

The Seekers: Do Spiritual Practices Lead to a Sense of Well-being?

Taylor Winfield

Stanford University

Abstract

This past year, I joined participants of spiritual retreats in India and Spain. I was surprised to discover that in each location individuals who had undergone some sort of spiritual process (a process through which one discovers a sense of self or “spirit”) reported similar emotional and behavior changes from the experience – particularly individuals who walked the Camino de Santiago, a Catholic pilgrimage in Northern Spain, and those who completed intensive, silent meditation retreats in India. My paper will explore similarities and differences between the Art of Silence meditation retreat and the Camino de Santiago and participants’ emotional outcomes. I will use both qualitative and quantitative data to document how practitioners changed during the processes and identify what community dynamics, interactions, and individual behaviors contributed to their developmental process. I hope to answer my research question of how spiritual processes influence emotion and behavior.

This past year, I joined participants of retreats to explore the effects of spiritual practices on well-being. I was skeptical of testimonials that these experiences lead to improved well-being and was eager to investigate this first hand.

My research examines seekers in two very different contexts: the Art of Silence, a meditation retreat in India, and the Camino de Santiago, a Catholic pilgrimage route in Spain. I chose these particular experiences because of their distinct locations (India versus Spain), religions (Hinduism versus Catholicism), and types of practices (sitting versus walking meditation). I was curious who was drawn to each one and how the type of practice and community influenced emotional development.

While remaining skeptical of the role of cognitive dissonance and group persuasion in reported effects, I hypothesized that spiritual processes have a “three-pronged” impact on well-being. (1) Spiritual processes give individuals a sense of purpose and belonging to a community. Although practitioners may enter the experience alone, the processes are communal and depend heavily on social influence. (2) Group dynamics during spiritual processes create norms where members are expected to value their spiritual growth and follow spiritual principles. (3) The taught techniques increase the practitioner’s perceived level of well-being and resilience. My work aims to illuminate the interplay between social and psychological processes on spiritual retreats and the impact these have on a searching individual.

Literature Review

Those who decide to meditate in silence for six days or hike across Northern Spain for five weeks are not average individuals.

Most are too busy with the activities of daily life, work, and family to be willing to undergo this experience. Hence, this paper is not about how spiritual practices will affect anyone, because not everyone would be drawn to this experience. My findings, however, are relevant for those who want to increase their spirituality but do not have the resources to undergo a retreat.

I propose that when seekers embark on a spiritual journey, they expect a higher state of well-being. However, is it possible to achieve a higher sense of well-being? Or are changes seekers feel a result of their desire to feel different? Evidence suggests that well-being levels, as measured by a number of scales, can increase – at least in the short term – through intentional actions.

The scale I found most useful is Sonja Lyubomirsky’s Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), which determines subjective well-being levels through four questions with rankings 1-7 (Lyubomirsky 1999). The scale is closely correlated with other happiness measures. Results from SHS and other similar scales suggest that activities like expressing gratitude, compassion, and forgiveness (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), performing service, acts of kindness, and generosity, (Sheldon et al., 2008), employing one’s strengths and pursuing goals (Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon et al., 2010), and spiritual practices (Koenig et al., 1988; Meisenhelder and Marcum 2004; Hartmann 2006) increase well-being.

Increasing numbers of studies are also touting the benefits of spirituality. While medical researchers were once skeptical that religion might influence mental or physical health, this topic has become well received (Ellison, 1998). One psychologist defines spirituality as a dynamic construct that involves the “internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness” and “deriving meaning, purpose and direction in life” (Astin, 2011). Astin argues that spirituality is a source of inner strength, moral orientation, and connection that brings faith, hope, peace and empowerment. Lyubomirsky uses the research of Myer (2000), Ellison (1998), Pollner (1989) to demonstrate that spiritual people are generally happier, have superior mental health, cope better with stressors, have more satisfying marriages, use drugs and alcohol much less, are physically healthier and live longer than non-spiritual people. Others suggest that spirituality is a significant indicator of well-being because spiritual communities create peer support systems and teach practices and principles that cultivate peace of mind (Keyes, 2002; Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Some researchers have found that spiritual practices, such as meditation, are also related to well-being on numerous scales. Meditation is what positive psychologists refer to as a “flow activity,” which is distinguished by a complete immersion in a present task (Csikszentmihályi, 1991). Foster and Hicks find that through flow activities, individuals can further appreciate and enjoy their lives, as “happiness is all about living in the

Subjective Happiness Scale

Instructions to participants: For each of the following statements and/or questions, please circle the point on the scale that you feel is most appropriate in describing you.

1. In general, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not						a very
a very						happy
happy						person
person						
2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
less						more
happy						happy
3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at						a great
all						deal
4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at						a great
all						deal

Fig. 1. Survey used to rate subjective happiness

present” (Foster 1999). For example, practicing mindfulness meditation (a Buddhist technique) for as little as eight weeks can measurably change parts of the brain associated with improved memory, sense of self, and empathy and decreased stress (Hölzel 2011). Hartmann adds a new dimension of walking meditation as compared to traditional sitting meditation in his analysis of bilateral therapy. Hartmann discusses how the alternating stimulation of the right and left lobes of the brain “while thinking of a problem or issue” (such as in REM sleep) is potentially healing for emotional trauma (Hartmann, 2006).

Foster, Hicks, Csikszentmihályi, Lyubomirsky, and numerous other psychologists agree that more information on the influence of spiritual relationships and activities on well-being is needed. My work will contribute to this literature through exploring whether spiritual communities and practices influence individual well-being on retreats. It will focus on how the collective experience shapes individual emotions in order to bridge the gap between social theory and positive psychology. The paper will also examine whether the effects of the process last after the end of the experience.

Methodology

During my research I employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the stories of the seekers. I utilized the ethnographic qualitative research methods of participant observations and interviews. Sections (1) and (2) of this Chapter explain the exact methods on each trip.

(1) Art of Living: My field site was the Art of Silence at the international Art of Living headquarters in Bangalore, India. The Art of Living (AOL) is an international non-governmental organization (NGO), focused on building “a global society that is free of stress, violence, and misery and full of service, wisdom, and celebration” (AOL 2011). Among its many projects, AOL utilizes breathing techniques, meditation and yoga in their silent

retreats to provide practitioners with, “tools to eliminate stress, heighten awareness, and increase mental focus” (AOL 2011). The Art of Silence (AOS) lasts five days, during which eight hours a day are dedicated to sitting meditation. The Art of Living states that the retreat provides the optimal conditions, “for going deep within, quieting our mental chatter, and experiencing deep rest and inner peace” (AOL 2011). Although the guru, or teacher, Sri Sri Ravi Shanker, has roots in the Hindu tradition, the practices are considered secular.

During AOS, I followed specific ethnographic research techniques to analyze how the teacher taught novices and shaped individual behavior and development. I conducted seventeen interviews chosen by convenience sampling and later sent out a quantitative survey. The survey included the SHS along with follow up questions for ranking the importance of various spiritual and religious activities in their daily life. AOL organization also sent the survey to centers all over the United States and Latin America. I collected 116 interviews in total, 76 of which were by AOS participants. Although the data was collected by convenience sample, I believe that the sample is reasonably representative of the different populations that take the course because it represents individuals from a large range of nationality and ages.

When analyzing practitioners from AOS, I was skeptical of the efficacy of the practices because individuals were taught exactly how each practice should make them feel. It was an expectation to feel better after the course, and dissent was not accepted at the ashram. Although the retreat contains many components that the literature suggests is conducive to well-being, these effects may be exaggerated because people believe they are supposed to feel a certain way. While the surveys were sent out anonymously, people may have felt a pressure to say positive things about the experience since the organization helped circulate the surveys. Moreover, there may have been selection bias if people with a positive experience were more likely to fill out the survey.

(2) Camino de Santiago: The Camino de Santiago is a Catholic pilgrimage that leads to the shrine of St. James in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Pilgrims walk from 15 to 40 kilometers per day, through forests, mountains, and valleys. I formally interviewed nineteen people along the Camino through convenience sampling, and spoke in detail with many more. Along the way, I collected the email addresses of every individual I encountered, to later send the quantitative survey. I also posted the survey on Camino de Santiago’s forum online, where experienced pilgrims answer questions for incoming pilgrims. I had 63 respondents. The pilgrims who filled out the survey from the Camino de Santiago forum most likely represent the most involved pilgrims, who have walked the route several times. I believe that the sample is reasonably representative because it includes individuals from a number of nationalities and religious backgrounds. Since the Camino does not have the institutional persuasive power of the Art of Living, I was less concerned about the bias in the survey results. However, there is most likely a selection bias. Those who filled out the survey were more likely to have had a positive experience. Moreover, cognitive dissonance says that if the seekers are taking the walk for spiritual fulfillment then they will be more likely to report this outcome.

Results

The Art of Silence

The Art of Silence is an intensive, five-day meditation retreat, during which individuals learn techniques and information meant to improve their state of mind. During the course there is substantial pressure to participate in all the meditations and have show an emotional response. The expectation of a result is especially relevant because many individuals undergo the experience to cure personal and psychological ailments. Among my participants, mental health, spiritual search, and stress were the most common reasons to undergo the AOS. Tejashree took her first silence course at age eighteen after she had fallen into a deep depression. Mark took the course after he had a breakdown because of work stress. Haava took and continues to take the courses because being close to the guru allowed her to escape depression and suicidal thoughts. As such, the participants had the expectation that their distress would decrease after the course. Participants also devoted immense amounts of time and money to the experience. Individuals had traveled from around the world to take a course with their guru, Sri Sri Ravi Shanker. Their decision to undergo the experience with their guru— instead of taking a less expensive course at their local center – suggests that they believe in the power of the guru and his teachings. Finally, there seems to be an addictive component to the course. For eight participants it was their first course, eleven had taken five-ten courses, and ten had taken more than fifteen. Haava has completed 48 courses. Due to these strong external factors, I was skeptical that the benefits participants reported from the experience were a result of the practices rather than the strong desire to feel a change. However, the AOS course utilizes several techniques: (1) a supportive community; (2) yoga and mediation practices; (3) service work; (4) song and dance; (5) a guru; and (6) peer reinforcement that have found to be conducive to well-being. This section will outline these components of the course and how participants reflected on their importance.

1. Community: Before going into silence, participants partook in a number of activities to create solidarity between group members. As an introduction, individuals were required to shake hands or hug and say, “sangachadwam” to each other, which means “let’s journey together” in Hindi. The first afternoon was spent sharing “life stories” in order to prepare the participants before going into silence. These rituals helped create trust and a sense of belonging that lasted through the retreat. Haava noted that, “We entered the class as strangers, but emerged as long time friends. This never happened before. Usually when you want to be that close, you need much more than five days.” That evening, participants took a vow of silence. For the rest of the course, the group meditated together in the same room.

2. Yoga and Mediation: The days began at 6 AM with morning yoga and Kriya. The Kriya is the technique used on all Art of Living courses. There are similarities between the Kriya and other breathing exercises. Both create an ecstatic state through irregular breathing patterns. The breathing cycles during the Kriya parallel breaths that occur in different emotional states to create bodily harmony. Participants reported powerful effects from the Kriya: “It was like I felt heaven...It was so exciting I did not want to get out of it,” said Tejashree. Meditation was like “merging yourself with the divinity,” she continued. For others the experience was less pleasant. Julianna’s first experience with the Kriya was not

positive: “after Kriya...my whole head, my eyes blocked, and my whole body was shivering. But I am very persistent and consistent person, so I continued to do the daily and group practice.” There are two versions of the Kriya: the long version which lasts about an hour which is done weekly, and the short version that lasts about twenty-five minutes that is done daily. While the long Kriya must be done together with the group, it is also recommended that participants do the short Kriya in a group, because, “the effects become stronger in groups,” says Ravi Shanker. Practicing in a group also insures that individuals will continue to do their practice and will not fall out of the routine.

3. Service: When practitioners were not engaged in meditation, they did seva (selfless service). Participants who stay at the ashram are given kitchen or manual labor seva tasks. Women help cut vegetables and wash dishes, while men spend most of their time lifting hot and heavy pans. It is a widely held belief that seva will deepen meditation: “If you are not having good experiences in meditation, then do more seva...when you bring some relief or freedom to someone through seva, good vibrations and blessings come to you” (Ravi Shanker). Participating in seva is a cultural expectation at the ashram. During seva, individuals are kind and compassionate toward others. It also helps practitioners savor the present moment, as they can not distract themselves with words during the activity.

4. Devotional Song and Dance: After a full day of meditation and seva, the participants gathered for satsung (a time for devotional song and dance). Participants were encouraged to sing loudly in order to let go of any energy that might have built up after staying silent for so long. Sri Sri Ravi Shanker ended the evening answering questions from the participants and teaching a lesson. Ravi Shanker employed the technique of “democratization of suffering” that can be found in many guru talks (Kakar, 1972). Gurus tell their disciples that their suffering does not connote any individual failure or deficiency – that suffering is part of the “nature of things,” the divine plan (Kakar 1972). For a devotee in pain, the realization that s/he is not alone in her/his suffering and that everyone else is also an actual or potential sufferer rids her/him of self-blame and feelings of hopelessness. During these talks the guru also stresses the benefits of the practices. During one satsung, I asked Ravi Shanker, “What if a practitioner is doing all the practices but is still unhappy?” His answer was simple, “Then the person is being selfish, thinking too much about himself or herself. He or she needs to do more seva.” Unhappiness was not an option at the ashram.

5. The Guru: One of the most important parts of taking the Art of Silence course at the ashram was the presence of the guru. At the Art of Living ashram, Ravi Shanker’s face was plastered everywhere. Walls were covered with pictures of him laughing and dancing. His face graced computer screens, calendars, and even newspapers.

Participants had a relationship with the guru – one that often paralleled their relationship with a higher power. “He is my father. He is my mother. He is my G-d. He is everything to me right now. I feel happy, I am happy, and I will be happy only because of him and his blessings,” said Tejashree. She believed that Ravi Shanker has a role in her fate and can control outcomes in her future: “with his blessings I finished my graduation with 92% marks... Whatever I ask him for, he gives me...once you ask with him full of faith, he never lets you down.” Mary also believed that Ravi Shanker is divine and has control over miraculous events: “Guruji

fixed my son's heart so he did not have to get surgery, pulled my other son out of a car so he did not get into an accident, and kept my car on the road in Afghanistan after it was almost pushed off. We all should have been killed but nothing happened... who knows what else he has taken care of." Mary's belief in Ravi Shanker's power and omnipresence gave her a sense of security and the ability to surrender her problems to him.

Not all participants feel comfortable with the idea of Ravi Shanker as divine. Mark did not like this guru-mania, "I don't think he is G-d. He just happens to be a teacher, a very special guy." Mark viewed Ravi Shanker as a teacher, and utilized the guru's philosophies to decrease his anxiety.

6. Peer Reinforcement: After five days of silence, the course comes to a close. The participants sat down in a circle and shared their first words. Participants were eager to describe the benefits they received from the course and practicing with the Art of Living in general. Many commented on how "beautiful" and "peaceful" the course was and how "grateful" they were for taking it. After completing the course, practitioners describe a number of outcomes including increased awareness, calm, compassion (in particular self-compassion), decrease in stress, and an increase in joy. Not a single negative comment was expressed. It is difficult to determine whether no one had a negative experience, or because saying a negative comment could have resulted in a loss of status or membership to the group.

The Camino de Santiago

There are so many ways to walk the Camino de Santiago that many disagree on where it actually begins. Some say it starts when the pilgrim first has the idea to walk the ancient path, and others believe it is when one starts to walk towards Santiago de Compostela. Nevertheless, the importance of the experience for the pilgrim is the journey and how one reaches the shrine. Unlike other Catholic shrines, the ritual act on the Camino de Santiago does not occur within the bounded sacred space of the shrine of St. James. The healing shrine consists of the physical and often internal (spiritual, personal, religious) journey that the pilgrim undergoes to reach Santiago de Compostela. Modern pilgrims often choose to travel the routes in the same way as medieval pilgrims – walking the entire path on foot. They carry all that they need on their back in a mochilla (backpack). For Catholics, the suffering that pilgrims undergo along the difficult path is penance for one's sins, a purification of the body. For others, it is a way to get in touch with their spirituality or take a vacation in nature (Frey 1998).

Similar to the Art of Silence course, pilgrims invested significant time and energy into the journey – to walk the whole pilgrimage can take between four to six weeks. There is pressure for the trip to be successful because of the large investment. These factors may influence how the pilgrims feel about the journey after arrival. However, there are several common themes that manifest along the pilgrimage that suggest elevated levels of well-being: (1) the performance of democracy; (2) minimal material items; (3) time for reflection; (5) community; and (6) sharing.

1. Equality: When one begins along the road, one enters into a liminal space (Turner 1971). People say that traditional roles lose meaning, and distinctions are eliminated. The pilgrim is in a state of transition, without a distinct identity. Distinctions between age, gender, and social status disappear, as pilgrims walk together: "We are ageless," said Conrad, "[Although] the

American man is seventy-seven-years-old, we really connected. That wouldn't really happen in normal life...You want to have a relationship with people from other age groups but it is pretty rare... you are supposed to be with people of your own kind, of your own age." Pilgrims could be recognized by their large backpack with a scallops shell and walking stick. Some say one can detect an "authentic" pilgrim by his smell - rich from weeks without proper laundry and sufficient bathing. The equality among pilgrims allowed individuals to develop friendships that may not exist in the outside world.

2. Minimal Materials: Pilgrims carried only the essentials they needed to survive. For many this was liberating because they did not have to worry about superficial aspects of life (Martha). For others it was freeing because they realize how little they needed to survive: "I just learned to stay in the present and that we make all these things big in our lives that really aren't important and that as you long as you have something to eat, and something to drink, and somewhere to sleep - which can be outside in a haystack, you're fine" (Erika). Those who brought too much quickly got rid of the excess weight - both literally and figuratively. They threw it into the garbage or sent it all the way to Santiago de Compostela.

3. Time for Reflection: On the road, pilgrims restructured their lives. This gave them space and time to think about things they usually ignore (Conrad). Pilgrims were able to find peace in solitude and appreciate the moment (Raul). Despite the pain of walking for so many miles, many pilgrims encountered pleasant emotions, and a sense of a deeper meaning. Finding the fatigue meaningful lead them to a place of personal, physical, and spiritual renewal. They felt purpose, because their only job was to arrive at the next albergue (shelter) (Jungyoung). They felt optimistic that they would arrive. There were many moments of joy as pilgrims connect with nature, and were free from modern technology (Sebastian). Many mentioned the ability to find time to think thoughts that they have been avoiding for some time, and dip into their "calling," or purpose. For example, Alejandro decided that he wanted to open up his own hotel. Suffering was also often mentioned as powerful emotion on the Camino – "it is part of redemption, penance" (David). Suffering helped pilgrims feel compassion for others. Jungyoung mentioned that it helped her connect more with Jesus and understand the pain that he must have felt on the cross. Suffering allowed pilgrims to stay in the moment, as they felt the immense pain in their feet with each step.

4. Community: Pilgrims spent the day on the road, only to reconnect with others during the night at the albergue. Several pilgrims I spoke with mentioned that the desire to meet new people was one of the reasons they decided to walk the Camino. While some pilgrims walk in pairs, it is preferable to walk alone. Andre shared, "To do the Camino, it is the best on your own. If you walk with a group, you are talking with the group. Your world is only your group, if you go alone, your world is the people you meet...People talk quicker to you because you are alone, and you talk quicker back. You are different: nice, more adventurous, more interesting." Similarly, Sebastian said, "There are more relationships between those who go alone. Those who go in pairs... continue leading the life of the city. When you go alone, you can become someone else, you can change yourself when you get to an albergue... When you go with a friend, you feel a bit shy to say some things." Once relationships began between individuals, they deepened immediately: "personal relationship develop without

Table 1: Art of Living Life Practice	Mean Frequency of Life Practice	Correlation with Well-being, p-value	Table 2: Camino Life Practice	Mean Frequency of Life Practice	Correlation with Well-being, p-value
Loving others	5.842	0.29, 0.011**	Expressing Gratitude	5.651	0.412, 0.001**
Meditation	5.816	0.287, 0.012**	Self-Reflection	5.651	-0.048, 0.71
Self-reflection	5.789	0.287, 0.012**	Feeling compassion for others	5.556	0.213, 0.097
Expressing Gratitude	5.737	0.358, 0.002**	Loving others	5.524	0.392, 0.002**
Feeling compassion for others	5.671	0.291, 0.011**	Connecting with nature	5.508	0.081, 0.531
Practicing acts of kindness	5.605	0.28, 0.014**	Practicing optimism	5.460	0.499, 0.000***
Forgiving others	5.592	0.297, 0.009**	Savoring the present moment	5.41	0.349, 0.005**
Having a life guide	5.592	0.329, 0.004**	Practicing acts of kindness	5.30	0.249, 0.050*
Doing compassionate things for others	5.566	0.287, 0.012**	Giving to others	5.29	0.125, 0.331
Belief in higher power	5.553	0.058, 0.166	Spending time with friends and family	5.29	0.398, 0.001**
Giving to others	5.553	0.266, 0.020**	Doing compassionate things for others	5.267	0.235, 0.067
Practicing optimism	5.434	0.371, 0.001**	Forgiving others	5.238	0.354, 0.005**
Spending time with friends and family	5.395	0.293, 0.010**	Committing to goals	5.190	0.126, 0.331
Savoring the present moment	5.368	0.394, 0.000***	Finding purpose daily	5.143	0.226, 0.078
Connecting with nature	5.342	0.25, 0.03**	Meditation	4.222	0.103, 0.428
Committing to goals	5.211	0.246, 0.032**	Belief in higher power	4.175	0.049, 0.705
Finding purpose daily	5.132	0.241, 0.036**	Communicating with a higher power	3.746	0.098, 0.447
Communicating with a higher power	4.882	0.2155, 0.062	Having a life guide	2.714	-0.035, 0.790
Attending services regularly	3.921	0.2972, 0.009*	Reading religious texts	2.476	0.115, 0.372
Reading religious texts	3.368	0.1869, 0.106	Attending services regularly	2.429	0.048, 0.709

Note: N= 76; * P< .05; ** P< .01;*** P<.001, two tailed tests

Table 1. Frequency of life practices among student cohort

falsity within the first or second day” (David). Pilgrims were not afraid to bear their souls along the road, especially because they might never see this person again: “They talk about important things. They talk about their reasons for making the journey, and speak of themselves. They arrive at the importance of life, and exchange knowledge...these people are not going to meet again, and enjoy the moment to talk about important things” (Ama). Pilgrims did not become attached to the others they meet along the way, because everyone has his/her own rhythm.

6. Sharing: Although pilgrims did not stay together for long, they learned how to “give and take” (Alejandro). Sharing is an essential part of the journey. Many were struck by receiving unexpected gifts and were left wanting to give to others. Conrad explained the phenomenon in his statement, “it’s just kind of like ‘what the hell have some of mine, have some of this. A really open, sharing atmosphere...When someone starts sharing it is really like a domino effect, more sharing follows. Someone just has to start. It is easier to start on the Camino, somehow.” King hit the heart of what is occurring on the Camino when he stated, “you depend on the kindness and acceptance of others. You can’t live in a bubble on the Camino...you kind of reconnect with humanity and the spirit.” The Camino gave individuals the time to realize their potential and the time to realize the good in others.

7. Arrival: After weeks of walking along the Camino, pilgrims develop a way of life. The arrival to Santiago comes as a shock. Frey finds that participants refer to it as la gran depression del Camino (the great depression of the Camino) (Frey 1998). Although the energy of the pilgrims rises as they get closer to the destination, after the initial excitement of arriving to the cathedral, emotions plummet. Pilgrims have little time to adjust and have to immediately figure out their plans for the future and how they will return home. Many pilgrims described a feeling of “emptiness” in a moment that they thought they would feel joyful. Participants reveal a slight fear as well: a fear of the future, and a fear of falling back into old habits. To deal with this stark contrast, many pilgrims continue to walk to Finisterre or to Muxia. They, however, can not continue to walk forever.

Quantitative Analysis

It is interesting to compare how lessons from the Art of Living and the Camino de Santiago are reflected in practitioners’

Table 2. Frequency of life practices among pilgrim cohort

life practice and well-being levels once they return home. Surveys were collected between two and six months after the experiences. A sample of 105 Stanford University students who did not undergo a spiritual retreat serve as the control.

Sonja Lyubomirsky finds that in over 2,732 participants, the average score on the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) runs from about 4.5 to 5.5. College students tend to score lower than working adults and older, retired people (5 versus 5.6). Art of Silence practitioners had an average subjective happiness score of 5.65. This is significantly different from those who did the Camino (5.25, $p=0.046$). When compared with Stanford students’ average score (4.93), AOS participants’ score is significantly different ($p=0.000$) but Camino’s is not ($p=0.09$). In these samples, subjective happiness is not correlated to education levels, gender, income, race, or religious association.

To analyze the data, I first calculated the average frequency of various life practices in order to understand if practitioners were integrating what they learned on the experiences into their daily lives. I was also curious which practices correlated with well-being. Tables 1 and 2 show the frequency of practice within each group and which are correlated with well-being. Table 1 demonstrates the almost all the life practices were correlated with well-being for AOS participants – except for belief in a higher power, reading religious texts, and communicating with a higher power, which were not highlighted in the course. The close relationship between what was taught in the course and what participants are practicing suggests that the AOS was successful in teaching students effective strategies to promote well-being. Table 2 shows that the practices on the pilgrimage are not correlated to well-being for the pilgrims: self-reflection, giving to others, feeling and doing compassion, connecting with nature, committing to goals, and finding purpose are not correlated with well-being. It is interesting how many fewer items are correlated to well-being for the Camino pilgrims than the AOS pilgrims. Since the AOS ranked almost everything higher on the survey, it is possible that this created more correlations.

Next, I examined whether or not frequency of practice was significantly different between groups. Table 3 demonstrates that despite the distinct nature of the experiences, the average frequencies between groups are surprisingly similar. The only

Frequency of Life Practices	1.Camino Average	2.AOS Average	3.Stanford Average	P value 1&2	P value 1&3	P value 2&3
Belief in a higher power*	4.174	5.553	3.354	0.001**	0.043*	0.000***
Communicating with a higher power*	3.746	4.882	2.781	0.007**	0.012*	0.000***
Reading religious texts*	2.476	3.368	2.260	0.008**	0.467	0.000***
Attending services regularly*	2.429	3.921	2.448	0.000***	0.953	0.000***
Feeling compassion for others	5.556	5.671	5.969	0.686	0.038*	0.192
Doing compassionate things for others	5.27	5.566	5.531	0.298	0.207	0.886
Loving others	5.524	5.842	6.063	0.258	0.008*	0.329
Practicing acts of kindness	5.302	5.605	5.78	0.298	0.028	0.448
Giving to others	5.286	5.553	5.49	0.367	0.347	0.795
Savoring the present moment	5.413	5.368	5.263	0.891	0.577	0.698
Spending time with friends & family	5.286	5.395	5.854	0.723	0.01*	0.049*
Practicing optimism	5.460	5.434	5.427	0.932	0.899	0.979
Expressing Gratitude	5.651	5.737	5.729	0.762	0.712	0.975
Forgiving others	5.238	5.592	5.49	0.233	0.27	0.669
Self-reflection	5.651	5.789	5.9791	0.616	0.107	0.419
Meditation	4.222	5.816	3.531	.000***	0.038*	.000*
Committing to goals	5.190	5.211	5.208	0.947	0.944	0.993
Finding purpose daily	5.143	5.132	5.031	0.972	0.682	0.726
Connecting with nature	5.508	5.342	4.323	0.595	0.000***	0.001**
Having a life guide	2.714	5.592	2.844	.000***	0.696	0.000***

Note: Data gathered from 3 separate convenience sample surveys, of Camino (N=63), Art of Silence (N=76), and Stanford Students (N=105). * P< .05; ** P< .01;*** P<.001, two tailed tests

Table 3. Life practices frequencies summary statistics

behaviors correlated to well-being that differ between the Camino and Art of Silence individuals are meditation and having a life guide – disparities that likely stem from the emphasis on meditation and the guru in AOS. Stanford students differ from both Camino and Art of Silence practitioners when it comes to belief in a higher power, communicating with a higher power, spending time with friends and family, meditation, and connecting with nature. Of these differences, only meditation and spending time with friends are correlated with well-being. The similarity suggests that the other behaviors correlated with well-being in Tables 1 and 2 are not a result of the retreat or pilgrimage. They are common practices among many individuals. It is interesting, however, that Camino individuals are more likely to meditate than Stanford students. The difference in meditation frequency could be because Camino individuals rank spirituality as more important in their lives than Stanford students; therefore, they are more likely to try out spiritual techniques, such as meditation.

If frequency of life practices does not drastically vary between activities, what is causing the significant difference in SHS scores? To answer this question, I ran a linear regression, controlling age, gender, importance of religion, importance of spirituality, meditation, and satisfaction with spirituality. Table 4 demonstrates that activity is important up until I added importance of spirituality to the regression analysis. When I controlled for likelihood to use meditation as a coping strategy, importance of spirituality lost its significance. This finding suggests an individual's values are not as important as his/her life practice. This hypothesis is furthered when meditation became insignificant after I added satisfaction with spirituality into the analysis. Meditation is just one tool individuals use to become satisfied with their spirituality. Satisfaction with spirituality also controls for the impact of expressing gratitude, feeling and doing compassion for others, loving others, connecting with nature, savoring the present moment, giving to others, committing to goals, finding purpose daily, and having a life guide. The only three behaviors correlated with well-being that were insignificant when regressing with satisfaction with spirituality were optimism, spending time with friends and family, and self-reflection (which was not correlated for Camino individuals). Additionally, the difference between the well-being level of AOS individuals and Stanford students became insignificant when controlling for satisfaction with spirituality (p=0.055).

These findings suggest that an individual's ability to practice spirituality in a meaningful way to increase subjective well-being. There is no single tool that will work for everyone. Merely

Subjective Happiness	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Activity	.401 (.201) [1.99*]	.445 (.204) [2.18*]	.440 (.206) [2.13*]	.440 (.207) [2.13*]	.214 (.216) [0.99]	-.005 (.228) [-0.02]	.023 (.219) [0.10]
Age		.007 (.007) [1.03]	.007 (.007) [1.03]	.007 (.007) [1.02]	.005 (.007) [0.67]	.008 (.007) [0.71]	-.001 (.007) [-0.13]
Male			-.053 (.211) [-0.25]	-.054 (.212) [-0.25]	-.011 (.207) [-0.05]	.015 (.203) [0.07]	.002 (.195) [0.01]
Importance of Religion				.005 (.046) [0.11]	-.032 (.046) [-0.69]	-.014 (.046) [-0.30]	-.011 (.044) [-0.25]
Importance of Spirituality					.164 (.058) [2.84 ***]	.085 (.064) [1.32]	.012 (.07) [0.18]
Meditation						.161 (.063) [2.57*]	.062 (.067) [0.93]
Satisfaction with Spirituality							.285 (.083) [3.45***]
Constant	5.254 (.149) [35.20***]	4.92 (.348) [14.15***]	4.941 (.358) [13.81***]	4.924 (.389) [12.67***]	4.318 (.434) [9.94***]	3.97 (.446) [8.91***]	3.50 (.449) [7.79***]
Unweighted N	136	136	136	136	136	136	136
Adjusted R-squared	0.021	0.025	0.018	0.010	0.061	0.01	0.17

Note: Data gathered from 3 separate convenience sample surveys, of Camino (N=63), Art of Silence (N=76), and Stanford Students (N=105) Regression Coefficient (Standard Error) [T-statistic] * P< .05; ** P< .01;*** P<.001, two tailed tests

Table 4. Regression model descriptions

going on a spiritual retreat or pilgrimage will not create lasting emotional change unless one learns how to practice spirituality daily. The benefit of going to a course like the Art of Silence is that participants learn specific tools, like meditation, that they can implement upon return. While most individuals went on these activities because spirituality is important to them (especially for AOS people who scored it at 6.447, as compared to Camino individuals at 5.03, and Stanford Students at 4.257 (p=0.000) the data suggests that heightened well-being occurs if one is able to learn how to be more satisfied with their overall spirituality level.

There are several limitations to this statistical analysis. First, Stanford students are not perfect controls for AOS and Camino individuals as they differ in terms of age and spiritual interest. There are also many cultural differences between the Camino and AOS that may attract people who have various spiritual needs. Moreover, it is difficult to control for cognitive dissonance and normative pressure to report positive results. While I do not have before and after data for the groups, when I examine individuals who did the basic Art of Living course (the prerequisite for AOS), I found more evidence that the practices are what make the difference for well-being. I found that importance of spirituality is not statistically different between the groups (basic=6.526 and AOS= 6.447, p = 0.775), but subjective happiness is (basic=5.032 and AOS= 5.655, p= 0.014). When I controlled for meditation practice, differences between subjective happiness disappeared (p=0.166). This suggests that people who have done the course might have boosted their subjective well-being levels through meditation practices.

Discussion

Comparing the Art of Silence and the Camino de Santiago sheds light on how spiritual retreats can make a lasting impact on behavior. In both experiences, the seeker leaves his/her community to embark on a spiritual journey. In these communities, individuals dress similarly and report that age, gender, and class are not barriers. People are taken out of their social category and

reintegrate as equals. The community that forms during these experiences is based upon acts of kindness. In both processes, there is a culture of giving and receiving. Surprisingly, neither group reports statistically higher frequencies of giving than Stanford students. This finding implies that while sharing may be augmented on the retreats, participants do not continue with these elevated levels upon reintegration into society.

Both groups reported some sort of emotional response to the practice. One emotional response is the cleansing or catharsis that occurs in meditation or along the walk. When combining this finding with the survey data, I found that AOS and Camino individuals do meditate with a higher frequency than Stanford students. However, meditation is only correlated to well-being for Art of Silence practitioners. Camino individuals' meditation practice, connection with nature, and self-reflection are not correlated with well-being. It is possible that they do not receive significant benefits from these practices because they are doing them alone, and spending time with others is highly correlated to well-being for them.

While there are similarities between the experiences, attainment of knowledge on each retreat is distinct. Art of Living is a course, a formal learning experience where individuals are brought through various types of meditation with the expectations of results. There are specific techniques and a teacher. In contrast, the pilgrims learn lessons on the Camino in an informal manner. Knowledge is attained through conversations with other pilgrims and the personal experience on the road. Pilgrims tend to follow the other pilgrims' lead when it comes to certain behaviors (how fast to walk, where to eat, where to stay, etc). They model each other's behaviors and habits. There is no authority figure. The quantitative data reveals that having a life guide is beneficial for the Art of Silence participants. When subjective-happiness levels between AOS and the Camino are controlled for the frequency of having a life guide, there is no longer a significant difference in subjective happiness ($p=0.675$). This finding suggests having a life guide is beneficial for both groups and has the potential to make benefits longer lasting.

Additionally, the way participants reintegrate the practices from the retreats and reconnect with their experiences varies between groups. While both lifestyles are unable to continue upon reintegration, since the Art of Living exists in 152 countries, AOS participants are more likely to find other centers to repeat the course or connect with others who have undergone it. In fact, the Guru recommends that participants undergo two to four silent retreats per year in order to maintain effects. This could be why the participants are able to integrate more of the learned behaviors into their daily life. The Camino, on the other hand, is a process that takes far more time and is often a once in a lifetime experience. Outside of Europe, the population of individuals that has walked the Camino is minimal. There are websites and Camino Federations, but for the average individual who walks the path, when s/he arrives at Santiago, s/he will be thrust back into the real world without tangible lessons to hold onto. While pilgrims want to reincorporate the positive experience into their real lives, it is difficult to maintain the reality of the Camino when it exists so far away and there are no nearby pilgrims. Pilgrims

who come alone (as is recommended) do not have the ability to replay the experience with anyone when they return home and often suffer from the "post-Camino blues" (Camino de Santiago forum).

The data suggests that without clear practices to reintegrate into real life, a spiritual guide, and/or individuals to reconnect about the experience, behavioral changes from the experience will not be sustainable. This is not to say that pilgrims do not receive any long-term benefit from the pilgrimage. Indeed, they practice many behaviors with a similar frequency as AOS individuals. Their ability to retain specific practices, however, appears to diminish.

Conclusion

Seekers set out on spiritual experiences for a reason – whether it is an escape a stressful job, secular life, or negative thoughts. They have goals for the journey, and expect to feel a certain way at the end. The well-being outcome on the Art of Silence retreat and on the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage can be seen as a result of mixing certain practices, principles and community. The quantitative data shows that higher levels of well-being are correlated with: savoring the present moment, remaining optimistic, feeling grateful, loving others, practicing acts of kindness, forgiving others, some sort of self-reflective processes, and spending time with friends and family. While the qualitative data reflects all of these aspects of the experience, it reveals that personal practices could become more sustainable and powerful through practice with a community.

While researchers have long known that loneliness is detrimental to health, it is not often discussed that relationships can also be the preserver of good memories and practices. Although some may consider it better to walk or meditate alone, the data shows that in order to maintain the benefits of the experiences it is imperative to travel or reconnect with a companion who can reinforce the behavior in the future. This practice could close the gap between the Camino pilgrims, who feel joy along the way that usually fades when they return home, and Art of Silence participants, who have an infrastructure of an organization to return to. In short, I encourage possible spiritual pilgrims to do the experience with someone they can continue to share the experience with in the future or keep in touch with the friends s/he meets along the way.

For those who want to increase their well-being but do not have the time or resources to go on an elaborate journey, this research provides insight into practices that could help elevate well-being. The research suggests that it is important to cultivate time with friends and family in order to build a support system. Community will also provide one with the opportunity to practice the other principles that are correlated with well-being with higher frequency, such as practicing acts of kindness. This topic requires future research regarding how people make the benefits of a spiritual practice long lasting, and further investigations into the claim that people are happier undergoing processes when they can reconnect with a community at home. Research along these lines has the potential to teach individuals tools they can use in their daily lives to help improve their quality of life.

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Taylor Winfield is a recent graduate from Stanford University with Honors in Sociology and a Minor in Anthropology. Her research focuses on the intersection between positive psychology, sociology, and spirituality. Ms. Winfield has collected data in India, Spain, and South Africa and will spend next year investigating the experience of ultra-orthodox women in Israel. During her time at Stanford, Ms. Winfield was involved with student mental health promotion. She served as the ASSU Chair of Health and Wellness 2010-2012 and the wellness consultant for Stanford Dining and Vaden Health Promotion Services. She hopes to continue this work in the future.