

7-year follow-up shows lasting cognitive gains from meditation

April 5 2018, by Andy Fell



A seven-year follow-up of participants in one of the first comprehensive tests of the effects of meditation, the Shamatha Project, shows that gains in visual attention were maintained in participants who continued to practice meditation. Here, Buddhist scholar B. Alan Wallace, Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies, instructs a class during one of the original retreats held for the Shamatha Project. Credit: UC Davis

Gains in the ability to sustain attention developed through intensive meditation training are maintained up to seven years later, according to a new study published in the *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*. The study is based on the Shamatha Project, a major investigation of the cognitive, psychological and biological effects of meditation led by researchers at the University of California, Davis, Center for Mind and Brain.

"This study is the first to offer evidence that intensive and continued [meditation practice](#) is associated with enduring improvements in sustained attention and response inhibition, with the potential to alter longitudinal trajectories of cognitive change across a person's life," said first author Anthony Zanesco, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Miami, who began work on the project before starting his Ph.D. program in psychology at UC Davis. The project is led by Clifford Saron, research scientist at the UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain, in collaboration with a large group of researchers.

The Shamatha Project is the most comprehensive longitudinal study of intensive [meditation](#) yet undertaken and has drawn the attention of scientists and Buddhist scholars alike, including the Dalai Lama, who has endorsed the project. It examines the effects of two intensive meditation retreats held in 2007 at the Shambhala Mountain Center in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado. The study followed 60 experienced meditators who attended these three-month meditation retreats and received ongoing instruction in meditation techniques from Buddhist scholar, author and teacher B. Alan Wallace of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies. They attended group meditation sessions twice a day and engaged in individual practice for about six hours a day.

Gains maintained in regular meditators

Immediately after the study, participants in the meditation retreat showed improvements in attention as well as in general psychological well-being and ability to cope with stress.

Since the retreats, the researchers have followed up with participants at six and 18 months, and most recently at seven years. The 40 participants who remained in the study at this latest follow-up all reported that they continued some form of meditation practice over the seven-year period, equivalent to about an hour a day on average.

The new study shows that those gains in [attention](#) observed immediately after retreat were partly maintained seven years later, especially for older participants who maintained a more diligent meditation practice over the seven years. Compared to those who practiced less, these participants maintained cognitive gains and did not show typical patterns of age-related decline in [sustained attention](#).

The participants' lifestyle or personality might also have contributed to the observations, Zanesco noted. Benefits from meditation appeared to have plateaued after the retreats, even in participants who practiced the most: This could have implications for how much meditation can, in fact, influence human cognition and the workings of the brain, he said.

More information: Anthony P. Zanesco et al, Cognitive Aging and Long-Term Maintenance of Attentional Improvements Following Meditation Training, *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s41465-018-0068-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s41465-018-0068-1)

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