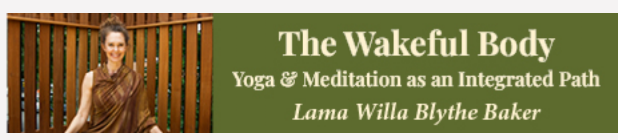

IDEAS
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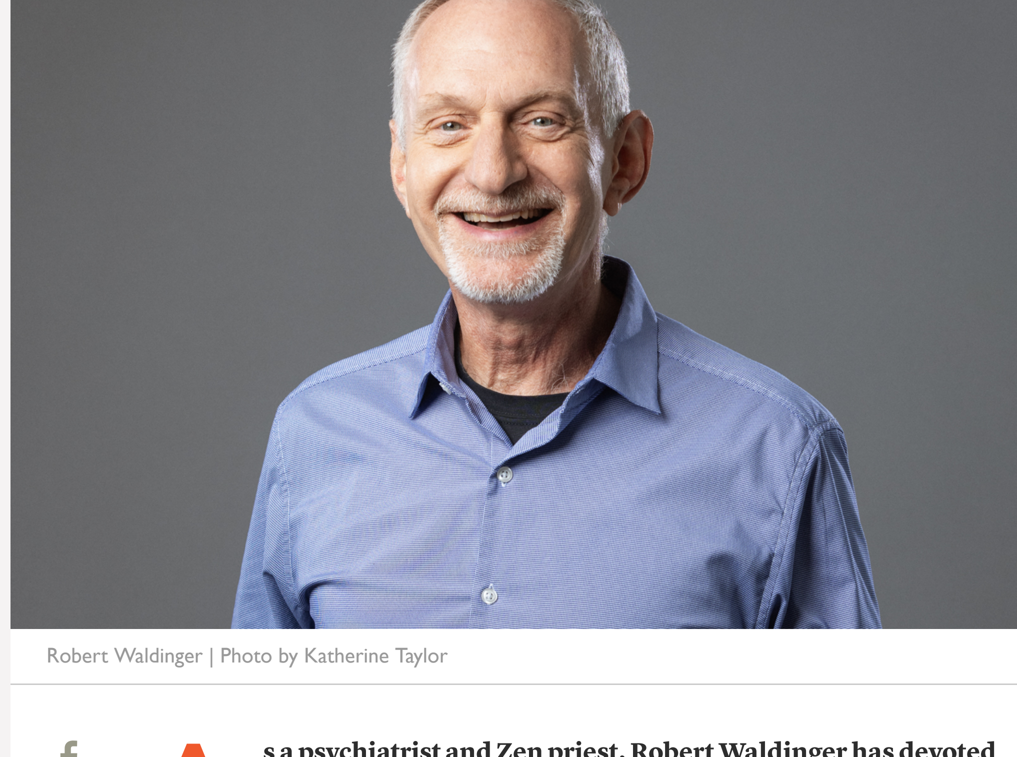
Robert Waldinger, Director of the Longest Scientific Study of Happiness, on What Makes a Good Life

The psychiatrist and Zen priest discusses the importance of sangha and how our relational needs shift as we grow older.

By Robert Waldinger | FEB 01, 2023



Robert Waldinger | Photo by Katherine Taylor

As a psychiatrist and Zen priest, Robert Waldinger has devoted much of his professional career to the question of what makes a good life. He currently serves as director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which is the longest scientific study of happiness. The study has tracked the lives of participants for over seventy-five years, tracing how childhood experiences and relationships affect health and well-being later in life. In his new book, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, Waldinger shares what he's learned from directing the study.

In a recent episode of *Tricycle Talks*, *Tricycle*'s editor-in-chief, James Shaheen, sat down with Waldinger to discuss what makes a good life, the common regrets that people have toward the end of their lives, and how his Zen practice informs his work as a psychiatrist. Read an excerpt from their conversation below, and then listen to the full episode.

James Shaheen: A recurring question in the book is: What makes a good life? What has the data shown you in this regard?

Robert Waldinger: To put it in Buddhist terms, a good life is made with sangha. When we studied people throughout their lives, if we wanted to predict who was going to stay healthy and be happier and live longer, we found two key predictors. One, of course, was taking care of your health, and that was not a surprise. But the surprise was that the people who stayed healthier and were happier were the people who had better, warmer connections with other people. Good relationships really predicted well-being over time.

At first, we didn't believe our own data: How could good relationships help prevent coronary artery disease or make it less likely that you were going to get rheumatoid arthritis? And so we've spent the last ten years studying the mechanisms by which our relationships actually get inside our bodies and shape our health. It's hard to determine for any one person exactly what caused what, but when we look at thousands of lives, as we've done, then we can say there are these predictors, and a lot of the predictors stem from relationships and community. There was a developmental researcher, Michael Rutter, who once said that all the data show that what every child needs to grow up healthy is one consistent, caring adult who's crazy about them. If you have that, you've got a huge leg up on a good life.

What are some of the factors that make a relationship successful? What we've seen is that it's important to be able to feel like yourself in a relationship—to feel like you don't have to stifle, suppress, or hide away parts of yourself. People tend to identify the relationships where they feel like they can be authentic as the most important and most impactful in their lives. That doesn't mean things have to be smooth all the time. In fact, you can still have a very argumentative relationship with somebody where you feel you can be yourself and that you're fundamentally respected.

> "A good life is made with sangha."

It's also important to have people who will be there for you no matter what. We asked our original participants, "List all the people who you could call in the middle of the night if you were sick or scared." Some people could list several people. Some of our participants couldn't list anybody. We think that having at least one relationship, one person to whom you feel securely attached and securely connected, is an essential component of what keeps us healthy.

In the book, you mention three important factors in maintaining mutually fulfilling relationships: curiosity, generosity, and what you call learning new dance steps. Can you walk us through each of these factors? Curiosity is the act of bringing what we call in Zen beginner's mind, putting aside all your preconceptions and bringing a curiosity even to the person you feel you know everything about. This can be very useful, especially if you're going to a family gathering where you know everyone and you know which jokes they're going to tell. One of my meditation teachers gave me the instruction once to ask myself, "What's here that I have never noticed before?" I find that extremely useful when I am coming into relationship with somebody who I feel like I've known for a long time or I know so much about. You can also bring this sense of curiosity to meeting someone you don't know by asking them questions, which communicates to them, "I recognize you, I'm interested in you." You will be amazed at how people will light up in response to that kind of curiosity.

Then there's generosity. One of the things that meditation practice shows us is our judging minds. One exercise that I love that's really painful for me is counting how many judgments you make in ten minutes of meditation. I lose count. My mind is filled with judgments all the time. Our minds are going to judge. That's part of what the human mind does. But we can hold those judgments lightly. We can set them aside and just be with the person in front of us. Of course, there's also generosity of our resources, time, attention, money, and physical help. All of those are relationship builders.

Then there's learning new dance steps. I started thinking of it this way when my wife and I took a beginners' dance class. A lot of the people in the dance class were learning to dance because they wanted to be able to dance at their weddings. We could see that some couples would learn new dance steps together, and they could really move and adjust to each other. And some couples just had a terrible time. What I began to understand is that we're always having to adapt to each other in relationships. We're always having to learn new things. My wife and I have been married for thirty-six years. We thought we were signing up for particular people when we committed to each other, and then she and I have both grown and changed a lot. The question is: Can we change in such a way that we adapt to each other? That's what I mean by learning new dance steps. We thought we knew how to dance well together when we first got together, but our dance moves have changed with each other. Can those dance moves be somewhat harmonious even as we're both developing into different people? That doesn't just happen in intimate partnerships. It happens in long friendships. Lord knows it happens in family relationships. You need to allow each other room to have grown out of old patterns.

You also draw from the work of Erik and Joan Erikson in laying out the stages of life. Can you walk us through the stages of what you call a lifetime of adult relationships? How do our relational needs shift as we get older? Erik Erikson and Joan Erikson were wonderful thinkers about adult life. I used to think that when I got to my 20s, I was done. If I was lucky, I'd find a partner, I'd find a profession, and I would just live out the rest of my life. There wouldn't be much development or much growth. The Eriksons were the first to say that there's a whole path of development in adult life. Erikson's idea was that young adulthood is a challenge of achieving intimacy versus isolation. The big question is: Can I find someone to love? Can I find someone to love me? Or am I going to be alone? Many of us do work out that challenge in young adulthood. Some people work it out in their 70s. Stages are helpful frameworks, but we don't all fit into them perfectly.

Then there is a stage in middle age of generativity versus stagnation. Generativity is the Eriksonian term for fostering the welfare of the next generation. What Erikson said was that we all get to a point in our adult development where we really want to further the lives of those who come next. It could be raising children. It could be mentoring people in our work lives. It could be mentoring younger people in a hobby or in a volunteer activity. It's a concern beyond the self. And I think we know from Buddhist teachings that when we move beyond the small self, the "I, me, mine" self, we grow, and we thrive. It's a very important contributor to well-being.

And then old age, Erikson said, was the challenge of integrity versus despair. Integrity is the ability to look back on your life and say, "This was a good enough life. I've had a decent run of things" as opposed to despair, or the sense that you've wasted your life. Sometimes when we talk about paying attention in meditation practice, we say: don't miss your life. Don't be so lost in your head that life goes by and you're not even here for it, you're not present. What Erikson said was, we all want to be able to look back and say not that I had a perfect life, but that it was OK. It was good enough.

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Robert Waldinger is an American psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and Zen priest. He currently serves as director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which is the longest scientific study of happiness. He is the author of *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*.

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