

Meditation and ballet associated with wisdom, study says

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Study finds that people who engage in physical practices such as ballet or meditation score higher on measures of psychological traits associated with wisdom. Credit: Eric Blochet

Wisdom, traditionally associated with old age, is nonetheless found in

people of all ages. So, what makes a person wise?

A new study, "The Relationship between Mental and Somatic Practices and Wisdom," published Feb. 18 in *PLOS ONE*, confirms an age-old conception that meditation is associated with wisdom. Surprisingly, it also concludes that somatic, or physical, practices such as classical ballet might lead to increased wisdom.

The researchers included ballet in the study "not expecting to find that it was associated with wisdom, but rather for comparison purposes," said Patrick B. Williams, lead author and a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Psychology. Williams is a member of a research project on somatic wisdom headed by principal investigators Berthold Hoeckner, associate professor of music; and Howard Nusbaum, professor of psychology.

"The link between ballet and wisdom is mysterious to us and something that we're already investigating further," Williams said. This includes ongoing studies with adult practitioners of ballet, as well as among novices training at Chicago's Joffrey Ballet. Williams wants to track novices and seasoned practitioners of both meditation and ballet for months and years to see whether the association holds up over time.

"As far as I know, this is the first study to be published that looks at the relationship between meditation or ballet and increased wisdom," said Monika Ardelt, associate professor of sociology at the University of Florida. Ardelt is a leading wisdom researcher who was not involved in the project. "The finding that the practice of ballet is associated with increased wisdom is fascinating. I think this study will lead to more research on this question."

The published research was groundbreaking because science has overlooked somatic practices as a possible path to wisdom, Williams

said.

Unstudied topic

"No studies have examined whether physical practices are linked to the cultivation of personal wisdom, nor have they theorized that this association might exist," the study stated.

"As we learn more about the kinds of experiences that are related to wisdom, we can gain insight into ways of studying the mechanisms that mediate wisdom," Nusbaum said. "This also lets us shift from thinking about wisdom as something like a talent to thinking about it as something more like a skill. If we think about wisdom as a skill, it is something we can always get better at if we know how to practice."

The researchers administered a self-reported survey to 298 participants. The survey asked about experience, both in number of years and hours of practice, as a teacher or student of four activities: the Alexander Technique, a method for improving posture, balance, coordination and movement; the Feldenkrais Method, a form of somatic education that seeks to improve movement and physical function, reduce pain, and increase self-awareness; meditation; and classical ballet. It also included psychological questionnaires that asked about characteristics thought to be components of wisdom, such as empathy and anxiety.

The results showed that those who practice meditation—vipassana (29 percent), mindfulness (23 percent), Buddhist (14 percent) and other types—had more wisdom, on average, than those in the three other groups. More importantly, it established for the first time that the link between meditation and wisdom might be attributable to a lower level of anxiety.

"We are the first to show an association between wisdom, on the one

hand, and mental and somatic practice, on the other," Williams said. "We're also the first to suggest that meditation's ability to reduce everyday anxiety might partially explain this relationship."

Participants who practiced ballet had the lowest levels of wisdom. Nevertheless, the more they practiced [ballet](#), the higher they scored on measures of psychological traits that are associated with wisdom.

Causal relationship?

Williams said it's important to note that the research was not looking for and did not establish a causal relationship between wisdom and any of the four practices. But the results suggest that further study could identify such a [causal relationship](#).

"We hope our exploratory research will encourage others to replicate our results and look for other experiences that are linked with wisdom, as well as the factors that might explain such links," Williams said.

"Although wisdom, as an intellectual pursuit, is one of the oldest subjects studied by humankind, it is one of the youngest as a scientific pursuit," he added.

Ardelt thinks this study will generate a lot of interest with the public and in the growing field of the study of wisdom, especially due to the current interest in meditation. "These findings indicate that [meditation](#) might have more benefits than as a stress-reduction or pain-reduction technique," she said.

If mental and somatic practices can lead to more [wisdom](#), "their applications should be explored across settings such as in the classroom or workplace with the goal of creating not only wiser people, but also a wiser society," the researchers concluded.

More information: Patrick B. Williams et al. The Relationship between Mental and Somatic Practices and Wisdom, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0149369](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0149369)

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