



# The Effects of Contemplative Pedagogy on Students' Well-Being in Taiwan

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## Introduction

Recently, the 1440 Foundation called for the development of real-world contemplative research and Owen Flanagan (2011) noted that "there are in fact no scientific studies yet on Buddhism as a lived philosophy and spiritual tradition, in any of its forms, and happiness" (p. 18). In order to advance the next phase of contemplative research, this study provides some of the first sociological evidence of Buddhism's effects on well-being outside the lab, by analyzing the effects of contemplative pedagogy on the well-being of undergraduate and graduate students at the College of Buddhist Studies (CBS) at Fo Guang University (FGU) in Taiwan.

## Materials and Methods

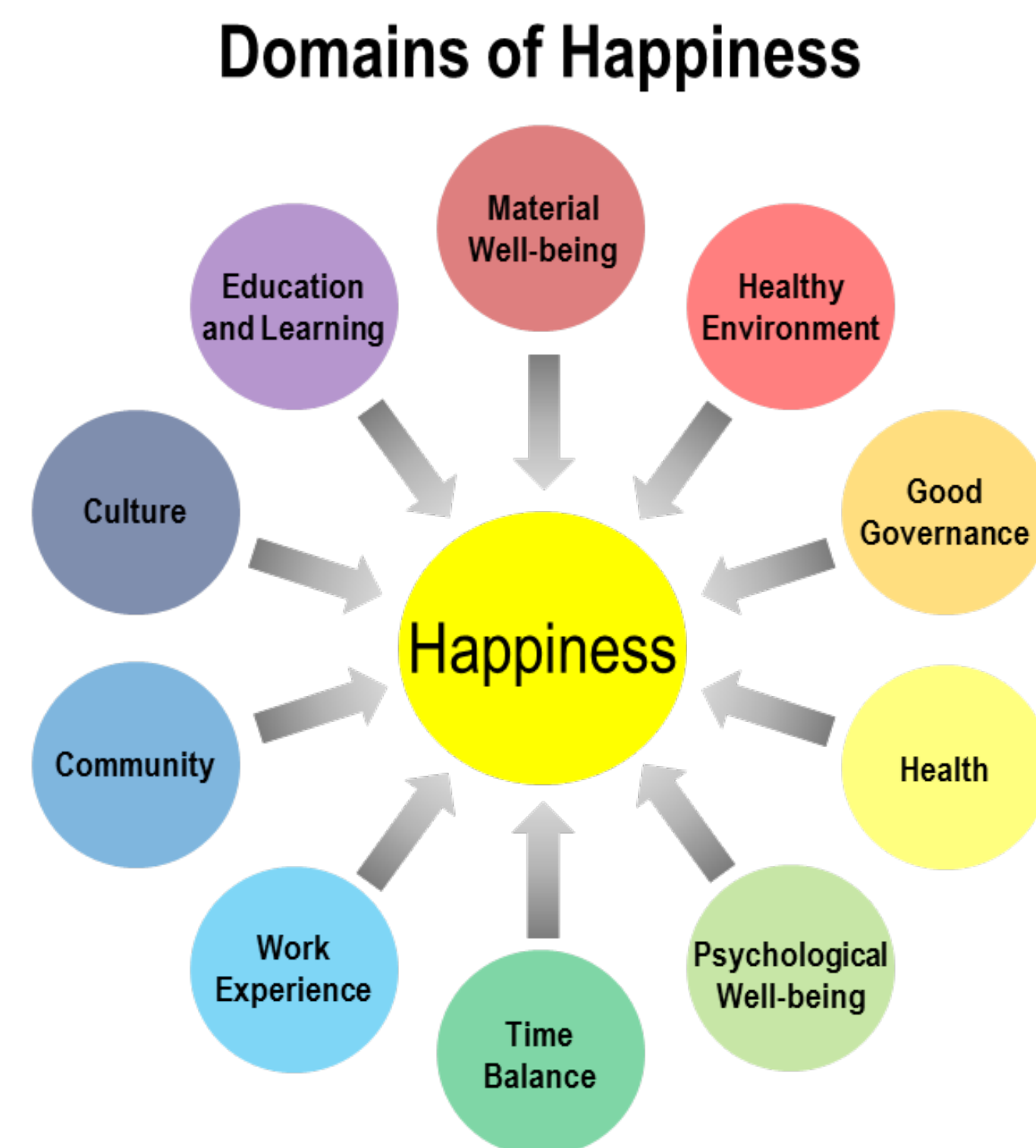
The curriculum at CBS is divided into academic and practicum components, so that student assessments are based on one's performance in the classroom and the degree to which students participate in the college's semi-monastic community life, contemplative training exercises, and week-long retreats.

The survey's analysis determined how the college's contemplative pedagogy affected students' well-being by comparing the differences between scholars and monastics that studied and practiced Buddhism at CBS with students that did not study Buddhism, either in the same environment at FGU or in a different environment at the University of Michigan.

Sample Size (n)	Population
15	FGU monastics at CBS
69	FGU Buddhist scholars at CBS
112	FGU students not at CBS
522	University of Michigan students

Data on students' well-being was collected using a Chinese translation of the Happiness Initiative Gross National Happiness (HI GNH) survey. The HI GNH survey consists of 123 questions measuring happiness and well-being across ten dimensions: psychological well-being, physical health, time balance, community vitality, education and learning, cultural vitality, environmental quality, governance, material well-being, and workplace experience.

## Materials and Methods (cont.)



The general survey hypothesis was that the cultivation of Buddhist values and discipline at CBS should increase students' well-being in all of the survey's ten domains, but particularly in the areas of psychological wellbeing and community wellbeing, based on findings of religion's positive impact on social well-being (Lim, 2012), and findings that link short-term meditation practice to positive psychological outcomes among Chinese college students (Tang, Y. Y. et al., 2007).

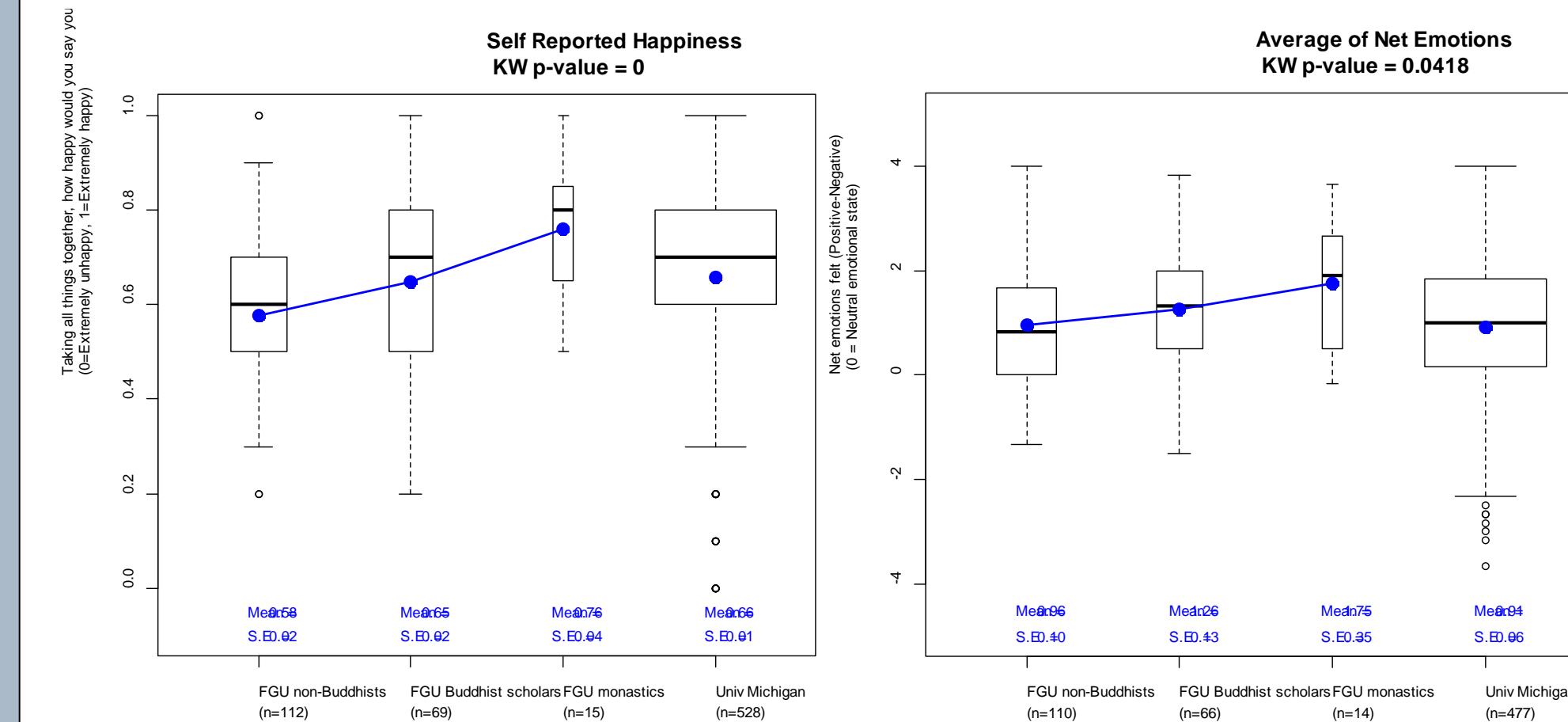
## Results

In total, there were fifteen statistically significant findings, where facets of well-being consistently improved between Buddhist scholars and monastics:

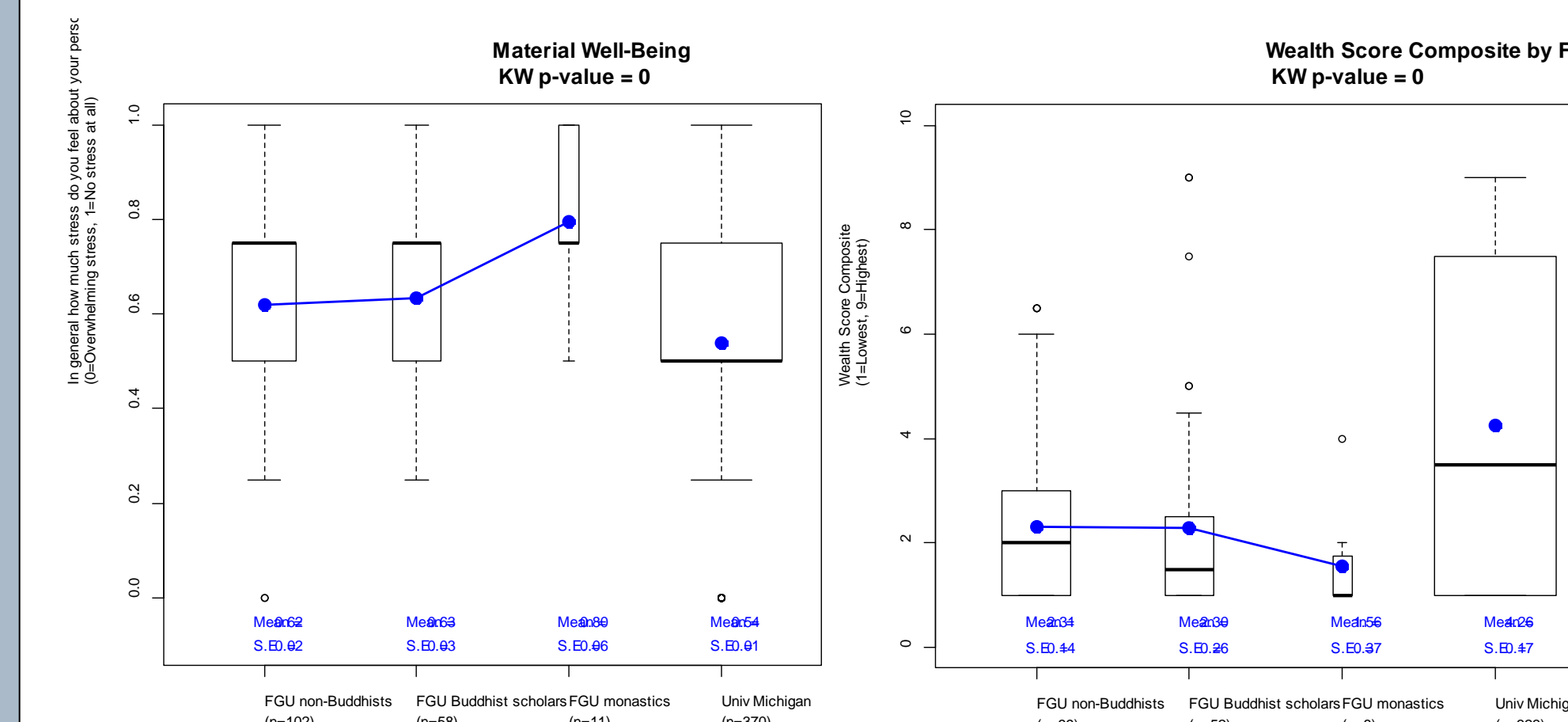
Variable	Effect on Scholars	Effect on Monastics	p-value
Volunteerism	+26%	+43%	<.01
Spirituality	+15%	+43%	<.01
Basic Needs Satisfaction	+18%	+36%	<.01
Financial Inadequacy	-10%	-26%	<.01
Interest in Work	+9%	+25%	<.01
Happiness	+7%	+18%	<.01
Financial Stress	-1%	-18%	.03
Trust	+9%	+17%	<.01
Life Purpose	+7%	+15%	.01
Life Satisfaction	+4%	+13%	.01
Community Belonging	+5%	+12%	.01
Work Satisfaction	+4%	+11%	.02
Mental Well-being	+5%	+10%	.01
Positive Emotions	+4%	+8%	.02
Emotional Balance	+3%	+8%	.03

## Results (cont.)

As hypothesized, Buddhist scholars and monastics exhibited greater happiness and emotional balance than students not at CBS.

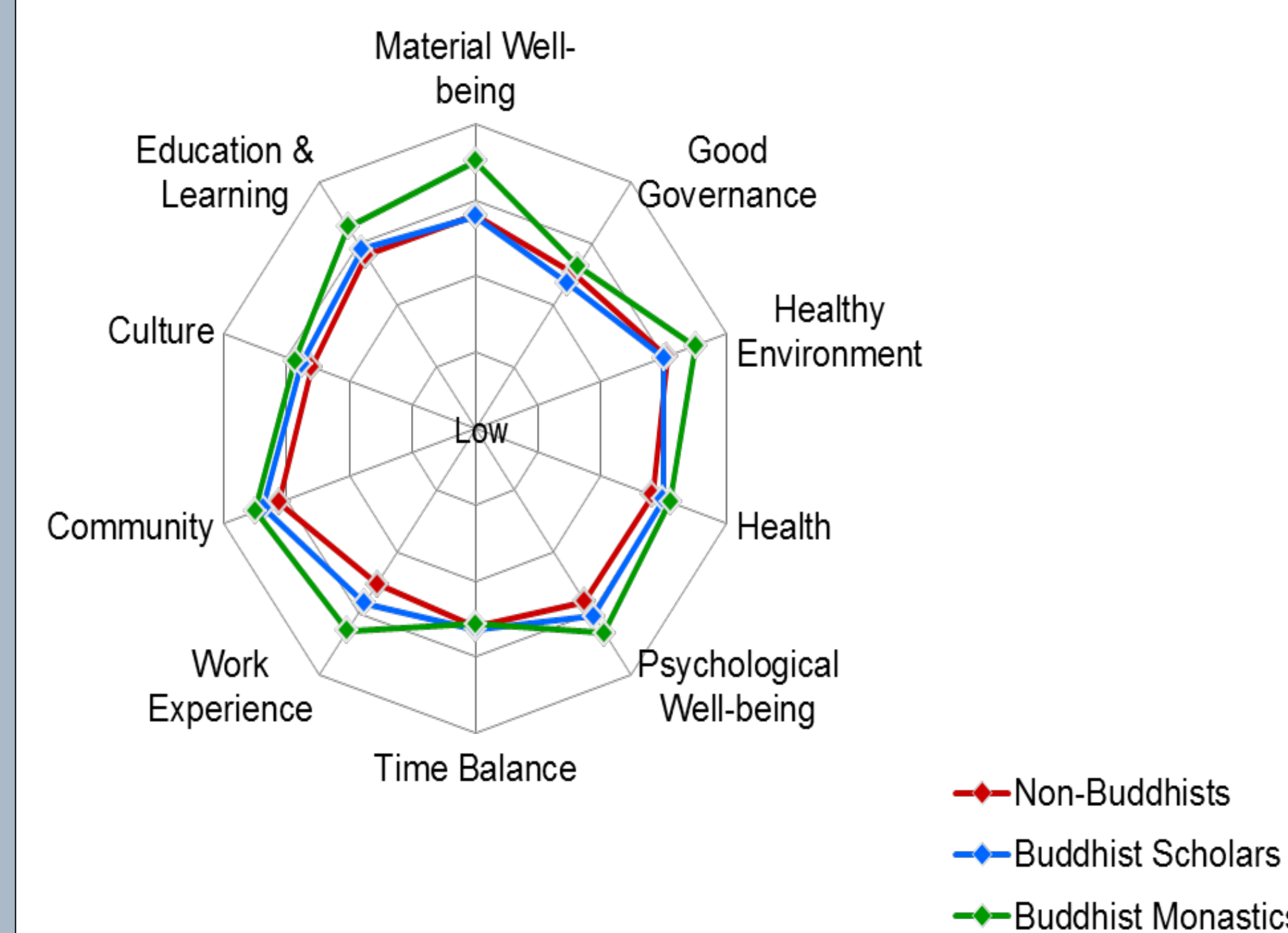


In the domain of material well-being, Buddhist scholars and monastics also experienced less financial stress, despite possessing less wealth than students not at CBS.



## Importing Tables & Graphs

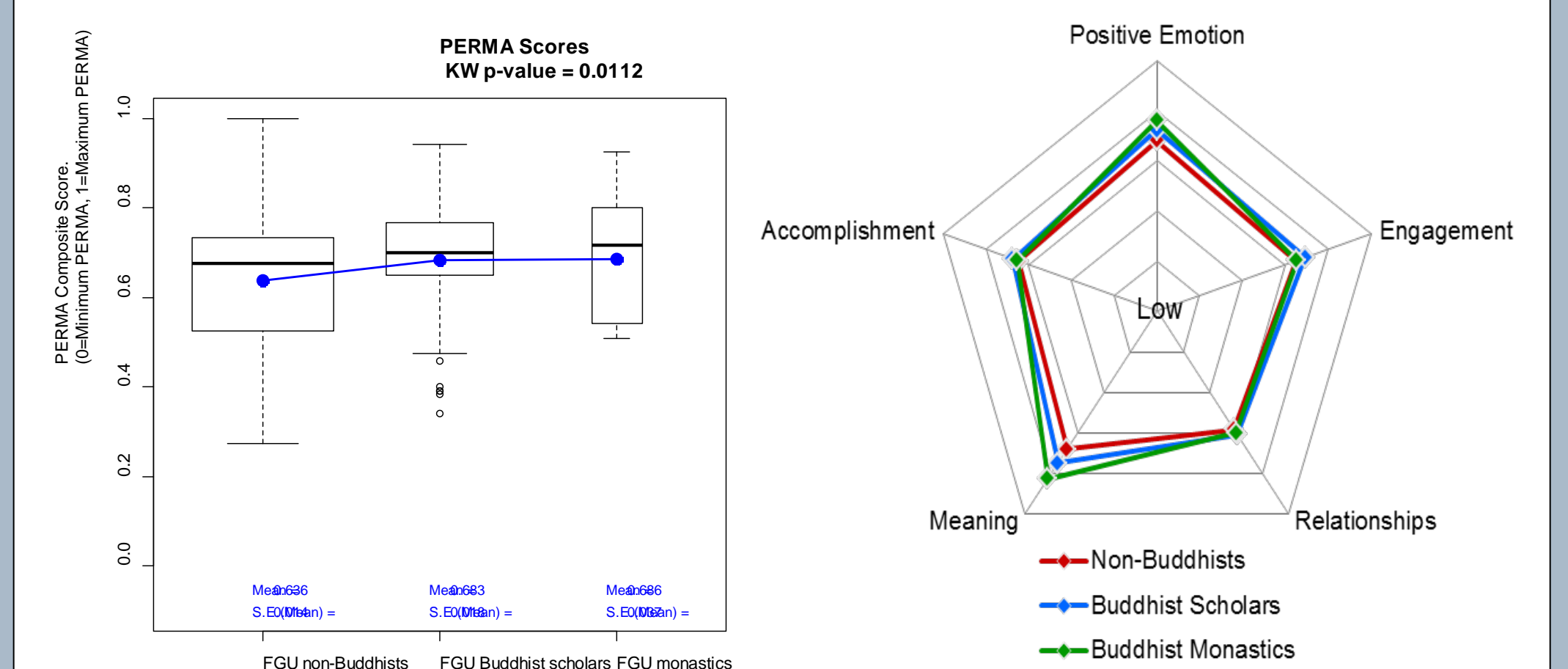
Overall, this study observed that participation in the contemplative curriculum at CBS consistently enhanced happiness and many facets of students' well-being. This positive effect seemed to be progressively enhanced by strengthening one's commitment to Buddhism, since the positive effects observed among Buddhist scholars were almost always reproduced to a greater degree among Buddhist monastics. In general, the most positive effects of Buddhist study and practice were noted in the domains of work experience, material well-being, psychological well-being, and community vitality.



## Conclusions (cont.)

The strength of evidence in this study was weakened by the small sample size of Buddhist monastics, compared to Buddhist scholars and non-Buddhists. Future research should enhance the even distribution of sample sizes, while extending the breadth of this study to include evidence of contemplation's effects in larger, more diverse Buddhist communities. Future data should also analyze the influence of religious commitment and contemplative practice according to additional variables, in order to more fully account for the nature of differences between practitioners.

Finally, more holistic models of well-being which reflect indigenous Buddhist values should be developed to measure the effects of Buddhist cultivation, since the predominant model of well-being in positive psychology (P.E.R.M.A.) is incapable of describing the full range of effects important to Buddhists.



## References

Flanagan, O. (2011). *The Bodhisattva's Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Tang, Y. Y., Ma, Y., Wang, J., Fan, Y., Feng, S., Lu, Q., Yu, Q., Sui, D., Rothbart, M. K., Fan, M., & Posner, M. I. (2007). Short-term meditation training improves attention and self-regulation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104 (43), 17152-17156. doi: 10.1073/pnas.0707678104.

Lim, C. (2012, March 22). In U.S., churchgoers boast better mood, especially on Sundays. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153374/churchgoers-boast-better-mood-especially-sundays.aspx>

## Further Information

For more information, see: Walsh, Z. D. (2013). *The Science of Sukha: A Scientific Theory on the Buddhist Concept of Happiness and Human Development* (Master's thesis, Fo Guang University, Yilan, Taiwan). Retrieved from <http://libthesis.fgu.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cdrfb3/gswweb.cgi?o=dstdcdr&i=sG0000992868.id>