



THE SHAMATHA PROJECT *By Jeff Pardy*

Thirty meditators will embark on a one-year residential retreat to practice shamatha meditation for eight to ten hours a day, beginning September 2006. The retreat is part of a research initiative, known as the Shamatha Project, which will study the neural, cognitive, and socio-emotional effects of shamatha meditation. Coordinated by the Center for Mind and Brain at the University of California, Davis, the project will address two major questions: How changeable are our cognitive behaviors and socio-emotional skills? And what measurable brain changes underlie behavioral changes?

Dr. George R. Mangun, a cognitive neuroscience expert and director of the Center for Mind and Brain, will direct the project. Mangun will be accompanied by several other specialists in the field of neuroscience and psychology, including Dr. Cameron Carter, a specialist in brain imaging, and Dr. Phil Shaver, chair of the Department of Psychology at the university.

"Participants in the study will undergo a kind of 'Olympic training' of the mind, and we expect to see many derivative benefits for the general public," says B. Alan Wallace, founder and president of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies and resident instructor for the program's participants. "Although other cognitive scientists have begun to study advanced meditators, no such longitudinal study of this high scientific caliber has ever been undertaken with participants engaging in such sustained, intensive practice."

The participants will receive ongoing instruction and training in meditation that will center on mindfulness of breath; settling the mind in its natural state, observing mental events without distraction or grasping; and resting the attention in pure awareness with no specific object of meditation.

The project will look at the potential of meditation to regulate emotions. This has great implications for the prevention and treatment of mental health disorders such as ADHD, depression, insomnia, and anxiety disorders. Researchers also expect to learn a great deal about the possibility of fostering empathy, love, and compassion through the practice of meditation. "Researchers are beginning to study 'eudemonic well-being,' or human flourishing, and how it differs from 'hedonic well-being,'" says Wallace. "This study has immediate bearing on education and the possibility of teaching attention skills, mindfulness, empathy, and emotional intelligence in the classroom."

Over the past two years, the project's team of investigators has been developing the design, measures, and statistical models for the project, as well as dealing with the logistical problems inherent in such a long-term study. The project has received initial funding from private individuals and foundations. The team has also applied for grants to support the entire project. However, a suitable contemplative research facility for such scientific and contemplative analysis has not yet been found.

The team is currently accepting applications from people who want to participate in the program. While those selected will have various levels of experience, all will have a substantial background in meditation and a sound understanding of the nature and significance of shamatha practice. In addition, participants must show psychological balance and maturity, good discipline, altruistic motivation, and enthusiasm to participate. Wallace plans to organize a three-month shamatha retreat prior to the project, as a pilot study.