

From Psychological States to Ontological Well-Being: Osho's Witnessing and Positive Psychology

Dr. Sandeep Kulshrestha

CEO, Rectangle Consulting and Visiting Professor, St. Francis College for Women, Hyderabad, India

Email: sandeep@rectangleconsulting.com

Abstract

Positive psychology has largely conceptualised human flourishing through two dominant paradigms: hedonic well-being, centred on pleasure and life satisfaction, and eudaimonic well-being, rooted in meaning, purpose, and self-actualisation. Both frameworks, however, operate within the bounds of the psychological self—the ego, the personality, and the narrative identity. This paper examines whether such frameworks are sufficient by turning to the philosophy of Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) and his central teaching of witnessing (*sakshi*). For Osho, witnessing is not a psychological exercise but a transcendence of the psychological altogether and that is a shift from identifying with thoughts and emotions to becoming the neutral, aware observer of them.

The paper proceeds in six parts. It begins by examining the hedonic and eudaimonic paradigms within positive psychology, identifying an assumption in both of them, that well-being is fundamentally psychological in nature. It then introduces the concept of ontological well-being (OWB) as a theoretical refinement that incorporates a whole-time perspective on life evaluation, while noting that OWB remains concerned with the “content” of life rather than the conscious space in which evaluation occurs. The paper then goes on to articulate Osho's philosophy of witnessing, drawing on his discourses and the Upanishadic tradition, and demonstrates how witnessing complements and deepens the OWB framework. The practical dimensions of witnessing are then outlined through a systematic four-stage model accessible to laypeople and applicable in daily life. The paper subsequently engages in a critical dialogue between these perspectives, arguing that Osho's framework both complements and challenges positive psychology and it offers a deeper foundation for resilience and emotional regulation. It also questions positive psychology's reliance on effortful interventions and self-report measures. Finally, it discusses the limitations of the present study and outlines directions for future research.

This paper argues that witnessing offers a third and a hitherto under-explored model of well-being, referred as *ontological well-being*, which is rooted not in the content of experience but in the conscious space in which experience arises. Through this critical dialogue, the paper contends that witnessing produces psychological benefits, including resilience, emotional regulation, and reduced rumination but not as direct goals, but as inevitable byproducts of a deeper state of silence and equanimity. Conversely, it challenges positive psychology's reliance on effortful interventions and self-report measures, proposing that the highest form of flourishing may be non-cultivated and non-psychological in nature. By introducing Osho's framework, this paper invites the field of positive psychology to expand its ontological horizons, from the management of psychological states to the recognition of consciousness itself as the ground of genuine well-being.

1. Introduction

Contemporary positive psychology has made significant strides in conceptualising human flourishing, yet its dominant frameworks remain anchored within the boundaries of the psychological self, including the ego, personality structures, and the cognitive content of experience. The field has largely organised itself around two principal paradigms - hedonic well-being, defined by the pursuit of pleasure, positive emotions, and the avoidance of pain (Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz, 1999), and eudaimonic well-being, centred on meaning, purpose, self-actualisation, and the realisation of human potential (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2014). While these frameworks have generated valuable insights and practical interventions, from Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci,

2000), they share a common assumption: that well-being is a function of optimising psychological states, whether emotional or cognitive.

This paper argues that both hedonic and eudaimonic paradigms, despite their differences, operate within what might be termed the 'psychological horizon', including the domain of thoughts, emotions, narratives, and personality traits. They seek to manage, enhance, or restructure psychological content, but they rarely question the foundational assumption that well-being must be *psychological* in nature. This limitation becomes particularly apparent when confronting philosophical traditions that posit a dimension of human experience that *transcends* the psychological altogether.

The Eastern contemplative traditions, particularly those emerging from the Indian subcontinent, have long articulated a distinction between the contents of consciousness and consciousness itself (Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1973; Ramana Maharshi, 1988). Within this framework, the Upanishads introduced the concept of *sakshi* or the witness, the pure seer that observes all psychological phenomena without becoming identified with them (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Olivelle, 1998). This witnessing self is not a psychological state among others; it is the very ground of awareness in which all states arise and dissolve. As one commentary on the Upanishads explains, 'Whatsoever becomes your experience, you are beyond it. Spirituality is reaching toward that which experiences all, but which itself never becomes an experience' (Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1973, p. 78).

Few contemporary spiritual teachers have articulated this witnessing consciousness with the clarity and accessibility of Osho. For Osho, witnessing is not merely a meditation technique but the very essence of spiritual transformation. He describes it as 'a transcendence; it is not psychological' (Osho, 2002, p. 45). Unlike joy, sadness, anger, or any other emotional state, which Osho characterises as 'part of your psychology' (Osho, 2002, p. 46), witnessing belongs to an entirely different order of experience. It is the mirror that reflects all psychological content without becoming stained by it, the watcher on the hills who observes the valley of human emotion without descending into it.

Osho's teaching on witnessing carries profound implications for how we understand well-being. While positive psychology seeks to cultivate positive emotions and meaningful engagement (Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman, 2011), Osho suggests that a deeper peace emerges not from managing psychological content but from disidentifying with it altogether. 'Don't get identified with the joy that comes, watch it,' he instructs (Osho, 2002, p. 52). The witnessing state does not deny joy or sadness; it simply refuses to be defined by either. In this view, the highest well-being is not hedonic pleasure, nor eudaimonic meaning, but a state of equanimity that transcends both and what Osho calls 'total peace' and 'eternal silence' (Osho, 1999, p. 134).

This paper proposes that Osho's witnessing offers a third paradigm of well-being, one that has been largely overlooked by positive psychology: *ontological well-being*. Unlike hedonic well-being (rooted in pleasant feeling states) or eudaimonic well-being (rooted in meaning and purpose), ontological well-being is rooted in the conscious *space* in which all experiences arise and pass. It is not a state *within* the psychological self but a recognition of the witnessing awareness *prior to* and *beyond* the psychological self. This framework does not dismiss the value of hedonic or eudaimonic pursuits but reframes them as relative goods within a larger context of absolute well-being, the peace that comes from knowing oneself as the witness rather than the witnessed.

The paper proceeds in six parts. First, it examines the hedonic and eudaimonic frameworks within contemporary positive psychology, identifying their shared assumptions about the nature of well-being and their confinement to the psychological domain (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2011; Ryff, 2014). Second, it articulates the concept of ontological well-being (OWB) as a theoretical refinement that addresses certain limitations of subjective well-being by incorporating a whole-time perspective on life evaluation (Şimşek, 2009; Kaba, 2020). Third, it introduces Osho's philosophy of witnessing, drawing on his discourses and the Upanishadic tradition from which they emerge, and demonstrates how witnessing complements and deepens the OWB framework (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Osho, 2002). Fourth, it outlines the practical dimensions of witnessing, presenting a systematic four-stage model accessible to laypeople and applicable in daily life (Osho, 1987). Fifth, it engages in a critical dialogue between these perspectives, arguing that Osho's framework both complements and challenges positive psychology: it offers a deeper foundation for resilience and emotional regulation, yet it also questions positive psychology's reliance on effortful interventions and self-report measures (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fredrickson, 2001). Sixth, it discusses the limitations of the present study and outlines directions for future research. By introducing Osho's witnessing as a legitimate—and potentially

transformative—approach to well-being, this paper invites positive psychology to expand its ontological horizons, from the management of psychological states to the recognition of consciousness itself as the ground of authentic flourishing (Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1973; Osho, 1999).

In doing so, this paper does not seek to dismiss the considerable achievements of positive psychology. Rather, it suggests that the field's current frameworks, however valuable, may be incomplete. If human well-being can indeed transcend the psychological—if there is a witnessing awareness that observes all psychological states without being reducible to them—then positive psychology must reckon with this dimension if it is to offer a truly comprehensive account of human flourishing. Osho's treatise on witnessing, this paper contends, provides the conceptual resources for such an expansion.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines the two dominant paradigms within contemporary positive psychology namely hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, and their foundational assumptions about human flourishing. While positive psychology has generated a rich and rapidly expanding empirical literature since its formal inception in 1998 (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the construct landscape remains fragmented, with inconsistent operationalisation and overlapping measurement frameworks (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026). This review argues that both paradigms, despite their considerable contributions, operate within what may be termed the 'psychological horizon', i.e., the domain of thoughts, emotions, narratives, and personality traits. By mapping the theoretical and empirical landscape of these frameworks, this review establishes the foundation for introducing Osho's witnessing as a potential third paradigm that transcends the psychological domain altogether.

2.1 The Hedonic Paradigm: Subjective Well-Being

The hedonic tradition in positive psychology conceptualises well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, tracing its philosophical roots to the ancient Greek Cyrenaic school and, later, to Aristippus of Cyrene (Ryan and Deci, 2001). In contemporary positive psychology, this tradition is operationalised through the concept of subjective well-being (SWB), which encompasses three core components: life satisfaction (a cognitive judgment), the presence of positive affect, and the absence of negative affect (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999). Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz (1999) further developed this framework by distinguishing between global life evaluations (life satisfaction) and ongoing affective experiences (the balance of pleasant and unpleasant emotions).

The empirical evidence for hedonic well-being's benefits is substantial. Research has demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of positive affect experience improved cardiovascular health outcomes, with one study showing that elevated positive affect was associated with a decreased risk of coronary heart disease over a decade, independent of other risk factors (Boehm et al., as cited in NIH, 2024). Similarly, life satisfaction has been linked to lower blood vessel calcification, though this association weakened after adjusting for cardiovascular risk factors (NIH, 2024). Positive psychological well-being, encompassing hedonic facets, has been associated with a 29% reduced risk of cardiovascular disease in older adults (NIH, 2024).

Despite these findings, the hedonic paradigm faces significant critiques. First, the operationalisation of subjective well-being remains contested; constructs such as happiness, positive affect, and life satisfaction, while overlapping, are not interchangeable (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026). Second, hedonic well-being is inherently state-dependent as it fluctuates with life circumstances, and thus may not capture the deeper, more enduring aspects of human flourishing that positive psychology purports to study (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Third, and most relevant to this paper, the hedonic paradigm remains confined to the psychological domain of affective and cognitive evaluations; it does not address the possibility of a well-being that transcends psychological states altogether.

2.2 The Eudaimonic Paradigm: Psychological Well-Being

In contrast to the hedonic emphasis on pleasure, the eudaimonic tradition, rooted in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, conceptualises well-being as the realisation of one's true potential and the pursuit of virtue (Ryan and Deci, 2001). In contemporary positive psychology, this tradition has been most systematically operationalised by Ryff's (2014) model of psychological well-being (PWB), which identifies six dimensions of human actualisation: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. This model has been widely adopted in positive psychology research and has demonstrated robust associations with various health outcomes.

The empirical literature on eudaimonic well-being is extensive. A sense of purpose in life has been associated with reduced risk of incident cardiovascular events in a meta-analysis of 136,265 individuals (NIH, 2024). Among cardiovascular patients, eudaimonic well-being has been linked to reduced stress, favourable physiological biomarkers (including C-reactive protein and blood pressure), and improved overall mental health following a cardiovascular event (NIH, 2024). Patients possessing a sense of purpose tend to experience accelerated recovery following myocardial infarction (NIH, 2024). More broadly, a systematic review found that gratitude, hope, character strengths, and resilience, all constructs associated with eudaimonic well-being demonstrated consistently positive effects across diverse populations (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026).

However, the eudaimonic framework shares a critical limitation with its hedonic counterpart: it remains located within the psychological domain. Purpose, meaning, personal growth, and self-actualisation are all psychological constructs, and they can be termed as cognitive appraisals, narrative identities, and motivational orientations that operate within the structure of the ego or personality. As Araújo, Ribeiro and Paúl (2017, p. 3) note in their scoping review, 'the study of positive psychology is still characterised by inconsistencies and opposing perspectives about what well-being is,' yet these disagreements remain within the same ontological frame—the psychological self.

2.3 The Integration Debate: Hedonic and Eudaimonic Together

Recent scholarship has moved toward integrating hedonic and eudaimonic frameworks, recognising that both capture important and complementary aspects of well-being (Henderson and Knight, 2012, as cited in Araújo, Ribeiro and Paúl, 2017). Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff (2002) proposed that subjective well-being (hedonic) and psychological well-being (eudaimonic) are distinct but related constructs, and that complete mental health requires both positive emotions and positive functioning. This integrative perspective has been influential in shaping intervention research, with positive psychological interventions (PPIs) increasingly targeting both affective and meaning-related outcomes.

The emerging evidence suggests that certain constructs, notably hope, optimism, and vitality may not clearly fit into either hedonic or eudaimonic categories, combining elements from both facets (NIH, 2024). A systematic review of core constructs in positive psychology research found that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being demonstrated 'the strongest and most replicated evidence' among all positive psychological constructs, with gratitude, hope, character strengths, and resilience showing consistently positive effects (Frontiers in Psychology, 2026). However, the same review identified significant methodological limitations, including construct proliferation, measurement heterogeneity, and Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) sampling bias.

2.4 Methodological Limitations and Critical Gaps

The literature review reveals several methodological and conceptual limitations that are pertinent to the present study. First, the reliance on self-report measures in positive psychology research raises questions about the validity of its constructs; scales such as the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) capture subjective evaluations, but these evaluations are themselves products of the psychological self. As NIH (2024) notes in their review of cardiovascular health, 'positive and negative constructs, such as optimism and depression, show only a modest inverse correlation (e.g., $r = -0.3$),' suggesting that positive psychological well-being is not simply the absence of psychopathology. Yet this finding also suggests that positive well-being remains within the same domain of psychological assessment.

Second, the intervention literature, while demonstrating the efficacy of PPIs for improving well-being, has largely focused on effortful, practice-based approaches that align with the cognitive-behavioural tradition. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), for example, have been shown to 'significantly induce mindfulness and self-compassion, while also alleviating elevated levels of stress' (Bostock et al., 2019, as cited in Khoury and Armenta, 2023). However, these interventions typically cultivate attention as an *instrumental* technique, a means to manage psychological states, rather than as a *transcendental* orientation. This distinction is critical for the present study, which proposes that Osho's witnessing offers a fundamentally different approach: not the cultivation of psychological skills, but the recognition of a witnessing awareness that transcends psychological content altogether.

2.5 The Emergence of 'Third Category' Constructs

Of particular interest to the present study are emerging efforts to identify well-being constructs that do not clearly fit into either hedonic or eudaimonic frameworks. A recent conceptualisation proposed that 'hope, optimism, and vitality could be implemented as a third category due to their combination of elements from both the eudaimonic and hedonic facets' (NIH, 2024, p. 3). While this represents a valuable expansion, these constructs remain psychological in nature.

The question that arises from this review is whether a genuinely *non-psychological* dimension of well-being can be identified. The Eastern contemplative traditions, particularly those emerging from the Indian subcontinent, have long articulated a distinction between the contents of consciousness and consciousness itself (Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1973; Ramana Maharshi, 1988). Within this framework, the Upanishads introduced the concept of *sakshi*—the witness, the pure seer that observes all psychological phenomena without becoming identified with them (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Olivelle, 1998). Osho (2002, p. 45) describes this witnessing as 'a transcendence; it is not psychological.' Unlike joy or sadness—which Osho characterises as 'part of your psychology' (Osho, 2002, p. 46)—witnessing belongs to an entirely different order of experience.

This witnessing state, Osho (1999, p. 134) suggests, yields not hedonic pleasure or eudaimonic meaning, but 'total peace' and 'eternal silence.' It is not a state within the psychological self but a recognition of the witnessing awareness prior to and beyond the psychological self. This framework does not dismiss the value of hedonic or eudaimonic pursuits but reframes them as relative goods within a larger context of absolute well-being—the peace that comes from knowing oneself as the witness rather than the witnessed.

2.6 Implications for the Present Study

This literature review has examined the hedonic and eudaimonic paradigms within positive psychology, identifying their strengths, limitations, and shared assumption that well-being is fundamentally psychological. Both paradigms, despite their differences, operate within the domain of thoughts, emotions, and personality traits. Recent efforts to integrate these frameworks or identify 'third category' constructs have expanded the conceptual landscape, yet these remain within the psychological horizon.

The present study proposes that Osho's philosophy of witnessing offers a genuinely alternative paradigm: *ontological well-being*, rooted in the conscious space in which all psychological experiences arise and pass. By introducing this framework, this paper invites positive psychology to expand its ontological horizons, from the management of psychological states to the recognition of consciousness itself as the ground of authentic flourishing. The following section will articulate Osho's philosophy of witnessing in detail, drawing on his discourses and the Upanishadic tradition from which they emerge.

3. Conceptual Foundations and the Complementary Role of Osho's Witnessing

3.1 The Emergence of Ontological Well-Being

The concept of ontological well-being (OWB) emerged as a theoretical refinement within positive psychology, addressing perceived limitations in the dominant framework of subjective well-being (SWB). While SWB has been operationalised as the unity of affective and cognitive dimensions, emotional well-being and life satisfaction, respectively, scholars have noted the absence of a coherent theoretical framework explaining this unity (Şimşek, 2009, p. 506). The construct of OWB was proposed to address this gap, offering a framework in which "the cognitive and affective components of the current conceptualisation of SWB are reframed and interpreted in a whole-time perspective" (Şimşek, 2009, p. 507).

Central to the OWB framework is the concept of **goal**, also understood as "life as a project" when the concern is the evaluation of life as a whole (Şimşek, 2009, p. 506). This perspective requires a whole-time dimension that encompasses past, present, and future. As Şimşek (2009, p. 507) explains, "ontological well-being (OWB) construct is structured in a theoretical framework by which the cognitive and affective components of the current conceptualisation of SWB are reframed and interpreted in a whole-time perspective".

3.2 Defining Ontological Well-Being

Ontological well-being has been defined as "one's evaluation of life in both past and future time perspectives in addition to the present" (Şimşek, 2009, p. 507). Unlike subjective well-being, which focuses on current emotional states and present-oriented life satisfaction, OWB considers the individual's entire life trajectory as a coherent project (Kaba, 2020, p. 145). This approach draws on the philosophical resources of both hedonic and eudaimonic traditions, integrating them through the lens of temporal wholeness.

The construct has been described as "the closest structure to one's life project meaning of life or the purpose of life, which is one of the most fundamental quests of an individual" (Kaba, 2020, p. 146). It involves a narrative assessment of one's own life, wherein individuals evaluate their completed past, ongoing present, and probable future as a unified whole (McAdams, 2001, as cited in Kaba, 2020). As Yalom (1999, as cited in Kaba, 2020, p. 147) articulates, the ontological mode involves "being continually aware of being" and recognising "one's responsibility for one's own being", a stance that enables genuine self-creation and transformation.

3.3 The Philosophical Dimensions of Ontological Well-Being

Beyond the psychological operationalisation, ontological well-being carries profound philosophical dimensions. Duminskaya (2020) analyses the well-being phenomenon from the standpoint of an ontological approach, demonstrating that "well-being as an ontological concept is multidimensional, its understanding is not reducible to satisfaction with the possession of external benefits based on incoming values" (Duminskaya, 2020, Abstract). Ontological well-being, in this view, functions as "a universal resource, the desire for possession of which will affect certain coordinates in order to acquire the ontological stability of a person acting in different modes of existence" (Duminskaya, 2020, Abstract).

Duminskaya (2020) further argues that ontological well-being is intrinsically connected to "the definition of the meaning of life, the experience of being happiness, with a measure of success in implementation of an individual existential project". It "opens up to a person as insight, a sudden experience of events of personal fulfilment, authenticity and uniqueness of one's own being, events of gaining not only material, but also spiritual happiness and good" (Duminskaya, 2020, Abstract). This characterisation reveals OWB as fundamentally existential and spiritual in nature, concerned not merely with psychological states but with the very structure of human existence.

3.4 Osho's Witnessing: A Complementary Framework

Osho's philosophy of witnessing offers a profound complement to the ontological well-being framework. While OWB focuses on the evaluation of life as a project across temporal dimensions, Osho's witnessing points to the *awareness* that undertakes this evaluation, the conscious space in which all life projects, evaluations, and temporal narratives arise and pass.

For Osho, witnessing is not merely a psychological technique but a mode of being that transcends the psychological domain altogether. He describes it as "finding your inside mirror" (Osho, 2020, para. 3). In the practice of witnessing, one learns to observe all phenomena, thoughts, emotions, moods, bodily sensations without identification: "There is anger, you can simply be a witness. There is no need to say, 'I am angry.' You are never angry, there is no way for you to be angry, you are always a witness. The anger comes and goes; you are just a mirror" (Osho, 2020, para. 3).

This witnessing awareness constitutes the foundational ground of what might be termed the ontological self. Osho describes the progression through layers of experience: "First you see the trees, and the rose and the stars, and you think the mind is witnessing. Then close your eyes. Now, see the impressions in the mind... Now, who is the perceiver? The perceiver has gone a little deeper" (Osho, 2020b, para. 3). This movement inward continues through successive bodies, physical, vital, mental, until one arrives at the ultimate point: "Then you don't see yourself as 'I am blissful'; you see yourself as a witness of bliss" (Osho, 2020b, para. 6).

3.5 How Witnessing Complements Ontological Well-Being

Osho's witnessing complements ontological well-being in several significant ways:

3.5.1 Witnessing Provides the Ontological Foundation for Life Evaluation

OWB conceives of the individual's life as a project to be evaluated across temporal dimensions. Osho's teaching illuminates the *subject* of this evaluation, the witnessing awareness that undertakes the project of living and reflecting. As Osho (2020c, para. 2) states, when one becomes a witness, "I will always stand at the third corner of the triangle... In all circumstances, I should always be the third person." This third-person stance is precisely the vantage point from which life-as-project can be authentically evaluated—not from the entanglement of identification but from the clarity of detached observation.

3.5.2 Witnessing Liberates Well-Being from Content

Ontological well-being, despite its expanded temporal perspective, remains concerned with the *content* of life evaluation, goals, narratives, meanings, purposes. Osho's witnessing points to a well-being that transcends content altogether. When the witnessing awareness turns upon itself and "there is nothing to watch—then the revolution. Then the witnessing energy turns upon itself because there is nothing to prevent it; there is no object left" (Osho, 2020, para. 5). This is the point of *kaivalya* or absolute liberation, which Osho describes as "when only the witnesser remains" (Osho, 2020b, para. 9).

This dimension of well-being is ontological in the deepest sense: it concerns not the evaluation of life *content* but the recognition of the *being* that is the witness. As Osho (2020b, para. 9) explains, the ultimate stage of witnessing involves the realisation that "you are the ultimate core of existence" (Osho, 2020b, para. 1). This is not a psychological state but an ontological recognition, a knowing of oneself as consciousness itself.

3.5.3 Witnessing Resolves the Question of 'Who Evaluates?'

The OWB framework, in its focus on life-as-project, implicitly raises the question of who or what undertakes this project. Osho's teaching provides a direct answer: the witnessing awareness that can observe even the project of one's own life. This insight addresses the philosophical depth that OWB's psychological operationalisation may overlook—the existential ground from which all life projects emerge.

3.5.4 Witnessing Offers a Pathway to Ontological Well-Being

While OWB is primarily a construct for *measuring* well-being, Osho's witnessing offers a *pathway* to ontological well-being. Through the systematic practice of witnessing, starting with bodily actions, progressing through thoughts and emotions, and ultimately witnessing the witness itself, individuals can directly experience the ontological dimension of their being. Osho (2020, para. 5) describes the result: "Then there is no misery, no frustration, no meaninglessness; then life is no longer an accident. It becomes part of this cosmic whole, an essential part. And a tremendous bliss arises" (Osho, 2020, para. 6).

Towards an Integrative Model

Dimension	Ontological Well-Being	Osho's Witnessing
Focus	Life as project; evaluation across time	Pure awareness; consciousness itself
Object	Life content (goals, meaning, purpose)	The witnessing subject
Outcome	Authentic life evaluation; existential fulfilment	Liberation; non-identification; bliss

Method	Narrative reflection; temporal integration	Meditation; witnessing practice
Philosophical Depth	Existential (Yalom, Duminskaya)	Trans-psychological (Upanishadic, Advaita)

The integration of Osho's witnessing with the OWB framework suggests a more comprehensive model of human flourishing. This model would include:

In this integrative model, OWB provides the framework for understanding life as a meaningful project, while Osho's witnessing illuminates the awareness that undertakes and transcends this project. Together, they offer a holistic vision of well-being that encompasses both the content of life and the consciousness that experiences it.

4. The Practice of Witnessing

Osho's approach to witnessing is notably accessible, emphasising a "knack" rather than a formal technique. This characterisation is significant because it removes the burden of perfectionism and effort that often accompanies meditation practices.

Step One: Starting with Physical Actions

The most accessible entry point for laypeople involves witnessing bodily actions. Osho advises practising awareness during everyday activities: "walking on the road, I can watch myself walking. Eating, I can watch" (Osho, 2002, p. 52). This practice does not require sitting in a formal meditation posture; it can be integrated into daily life.

The key distinction here is between ordinary action and witnessed action. Osho explains that one can write in two ways: the ordinary way, or "you can write it and you can also inside witness that you are writing it" (Osho, 2002, p. 48). The witnessing stance involves a subtle detachment, remaining "a little distant, away, watching yourself writing" (Osho, 2002, p. 48).

Step Two: Progressing to the Mind

Once a measure of facility is developed with witnessing bodily actions, practitioners can extend their witnessing to thoughts and mental activity. Osho describes a systematic progression: "On the first step, you are witnessing only the activities of the body. On the second step, you are witnessing the activities of the mind. On the third step, you are witnessing the activities of the heart. And on the fourth, you are simply witnessing your witnessing itself" (Osho, 1987, para. 4).

Osho draws on a helpful metaphor to explain the practice: "You can watch that you are feeling hurt, your ego is feeling hurt, that you are angry. And you can still remain aloof, detached, just a watcher on the hills. Whatever goes on in the valley you can see" (Osho, 2002, p. 55). This imagery of the "watcher on the hills" conveys the essential non-identification that defines witnessing, observing psychological events without becoming entangled in them.

Step Three: Cultivating Frequency of Practice

Osho emphasises that regular, brief practice is more valuable than occasional, extended sessions. Furthermore, he suggests that moments of "failure" should not generate guilt, as guilt itself impedes practice: "If one day you meditated and the next day you did not, if you turn it into a suffering, it will become a suffering. Otherwise there is no need to be sad about it. Feel gratitude for whatever you could manage" (Osho, 1987, para. 9). This non-judgmental approach is essential for sustaining practice.

Step Four: The Role of Eyes Open or Closed

Osho addresses practical considerations about whether the eyes should be open or closed during witnessing. He suggests that while closed eyes may be easier initially because "then you will need to be a witness only at the windows of your ears," it is ultimately better to keep both eyes open (Osho, 1987, para. 6). With eyes open, "you will have to be a witness at two places—at the windows of your ears and also at the windows of your eyes" (Osho, 1987, para. 6). He advises: "when you have mastered witnessing at the ears, then you can also keep your eyes open. But if you feel it is difficult to keep your eyes closed, keep them open from the beginning" (Osho, 1987, para. 7).

Step Five: The Four-Stage Model of Witnessing

Osho's four-stage model of witnessing provides a clear developmental framework that practitioners can use to assess their progress:

Stage	Object of Witnessing	Description
Stage 1	Bodily activities	Witnessing actions, sensations, and movements
Stage 2	Mental activities	Witnessing thoughts, images, and mental patterns
Stage 3	Emotional activities	Witnessing feelings, moods, and emotional states
Stage 4	Witnessing itself	Witnessing the witness—a quantum leap into pure awareness

Hence, these stages can be used as a method to experience witnessing. It could help if one could hire an expert in this area to get closer to experiencing this phenomenon.

5. Summary and Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Arguments

This paper has undertaken a critical examination of positive psychology's dominant frameworks namely hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, and proposed that both operate within what has been termed the 'psychological horizon': the domain of thoughts, emotions, narratives, and personality traits. While these frameworks have generated valuable insights into human flourishing, they share a foundational assumption that well-being is fundamentally psychological in nature. This assumption, the paper has argued, may be incomplete.

The paper began by tracing the philosophical and empirical foundations of hedonic well-being, operationalised through subjective well-being (SWB) and its components of life satisfaction, positive affect, and the absence of negative affect (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999; Kahneman, Diener and Schwarz, 1999). It then examined the eudaimonic tradition, particularly Ryff's (2014) model of psychological well-being (PWB), which emphasises meaning, purpose, self-actualisation, and the realisation of human potential (Ryan and Deci, 2001). The literature review revealed that despite their differences, both paradigms remain confined to the psychological domain, and recent efforts to integrate or expand these frameworks have not fundamentally challenged this assumption (Araújo, Ribeiro and Paúl, 2017; *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2026).

The paper then introduced the concept of ontological well-being (OWB) as a theoretical refinement that addresses some limitations of SWB by incorporating a whole-time perspective on life evaluation (Şimşek, 2009; Kaba, 2020). However, it was argued that even OWB remains concerned with the *content* of life evaluation such as goals, narratives, meaning, and purpose, rather than the conscious *space* in which such evaluations occur. This limitation, it was suggested, can be addressed by turning to Osho's philosophy of witnessing.

Osho's witnessing was presented as a radical alternative to conventional well-being frameworks. Drawing on the Upanishadic tradition of *sakshi*—the pure witness or seer, Osho describes witnessing as 'a transcendence; it is not psychological' (Osho, 2002, p. 45). Unlike joy, sadness, anger, or any other emotional state, witnessing belongs to an entirely different order of experience. It is the mirror that reflects all psychological content without becoming stained by it, the watcher on the hills who observes the valley of human emotion without descending into it.

The paper demonstrated how witnessing complements ontological well-being in four significant ways. First, witnessing provides the ontological foundation for life evaluation—the witnessing awareness that undertakes the project of living and reflecting. Second, witnessing liberates well-being from content, pointing to a well-being that transcends goals, narratives, and purposes altogether. Third, witnessing resolves the implicit question of 'who evaluates?' by identifying the witnessing awareness as the subject of all life projects. Fourth, witnessing offers a practical pathway to ontological well-being through systematic practice (Osho, 1987; Osho, 2020).

The practical dimensions of witnessing were also explored, outlining a systematic progression from witnessing bodily actions to witnessing mental activities, emotional activities, and ultimately witnessing the witness itself. This four-stage model (Osho, 1987) provides a clear developmental framework that is accessible to laypeople and can be integrated into daily life. The paper further discussed how psychologists might incorporate ontological well-being into their curricula through contemplative pedagogy, reframed intervention design, training in non-judgmental attention, and pedagogical attention to discomfort (McCaw et al., 2025; Teaching in Higher Education, 2024).

5.2 Conclusions

This paper concludes with several key propositions that carry implications for positive psychology, contemplative practice, and the broader understanding of human flourishing.

First, the paper concludes that positive psychology's dominant frameworks, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are incomplete without acknowledging the ontological dimension of human experience. While they capture important aspects of flourishing, they remain confined to the psychological domain and do not address the possibility of a well-being that transcends psychological states altogether. This limitation is not merely theoretical but has practical implications for how well-being is measured, cultivated, and understood.

Second, the paper concludes that Osho's concept of witnessing offers a genuine third paradigm of well-being: *ontological well-being* rooted in the conscious space in which all experiences arise and pass. This is not a state *within* the psychological self but a recognition of the witnessing awareness *prior to* and *beyond* the psychological self. Unlike hedonic well-being (rooted in pleasant feeling states) or eudaimonic well-being (rooted in meaning and purpose), ontological well-being is rooted in the recognition of oneself as the witness rather than the witnessed.

Third, the paper concludes that witnessing produces psychological benefits like resilience, emotional regulation, and reduced rumination, not as direct goals, but as inevitable byproducts of a deeper state of silence and equanimity. This has significant implications for intervention design: rather than seeking to cultivate psychological skills, interventions might invite participants to recognise the witnessing awareness that is already present. This shift from *cultivation* to *recognition* represents a fundamental reorientation of how well-being might be approached.

Fourth, the paper concludes that the integration of Osho's witnessing with the OWB framework offers a more comprehensive model of human flourishing, one that encompasses both the content of life (goals, meanings, purposes) and the consciousness that experiences it. In this integrative model, OWB provides the framework for understanding life as a meaningful project, while Osho's witnessing illuminates the awareness that undertakes and transcends this project.

Fifth, the paper concludes that contemplative pedagogy and related approaches offer practical pathways for incorporating witnessing and ontological well-being into psychological education and practice (McCaw et al., 2025). By cultivating the capacity to observe thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without identification or judgment, psychologists and educators can support individuals in recognising the witnessing awareness that is their fundamental nature.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The paper acknowledges several limitations that point toward future research directions. First, the operationalisation and measurement of witnessing and ontological well-being remain underdeveloped. While the Ontological Well-Being Scale (OWBS) has been developed (Şimşek and Kocayörük, 2013), the measurement of witnessing itself poses significant challenges given its non-psychological, transpersonal nature. Future research might explore qualitative and phenomenological approaches to capturing the lived experience of witnessing.

Second, the empirical evidence for Osho-specific witnessing interventions is limited. While mindfulness-based interventions have been extensively studied (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2002), witnessing-based interventions (WBIs) remain largely unexplored. Future research might design and test WBIs against active controls to assess their efficacy for various psychological outcomes.

Third, the paper has not extensively addressed cultural and contextual considerations. Osho's teachings emerged from a specific cultural and historical context, and their applicability across diverse populations requires careful examination. Future research might explore how witnessing is understood and practiced across different cultural contexts.

Fourth, the relationship between witnessing and other contemplative traditions such as Buddhist, Taoist, Sufi etc., merits further exploration. While the paper has focused on Osho's articulation of witnessing, situating this within a broader cross-cultural framework would strengthen the argument that ontological well-being represents a universal human potential.

This paper has argued that positive psychology, for all its considerable achievements, may be incomplete without acknowledging the ontological dimension of human experience. Osho's philosophy of witnessing offers a radical yet practical pathway to this dimension—a pathway that does not require rejecting the insights of positive psychology but rather situating them within a larger context of ontological well-being. As Osho (2020, para. 6) describes, when one recognises oneself as the witness, 'there is no misery, no frustration, no meaninglessness; then life is no longer an accident. It becomes part of this cosmic whole—an essential part. And a tremendous bliss arises.'

This paper invites positive psychology to expand its ontological horizons, from the management of psychological states to the recognition of consciousness itself as the ground of genuine well-being. In doing so, it suggests that the deepest flourishing may not be found in the cultivation of positive emotions or meaningful engagement, but in the recognition of the witnessing awareness that is already present, already whole, and already at peace.

References

- Araújo, L., Ribeiro, O. and Paúl, C. (2017) 'Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in old age through positive psychology studies: a scoping review', *Anales de Psicología*, 33(3), pp. 1–11.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Diener, E., Suh, E.M., Lucas, R.E. and Smith, H.L. (1999) 'Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress', *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), pp. 276–302.
- Duminskaya, M.V. (2020) 'The well-being phenomenon in the context of existential and ontological understanding', *CyberLeninka*. Available at: <https://cyberleninka.ru> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Fredrickson, B.L. (2001) 'The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions', *American Psychologist*, 56(3), pp. 218–226.
- Frontiers in Psychology (2026) 'From Happiness to Meaning: A Systematic Review of Quantitative Research on Core Constructs in Positive Psychology Research', *Frontiers in Psychology*. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Henderson, L.W. and Knight, T. (2012) 'Integrating the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives to better understand the relationship between well-being and health', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 13(4), pp. 723–745.

- Kaba, İ. (2020) 'Ontolojik İyi-Oluş (Yaşam Projesi) [Ontological Well-Being (Life Project)]', *Psikiyatride Güncel Yaklaşımlar*, 12(1), pp. 143–154.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990) *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Kahneman, D., Diener, E. and Schwarz, N. (eds.) (1999) *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Keyes, C.L.M., Shmotkin, D. and Ryff, C.D. (2002) 'Optimizing well-being: The empirical encounter of two traditions', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(6), pp. 1007–1022.
- Khoury, N. and Armenta, M. (2023) 'Mindful Well-being: A Review on the Effects of Journaling and Meditation'. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.
- McCaw, C.T., Sun, H., Galante, J., Joyce, C. and Van Dam, N.T. (2025) 'Introducing interdisciplinary contemplative pedagogy: a case study of "The Art and Science of Meditation"', *Teaching in Higher Education*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2025.2599345> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- NIH (2024) 'Positive psychological well-being and cardiovascular health', *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 15, p. 1443978. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11543404/> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Nisargadatta Maharaj, S. (1973) *I Am That: Talks with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*. Durham, NC: Acorn Press.
- Olivelle, P. (1998) *The Early Upanishads: Annotated Text and Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Osho (1987) 'Witnessing - Watercourse - Person?', *The Last Testament, Vol. 3*. OSHO Online Library. Available at: <https://www.osho.com/osho-online-library/osho-talks/witnessing-watercourse-person-ec5d7537-424> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Osho (1987) 'Meditation – Witnessing – Guilt?', OSHO Online Library. Available at: <https://www.osho.com/osho-online-library/osho-talks/meditation-witnessing-guilt-1d564bd9-9f5> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Osho (1999) *The Book of Secrets: 112 Meditations to Discover the Mystery Within*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Osho (2002) *The Secret of Secrets: Talks on the Mystic Essence of the Heart Sutra*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Osho (2020) 'Dynamic Meditation – Watchfulness – Witnessing?', *OSHO Online Library*. Available at: <https://www.osho.com/osho-online-library> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Osho (2020b) 'Meditation – Bliss – Samadhi?', *OSHO Online Library*. Available at: <https://www.osho.com/osho-online-library> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Osho (2020c) 'Witnessing – Deathless – Spiritual Practice?', *OSHO Online Library*. Available at: <https://www.osho.com/osho-online-library> (Accessed: 19 June 2026).
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1953) *The Principal Upanishads*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Ramana Maharshi, S. (1988) *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*. London: Penguin.
- Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000) 'Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being', *American Psychologist*, 55(1), pp. 68–78.
- Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2001) 'On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), pp. 141–166.
- Ryff, C.D. (2014) 'Psychological well-being revisited: Advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia', *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 83(1), pp. 10–28.
- Segal, Z.V., Williams, J.M.G. and Teasdale, J.D. (2002) *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse*. New York: Guilford Press.

Seligman, M.E.P. (2011) *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. New York: Free Press.

Seligman, M.E.P. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000) 'Positive psychology: An introduction', *American Psychologist*, 55(1), pp. 5–14.

Şimşek, Ö.F. (2009) 'Happiness Revisited: Ontological Well-Being as a Theory-Based Construct of Subjective Well-Being', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 10(5), pp. 505–522.

Şimşek, Ö.F. and Kocayörük, E. (2013) 'Affective Reactions to One's Whole Life: Preliminary Development and Validation of the Ontological Well-Being Scale', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 14(1), pp. 309–343.