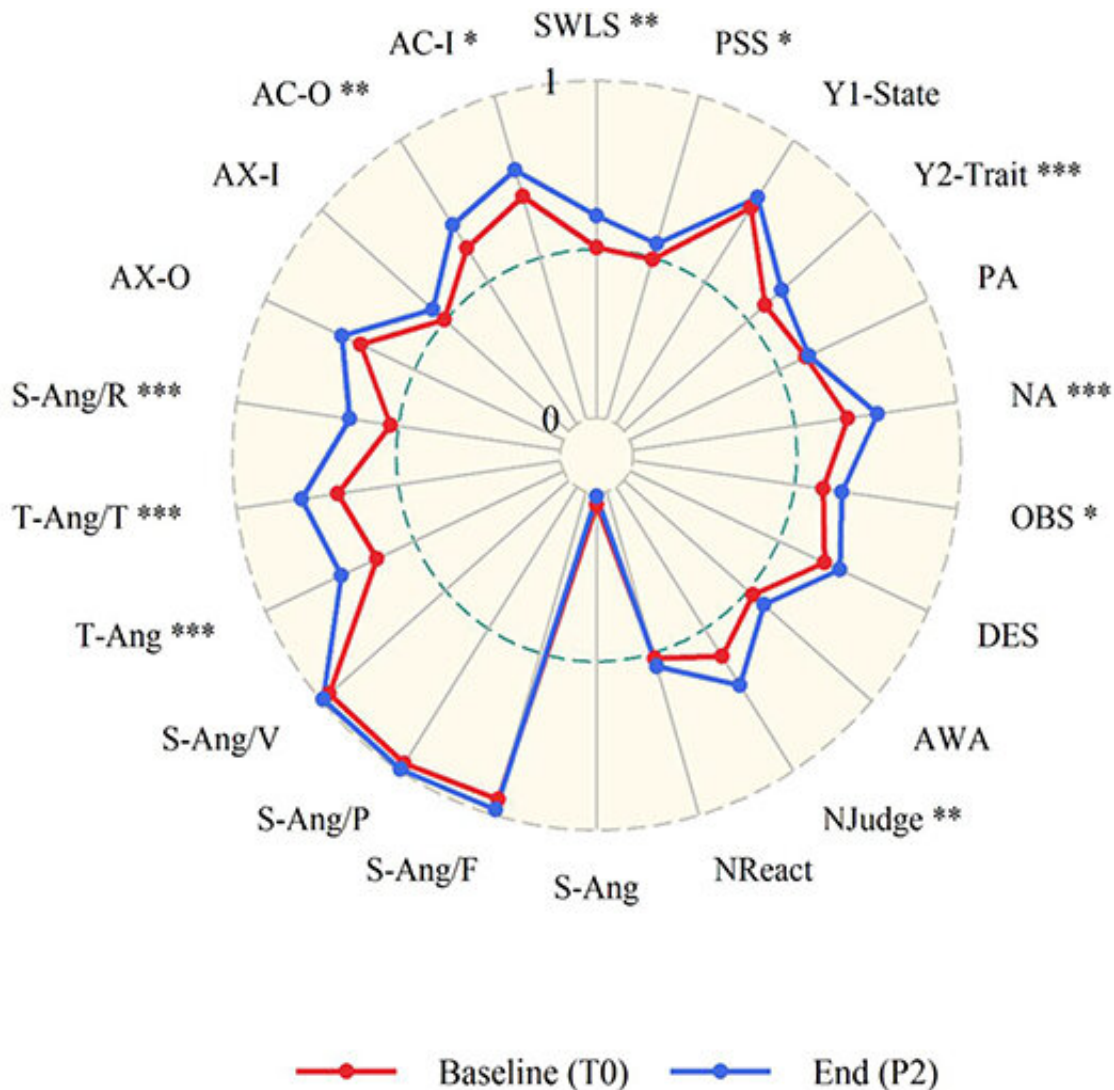


Happiness can be learned through meditation, philosophy and training

March 22 2021



Results of the permutation t-test between the start and the end of the course. All values ranged from 0 to 1. Variables: SWLS, Satisfaction with Life Scale; S-Ang/F, Feeling Angry; S-Ang/V, Feel like Expressing Anger Verbally; S-Ang/P,

Feel like Expressing Anger Physically; T-Ang/T, Angry Temperament; T-Ang/R, Angry reaction; AX-O, Anger Expression-OUT; AX-I, Anger Expression-IN; AC-O, Anger Control-OUT; AC-I, Anger Control-IN; PSS, Perceived Stress Scale; STAI-Y1, State-Trait Anxiety Inventory—State; STAI-Y2, State-Trait Anxiety Inventory—Trait; PA and NA, Positive and Negative Affect Scales, respectively; OBS, Observe; DES, Describe; AWA, Act with awareness, Njudge, Non-judge; NReact, Non-react. To make consistent that an increase of the specific scale corresponds to an improvement in well-being, negative scales were reversed, namely: PSS, STAI-Y1, STAI-Y2, PANAS-NA, S-Ang, S-Ang/F, S-Ang/P, S-Ang/V, T-Ang, T-Ang/T, S-Ang/R, AX-O, AX-I. Credit: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.600982

Is it possible to learn to be happier? Well, it seems it is—at least according to a scientific study coordinated by the University of Trento and carried out in collaboration with Sapienza University of Rome, now published in *Frontiers in Psychology*. In this study, researchers demonstrated the effectiveness of an integrated mental training program in which the participants practiced meditation exercises and explored topics related to philosophy, psychology and neuroscience in depth.

The results showed that several psychological wellbeing measures gradually increased within participants from the beginning to the end of the course. That was especially true for life satisfaction, perceived well-being, self-awareness and emotional self-regulation. The participants in the study also reported a significant decrease in anxiety, perceived stress, negative thoughts, rumination and anger tendencies. The researchers also observed improvements in the positive aspects and a reduction of negative emotions, both in the short term and longitudinally throughout the program.

Nicola De Pisapia, researcher of the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Sciences of the University of Trento and scientific

coordinator, explained the fundamental principles of the study: "The training that we proposed to the participants was inspired by the idea—present in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions—that [happiness](#) is inextricably linked to the development of inner equilibrium, a kinder and more open perspective of self, others, and the world, towards a better understanding of the human mind and brain. In this training process we need on the one hand the theoretical study of philosophy and science, and on the other [meditation](#) practices."

The study was conducted over nine months (with seven theoretical/practical weekends and two meditation retreats) at the Lama Tzong Khapa Institute of Tibetan culture in Pomaia (Italy). For the theoretical part, the participants attended a series of presentations and watched some video courses, and took part in open discussions on topics of psychology, neuroscience, the history of Western thought and the philosophy of life of Buddhism. The scientific topics included neuroplasticity, the brain circuits of attention and mind wandering, stress and anxiety, pain and pleasure, positive and negative emotions, desire and addiction, the sense of self, empathy and compassion. For the practical part, a series of exercises were proposed, taken from Buddhist and Western contemplative traditions (for example, meditation on the breath, analytical meditation, keeping a personal journal).

Excluding the approaches that mistake happiness for hedonism and the New Age obsession with positive thinking, recent research has shown that meditation practices have important benefits for the mind, while studies on happiness and wisdom have been scarce. De Pisapia says, "I believe that in times like these, full of changes and uncertainties, it is fundamental to scientifically study how Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, together with the most recent discoveries on the mind and the brain, can be integrated with contemplative practices in a secular way. The goal is to give healthy people the opportunity to work on themselves to develop authentic happiness, not hedonism or

superficial happiness. With this study we wanted to take a small step in this direction."

More information: Clara Rastelli et al, The Art of Happiness: An Explorative Study of a Contemplative Program for Subjective Well-Being, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.600982](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.600982)

Provided by Università di Trento

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