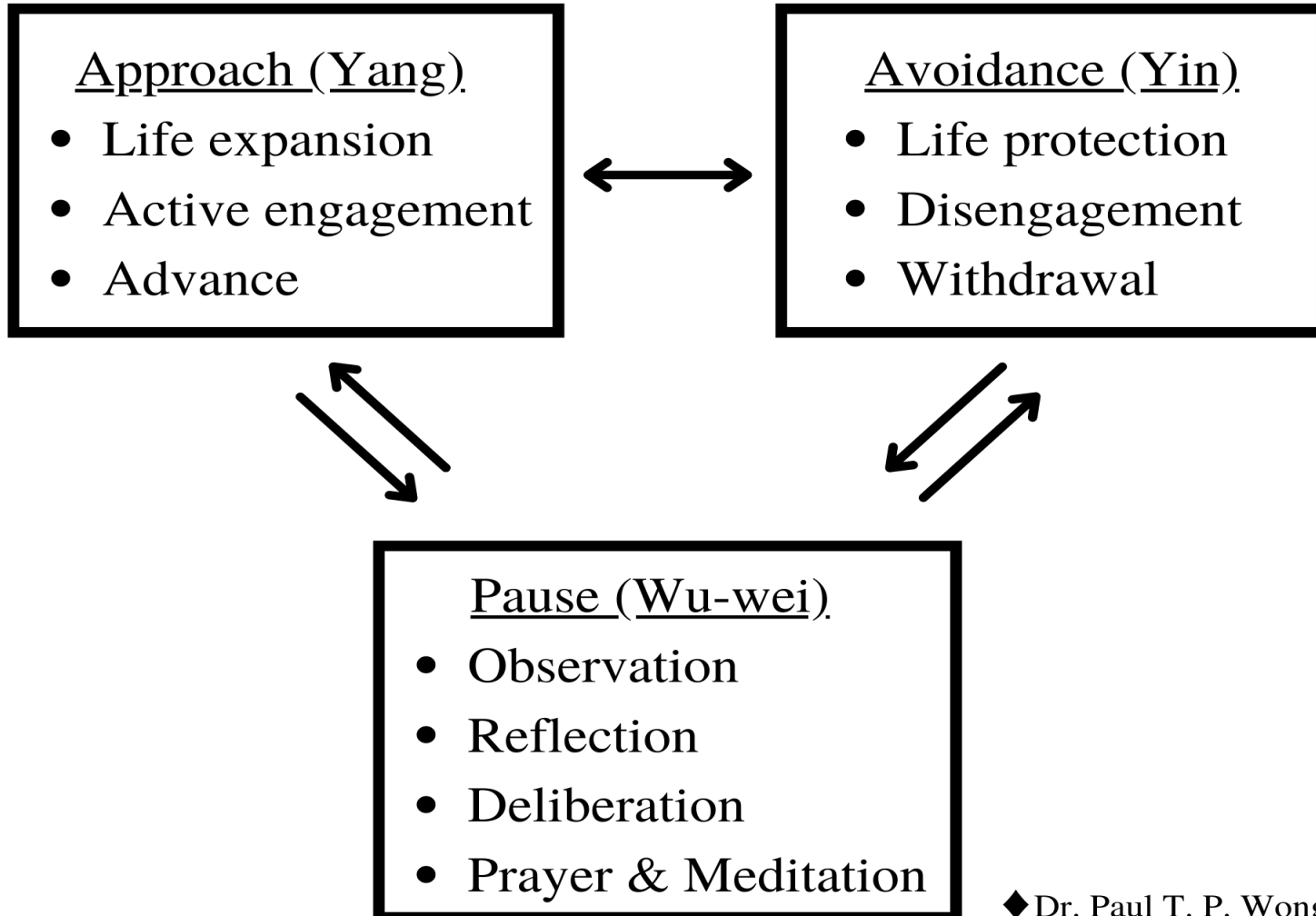
**Outer Circle** - - represents the universe and everything in it

**Small Inner Circles** - represents that everything carries the seed of its opposite

Flourishing depends on the optimal balance between Yin and Yang.

# A New Paradigm for Coping with Persistent Life Stress:

*The Dual-Systems Model (Wong, 2012)*



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A new paradigm  
for flourishing  
through  
suffering.

**The most natural way to be free from the wheel of suffering** is to return to its center, where one can find peace and harmony balancing the opposites and extremes in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. Here are the four simple steps of finding your center, represented by the acronym **FACE**:

**F**ocusing on the present moment and one's own breathing.

**A**ccepting life as it is and the bleak reality.

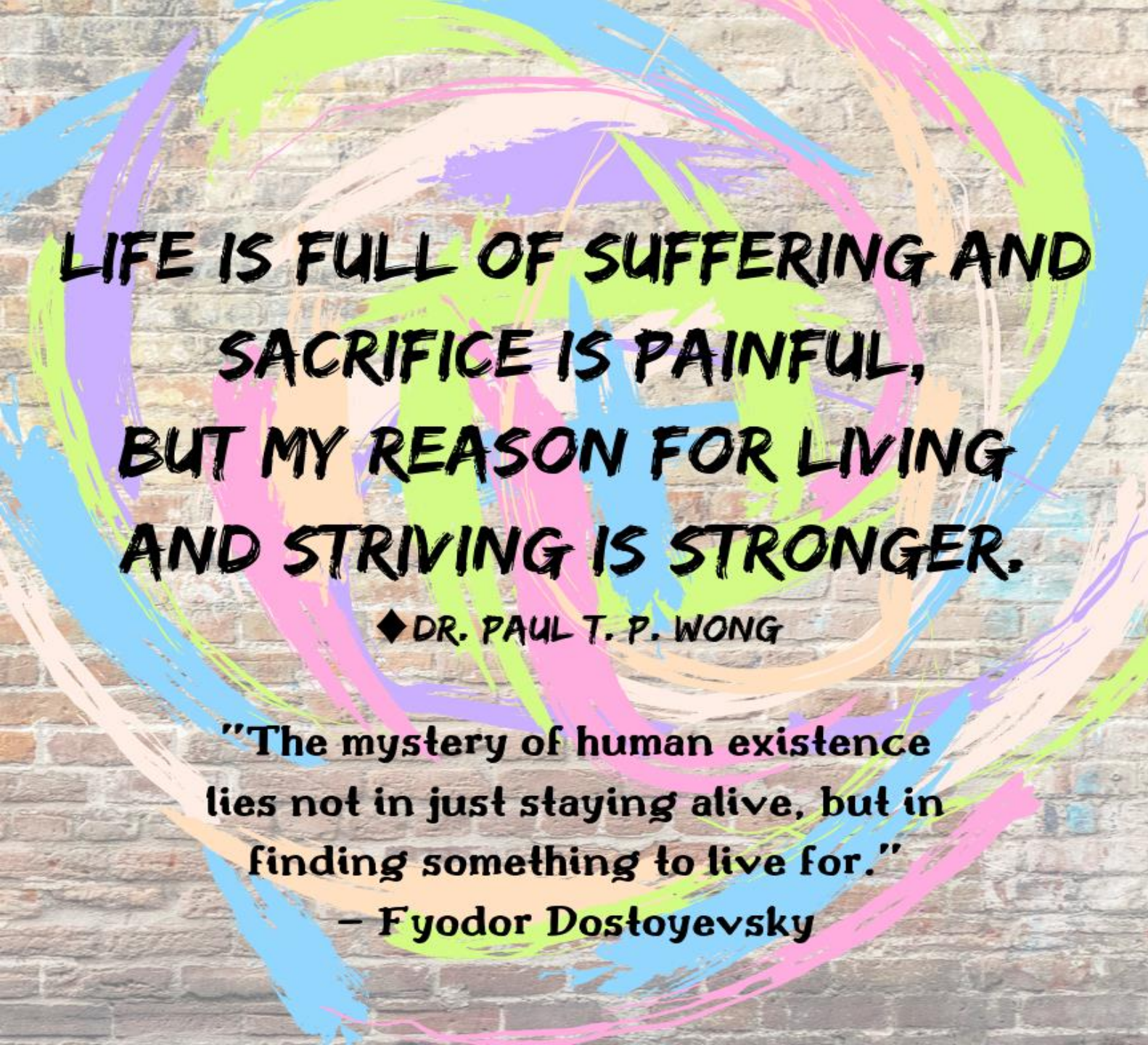
**C**lear understanding of one's core values and true self.

**E**nduring all the changes and hardships with equanimity.

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A simple practice of living with suffering.





**LIFE IS FULL OF SUFFERING AND  
SACRIFICE IS PAINFUL,  
BUT MY REASON FOR LIVING  
AND STRIVING IS STRONGER.**

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**"The mystery of human existence  
lies not in just staying alive, but in  
finding something to live for."**

**– Fyodor Dostoyevsky**

The search for  
meaning is at the  
heart of transforming  
suffering into  
flourishing.



# ACCORDING TO PP 2.0,

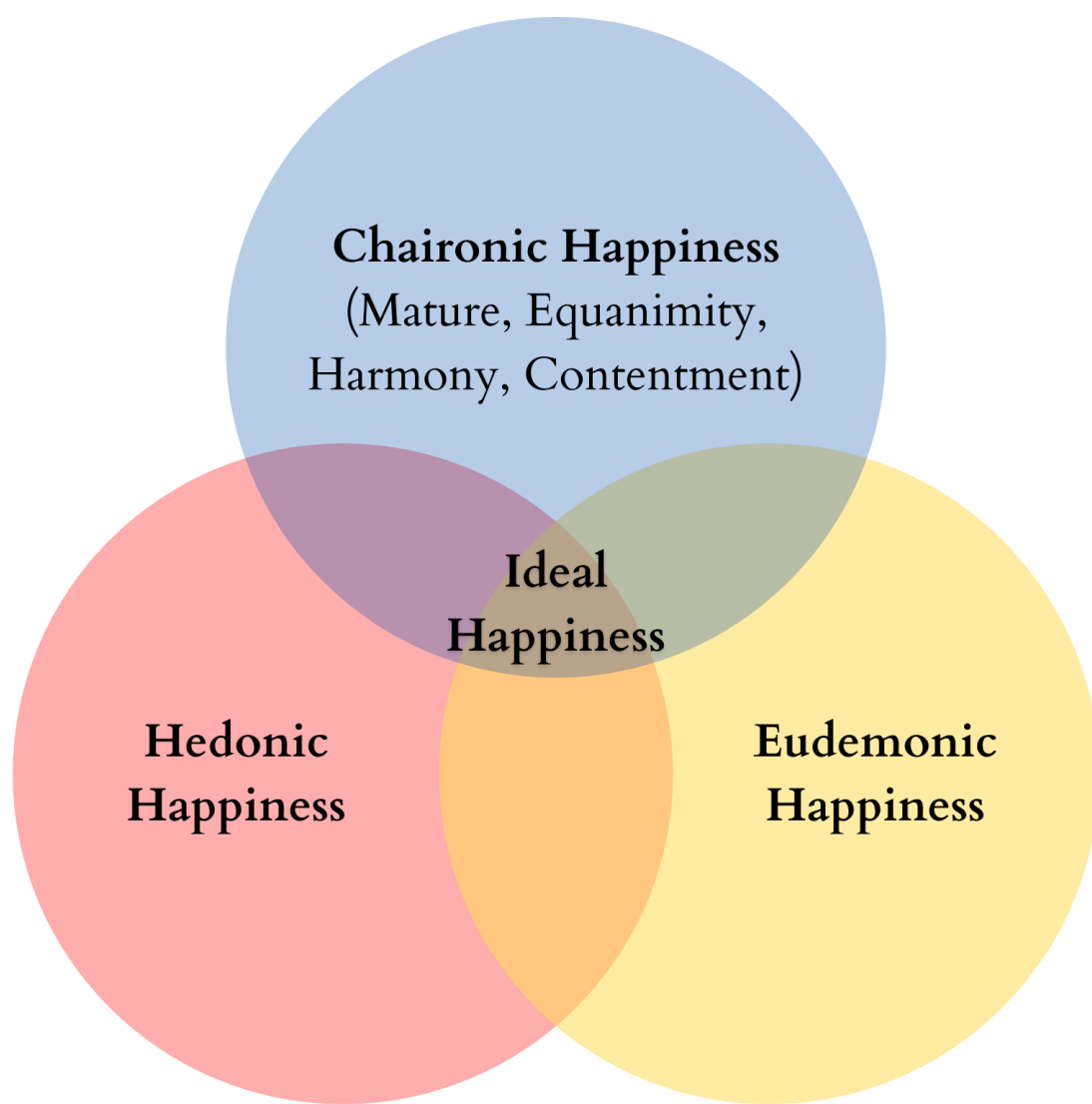
true happiness emerges from finding meaning, peace and contentment in the depth of suffering through drawing from the deep well of spiritual resources cultivated for many years.

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True happiness comes from having a sense of inner peace and contentment, which in turn must be achieved by cultivating altruism, love and compassion, and by eliminating anger, selfishness and greed.

————— Dalai Lama —————

The third major type of happiness is based on Wu Wei and acceptance.



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**Three Main Types of Happiness**  
for All Seasons of Life in All Cultures

◆ Dr. Paul T. P. Wong

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The three major types of happiness. Chaironic happiness is most resistant to disruptions and tragedies.



## 🔊 Tox · ic pos · i · tiv · i · ty

*noun*

1. The overgeneralization of a happy, optimistic state that results in the denial, minimization and invalidation of the authentic human emotional experience.

We can avoid toxic positivity and find true happiness by practicing the following tenets of **PP 2.0** and **Logotherapy**:

1. Believe that the world is full of suffering, but also full of overcoming and meaning.
2. It is only human to feel depressed, anxious or angry as a natural reaction to painful life situations, but we don't have to be stuck in our miseries. We all have the freedom and responsibility to find a way out and live a good life.
3. We all have the ability to choose healthy positivity, which is to accept whatever life may throw at us, and turn lemon into lemonade.
4. We become more resilient and experience more sustainable happiness if we choose to accept and transform our frailty and suffering rather than avoiding or denying painful experiences.

A healthy balance between suffering and happiness will help us avoid toxic positivity.

# The New Science of Suffering for the Age of COVID-19

## Developing a Resilient Mindset (TRAMMB):

Be **TOUGH** mentally  
to face a dangerous world,

Be **RESPONSIBLE** for  
adapting to the new reality,

**APPRECIATE** what we still have  
and for blessings in disguise,

**MINDFULLY** accept life with all  
its problems and disappointments,

**MEANINGFUL** transformation  
of all things negative,

**BELIEF** in a better future through faith  
and hope in God for things beyond our control.

When we arm our  
mind to embrace  
suffering and  
meaning, we will  
have a resilient  
mindset.



# Towards a General Theory of Global Wellbeing



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Through levels of processing, at the deepest level, all disciplines reach the same conclusion. Through the dialectical process of self-transcendence, at the highest level, all people can reach the same awe-inspiring mystery. Through selfless sacrifice, we can serve the greatest number of people. Through holistic integrative research, we can best approximate the ultimate truth of wellbeing.

This figure illustrates the essential role of suffering in flourishing.





RESEARCH INSTITUTE ON  
**FLOURISHING  
& SUFFERING**

# RESEARCH INSTITUTE ON FLOURISHING AND SUFFERING

The Research Institute on Flourishing and Suffering (RIFS) is a research arm of the International Society for Existential Positive Psychology of INPM.

**HUMAN FLOURISHING THROUGH SUFFERING**

I need your support for this new institute dedicated to the new science of suffering and flourishing: <https://www.meaning.ca/positive-psychology/rifs/>