

Mental Health, Well-Being, and Meditative Development:

A Phenomenological Study of Advanced Meditators

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness is increasingly recognized for its mental health benefits, with evidence supporting efficacy across clinical and non-clinical contexts. However, little research has explored deeper psychological and even existential transformations related to advanced meditation, which meditative traditions regard as essential to actualize the most profound states of well-being. Given the global mental health crisis and the urgent demand for innovative interventions, there is an increasing need for research into the mental health implications of advanced meditation. 28 advanced meditators participated in semi-structured phenomenological interviews focused on their meditation experiences and mental health. A content-driven, inductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify core themes. Saturation was tracked, interrater reliability assessed, and *Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research* (COREQ) guidelines followed. Participants reported profound psychological changes spanning emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and existential domains. Six major positive themes emerged: (1) vast improvements in baseline well-being; (2) consistently strong and prevalent positive attitudes; (3) increased positive affect; (4) enhanced mental and perceptual clarity, attentional stability, and cognitive balance; (5) positive shifts in life orientation; and (6) transformative changes in mental health conditions. Many described existential insights arising through the resolution of psychological difficulties, leading to reduced suffering and deeper meaning. Additional themes included synergistic effects between meditation, psychotherapy, and psychedelics. This study provides initial empirical evidence that advanced meditation supports profound psychological transformation, including reduced suffering and enhanced well-being across multiple domains, and sets the stage for multidisciplinary empirical work. Advanced meditation and meditative development may thus serve as powerful mechanisms for healing and flourishing.

Keywords: Advanced meditation, mental health, meditative development, well-being, clinical psychology, phenomenology, meditative endpoints

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, mindfulness meditation, centered on non-judgmental present-moment awareness, has gained widespread application for mental health. In the UK, up to 15% of the population has practiced mindfulness (Simonsson et al., 2021), while 25% of Australians have used it to address mental health concerns (Dib et al., 2021). In the U.S., practice rates have increased 2.5-fold, rising from 7.8% to 18.3%, approaching the annual prevalence of 23% for visits to mental health professionals (Davies et al., 2024). Amid a global mental health decline (Santomauro et al., 2021), meditation may reduce treatment demand by addressing unmet needs (Davies et al., 2024). Across diverse populations and designs, evidence suggests mindfulness benefits mental health by reducing addiction (Tang et al., 2016), pain (Ploesser & Martin, 2024), and mood symptoms (Hofmann & Gómez, 2017), suggesting transdiagnostic effects (Wielgosz et al., 2019), while also improving stress resilience (Galante et al., 2018) and immunity (Black & Slavich, 2016).

The study of advanced meditation represents an emerging “third wave” of meditation research that moves beyond early clinical benefits to explore the positive and challenging meditative states, stages, and endpoints that arise with sustained practice and mastery (Sacchet et al., 2024; Sparby & Sacchet, 2025b, 2025c). This line of inquiry draws on millennia-old contemplative traditions to explore the full potential of meditative development (Wright et al., 2023). Long-term meditators (LTMs), defined using years or hours of practice, have demonstrated positive outcomes, suggesting that expertise magnifies benefits (Ehmann et al., 2025c, 2025d; Sparby et al., 2025). However, advanced meditators (AMs), as defined by many contemplative traditions (Anuruddha & Bodhi, 2000; Wang et al., 2022), are distinguished by stringent *skill-based proficiency criteria* rather than *duration* alone. It involves attaining specific states, progressing through distinct stages, and reaching meditative endpoints (Grabovac, 2015; Sparby & Sacchet, 2025a, 2025c), with these experiences likely being necessary for the most profound improvements in well-being (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2024; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011;

Grabovac et al., 2011). Indeed, putative evidence suggests stronger links between skill-based proficiency and well-being compared to duration-based expertise (Nair et al., 2018). While higher practice amounts are often linked to skill acquisition and advanced meditative phenomenology, this relationship is not necessarily causal or required.

Building on traditional approaches, contemplative science now rigorously investigates advanced meditative states (Sparby, 2017), such as advanced concentration absorption meditation (ACAM), characterized by sustained attention, bliss, stillness, and equanimity (Chowdhury et al., 2025; Demir et al., 2025; Potash et al., 2025; Sparby & Sacchet, 2024; Yang et al., 2024), and advanced investigative insight meditation (AIIM) which focuses on developing awareness of the dynamics of mental experiences, thoughts, and emotions (Yang et al., 2025a). Other areas of inquiry include meditative endpoints like ‘cessation’ and ‘awakening’ (Chowdhury et al., 2023; Laukkonen et al., 2023; van Lutterveld et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025b).

Despite growing interest, the psychological impact of advanced meditation remains understudied. While meditation generally correlates with improved mental health, advanced forms may offer deeper psychological benefits. However, modern psychological conceptions of mental health, typically centered on symptom reduction, do not neatly map onto contemplative frameworks, which emphasize liberation, insight, or awakening over symptom reduction (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025a, 2025c). This disconnect underscores the need for first-person phenomenological research to illuminate how advanced meditation affects mental health (Sparby, 2015, 2017). Qualitative methods are essential for capturing lived experience, exploring how individuals interpret and integrate new states (Gallagher, 2003; Peat et al., 2019; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Since meditation involves mental activities, phenomenology is indispensable for refining definitions, capturing practice diversity, and generating hypotheses, as emphasized in a recent field-defining paper (Sparby & Sacchet, 2022). These approaches also support experimental design, neuroscientific interpretation, clinical insights, and understanding of consciousness shifts (Kyzar & Denfield, 2023; Lutz et al., 2015, 2025; Northoff et al., 2023).

As such, first-person research is central to elucidating how mental health evolves through meditative development.

Preliminary qualitative studies reveal complex, often positive, relationships between meditative development and mental health (Ekici et al., 2020; Full et al., 2013; Kaselionyte & Gumley, 2017; Lomas et al., 2015; Miller, 1993; Shaner et al., 2017; Sparby et al., 2025). However, large-scale, systematic investigations into advanced meditation remain lacking. Without this foundational research, key aspects of advanced meditation, such as transforming acute challenges into long-term benefits and ultimately meditative endpoints, remain poorly understood. This gap not only limits our ability to identify the most effective components of meditation training (Ehmann et al., 2025e) but also hinders a deeper understanding of the individual and contextual factors that moderate these effects.

To address this gap, the present study offers the first large-scale, systematic qualitative analysis of advanced meditators, employing inductive thematic analysis to examine mental health-related experiences. Mental health is conceptualized not merely as the absence of symptoms, but as the presence of well-being and functional capacity across interconnected systems (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; WHO, 2022). Framed within a value-based pluralistic perspective, this study interprets the pursuit of well-being and avoidance of distress through the lens of happiness—defined as the evaluation of what is truly worth striving for (Taylor, 1985). It further distinguishes between *functional well-being* (the realization of purpose and capabilities) and *experiential well-being* (positively valenced felt states and the absence of distress) (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025b), offering a nuanced account of the aims and effects of advanced meditation. By clarifying terminology and psychological effects, this study will, among other outcomes, inform the development of future interventions that enable novices to access advanced meditative states and stages, with the potential to cultivate qualities that enhance individual and societal well-being (Ehmann et al., 2025a). As the first study of its kind at this scale, it offers foundational insight and a basis for broader research in this emerging field.

METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an inductive, exploratory thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) supplemented with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to characterize the effects of advanced meditative states, stages, and endpoints on mental health (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Thematic analysis provided cross-participant patterns, while IPA enabled deeper examination of individual meaning-making. The study followed phenomenological epistemology and COREQ reporting guidelines (Tong et al., 2007). For detailed information on methods, see Supplement A.

Participants

AMs were recruited via snowball sampling due to the rarity of individuals able to reliably access ACAM or AIIM states. Eligibility required ≥ 18 years of age, English fluency, and demonstrable ability to enter and emerge from ACAM or AIIM. Screening involved an online questionnaire followed by a virtual interview and digital informed consent. Twenty-eight meditators participated (ages 26–96; mean = 49). Estimated lifetime practice ranged from ~1,100 to 120,000 hours (mean = 20,435). Most were male (89%). Participants represented diverse traditions, occupations, and countries. Detailed demographics appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Baseline Characteristics	Mean	SD	Range	<i>n</i>	%
Age	49.0	17.5	26 – 96		
Gender					
Male				25	89.3
Female				3	10.7
Home Country					
United states				18	64.3
Europe				5	17.9

Canada				3	10.7
Other				2	7.1
Meditation hours					
< 5,000				5	17.9
5,000 – 9,999				8	28.6
10,000 – 19,999				4	14.3
20,000 – 29,999				4	14.3
30,000 – 39,999				2	7.1
40,000 – 49,999				1	3.6
> 50,000				3	10.7
Unknown				1	3.6
Years of education	18.0	3.68	12 – 27		
< 15 years				6	21.4
15 – 20 years				14	50.0
> 20 years				7	25.0
Unknown				1	3.6
Marital status					
Married or living with someone as married				15	53.6
Never married				8	28.6
Separated				1	3.6
Divorced or annulled				1	3.6
Unknown				3	10.7
Annual household income					
< \$10,000				1	3.6
\$10,000 – \$24,999				4	14.3
\$25,000 – \$49,999				1	3.6
\$50,000 – \$74,999				3	10.7
\$75,000 – \$99,999				2	7.1
\$100,000 – \$124,999				1	3.6
\$125,000 – \$149,999				3	10.7
\$150,000 – \$174,999				2	7.1
\$175,000 – \$199,999				3	10.7
\$200,000 – \$299,999				0	0
≥ \$300,000				4	14.3
Unknown				3	10.7

Researcher Characteristics

All interviews were conducted by TS, an expert phenomenological interviewer with extensive experience in contemplative research. The coding team consisted of four researchers with varied backgrounds in psychology, philosophy, and meditation practice. Reflexive practices, e.g., regular debriefing and discussion of assumptions, were used to minimize bias.

Data Collection

Between June 2022 and March 2025, 60 semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted (55 included in analysis). Each lasted 60–120 minutes, and participants completed 1–4 sessions. Interviews focused on experiences related to ACAM (e.g., jhānas), AIIIM (e.g., insight stages), and meditative endpoints (e.g., cessations). Questions probed phenomenology, perceived effects, and changes in functioning.

Data Processing and Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed using AI software, and checked for accuracy according to standardized rules. Transcriptions were cleaned of fillers but remained verbatim in content. The coding process was inductive and iterative. Two coders reviewed early interviews to identify mental-health-related themes and constructed a hierarchical codebook, which was refined through team discussion as new themes emerged. Transcripts were analyzed using MAXQDA. For detailed information on methods, including *Interrater Reliability* and *Saturation Analysis*, please see Supplement A.

Data Presentation

Participant quotations were lightly edited for clarity, with disfluencies and filler words removed when content remained unchanged. Ellipses indicate brief omissions; bracketed ellipses mark longer ones; brackets are used for clarification or grammar. Representative quotes appear in Table 2 and the results section; extended quotations are in Supplement B, and the full codebook is in Supplement C.

Ethics, Funding, and Data Availability

The study was approved by the Mass General Brigham IRB (2019P00390) and Witten/Herdecke University ethics boards. No external funding was received. De-identified data are available upon request.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of 55 phenomenological interviews from 28 advanced meditators yielded eight themes related to improved mental health associated with advanced meditation practice. Themes were organized into two overarching domains: *Positive* and *Other* (Table 2). Within each theme, multiple subthemes captured the nuanced and multifaceted nature of participants' experiences. Mental health themes related to challenging or adverse experiences are reported in a separate manuscript. An extended results section, including longer participant quotes, is provided in Supplement B.

Table 2

Domains, Themes, and Subthemes of Advanced Meditators' Mental Health Identified using Thematic Analysis

Domains and Themes	Subthemes	Characteristics	Sample quote
Positive Positive General (208)	1) <i>Pleasant and Beneficial Experiences and Perspective</i> 2) <i>Well-Being</i>	Broadly pleasant or beneficial shifts in physical, psychological, or existential tone—marked by ease, lightness, or appreciation—that do not clearly fit into specific domains like affect, cognition, or clinical outcomes.	"And then some of the other things, like negative self talk, just seemed to drop. Not that it vanished entirely. But I would say like 80% of it left and never returned. I don't know what happened to it, it just disappeared. [...] That was a big surprise." (P2)
Positive Attitudes (224)	1) <i>Non-Attachment</i> 2) <i>Flexibility in Relation to Identity or Sense of Self</i> 3) <i>Acceptance and Forgiveness</i>	Beneficial shifts in outlook, perspective, and self-orientation—marked by greater openness, adaptability, and emotional resilience, along with reduced identification with thoughts, emotions, or self-related concerns.	"it's very easeful, to be in a place where self isn't necessary. You know, it's actually not there anyway. It is created and to kind of be able to go oh, yeah, this is... and so that itself is an insight practice to recognize that there's greater ease when there's less self." (P16)

Positive Affect (282)	1) <i>Emotion Regulation</i> 2) <i>Reduced Cravings and Aversion, and Less Focus on Sense Experience</i> 3) <i>Positive Mood and Joy</i> 4) <i>Empathy and Compassion</i>	Beneficial and stable emotional states—such as improved mood, emotional balance, and enhanced interpersonal feeling—experienced as core psychological outcomes of advanced meditation.	“I could process my emotions very well. (...) I cried about the deepest traumas I've had in my life, which is very nice. Feels very freeing to do that. And the more I do that, actually, the more, comfortable I feel.” (P28)
Positive Cognition and Mentation (219)	1) <i>Mental and Perceptual Clarity, Attention, and Focus</i> 2) <i>Awareness and Insight into the Perceived Nature of Reality and the Mind</i> 3) <i>Mental Balance and Tranquility</i>	Enhanced mental functioning—including improved attention, perceptual clarity, insight, and cognitive stability—experienced both during meditation and in everyday life.	“And then it also seems to be purifying in a sense that the mind becomes like, much less sticky and much brighter. I mean, especially after a long sitting, just the world seems so bright, you know, everything's so great.” (P4)
Positive Impact on Life (301)	1) <i>Positive Impact on Trajectory of Life</i> 2) <i>Application of Meditation Insights to Daily Life</i> 3) <i>Positive Impact on Interpersonal Relationships</i>	Meaningful changes in life orientation, values, behavior, decision-making, and relationships that participants attributed to insights gained through advanced meditation practice.	“Oh, it's quite extraordinary, actually. And it will alter completely one's relationship ... to the sensual desire and all sensory experiences. It will create an ease of happiness and of equanimity that really is... It's just quite extraordinary. That lasts, you know, that lasts. It points to a potential of the mind that I think most people don't even know is possible.” (P9)
Positive Clinical and Non-Clinical Transformative Experiences (120)	1) <i>Transformation from Negative to Positive Experiences</i> 2) <i>Improvements in Psychiatric Mental Health Conditions or Symptoms</i>	Profound psychological changes—therapeutic or developmental in nature—often described as shifts from suffering to clarity, instability to balance, or pathology to health.	“I used to have ...addictions. I used to ... drink too much. I don't drink now, for example, and that wasn't a conscious choice. It's just simply that I don't like that experience or that I don't have a need for it or something like that.” (P27)
Other Therapy Experiences (38)	No separate subthemes	Participants' reflections on the interplay between meditation and psychotherapy, including how each modality supported psychological healing, with meditation	“Yes. So trauma processing stuff. Just trying to get rid of my own suffering through any means. Western modalities, eastern modalities. Tried it all. It just happened to be that meditation and soul awakening stuff worked the best.” (P28)

		sometimes enhancing therapy and therapy helping to process meditation-related challenges.	
Comparison and Connection to Psychedelic Experiences and Other Substances (23)	No separate subthemes	Participants' reflections on similarities, differences, and relationships between their meditation experiences and their use of psychedelic drugs or other substances.	"And, after that, during a psychedelic trip, I [the first stage of awakening]" (P27)

Note. Brackets indicate the number of coded segments for each theme and subject IDs.

Positive Domain

Overall, participants described advanced meditation as generating pervasive and enduring positive changes in their lives. These included shifts in attitudes and worldview, affective tone, cognitive functioning, perceived life trajectory, relationships, clinical symptoms, and general pleasant experiences, which were all frequently reported as extending beyond formal practice into everyday contexts.

Positive General

The first theme, *Positive General*, encompassed broadly pleasant, uplifting, or beneficial experiences that did not clearly fit into more specific domains such as affect, cognition, or clinical outcomes. Participants reported diffuse shifts in physical, psychological, and existential tone, characterized by ease, lightness, and appreciation. They described feeling generally "better" in their bodies, more comfortable even when ill or in pain, and experiencing a global sense of well-being and freedom from perceived limitations or self-imposed constraints.

This theme included two subthemes: (1) *Pleasant and Beneficial Experiences and Perspectives*, and (2) *Well-Being*. Across these, participants, for example, described broadly positive shifts marked by bodily ease, comfort, and a steady sense of physical and

psychological lightness, often present even during illness or discomfort: “I’m just kind of in a blissful physical state. The body feels good all the time. Even a lot of times when I’m sick” (P6) Participants also reported a more global feeling of well-being, an experience of openness, freedom, and relief from previously assumed limitations. As Participant 2 noted: “[T]here’s this incredible sense of well-being. A real sense of a lack of limitations or a lack of self-imposed constraints.”

Overall, these subthemes reflected a shift toward a more easeful, spacious, and supportive baseline, from which other benefits naturally unfolded.

Positive Attitudes

The *Positive Attitudes* theme captured sustained and beneficial shifts in outlook, perspective, and self-related orientation. Participants reported a marked reduction in rumination, stickiness of thought, and fixation on outcomes, describing a process of “letting go” of stories and mental narratives that lead to an overall increase in openness, adaptability, and emotional resilience. Subthemes included *Non-Attachment* (less clinging to internal experiences, such as emotions and thoughts, and external circumstances), *Flexibility in Relation to Identity or Sense of Self* (reduced identification with a fixed “I,” increased capacity to see experience from a decentered, less personal perspective), and *Acceptance and Forgiveness* (greater willingness to acknowledge, accept, and integrate past events and perceived faults in self and others). Many linked these changes to increased equanimity and a sense of intimacy with ongoing experience:

“What surprised me the most... is that when the sense of self is greatly attenuated, or absent, there’s a lot of equanimity present. So those go hand in hand. I guess what’s surprising about that is how intimate everything feels, [which] is not present, like that, otherwise. That’s not something I had expected.” (P2)

Positive Affect

The *Positive Affect* theme summarized affective changes that were experienced as beneficial, relatively stable, and positively valenced, including enduring improvements in mood, emotional stability, and interpersonal feeling, and often experienced as central to the psychological effects of advanced meditation.

Under the *Emotion Regulation* subtheme, participants described being less emotionally reactive, better able to cope with distressing news or circumstances, and less likely to dwell on negative emotions. As Participant 10 shared: “Not only did it save my life...I could get the worst news in the world right now, and I would be able to absolutely cope with it in the most wholesome way possible.” *Reduced Cravings and Aversion, and Less Focus on Sense Experience* involved diminished urges toward sensory gratification and a decreased pull of desires and aversions in everyday life. *Positive Mood and Joy* referred to a background sense of contentment, happiness, or joy, sometimes described as the happiest period of participants’ lives, even amid demanding professional roles: “even my work becomes more enjoyable, although it’s long hours, sometimes 80, 85, 90 hours a week, in the intensive care unit, dealing with very sick people, especially during the pandemic, but the joy and returning to falling in love with my work again, despite the long hours, all those things are very, very helpful” (P11) Finally, *Empathy and Compassion* captured reports of increased sensitivity to others’ emotional states, enhanced attunement to subtle interpersonal cues, and a stronger drive to alleviate suffering, which participants felt improved communication and the emotional climate around them.

Positive Cognition and Mentation

The *Positive Cognition and Mentation* theme reflected perceived enhancements in mental functioning, including awareness, attention, perceptual clarity, insight into mental processes, and overall cognitive stability. In the *Mental and Perceptual Clarity, Attention, and Focus* subtheme, meditators reported increased ability to sustain attention, reduced distraction,

and a “laser-like” clarity of mind, especially after deep absorptive practice. *Awareness and Insight into the Perceived Nature of Reality and the Mind* involved recognizing patterns of craving, seeing how mental states arise and pass, and applying these insights off the cushion to monitor and relax unhelpful tendencies throughout the day. For example, Participant 4 reported: “I mean, there seems to be a certain amount of insight that's gained [...] and then that's carried off the cushion in recognizing whether mind is basically affected by craving throughout the day or not, and then how to just relax that tension and bring it back towards a more collected state throughout the day. So it feels like I'm training the ability to notice mind more clearly.” Finally, *Mental Balance and Tranquility* referred to an abiding sense of cognitive stillness, ease, and equanimity, with participants emphasizing the value of a quiet, stable mind as an outcome in its own right.

Positive Impact on Life

The *Positive Impact on Life* theme concerned broader changes in life direction and daily functioning attributed to meditation. Under *Positive Impact on Trajectory of Life*, participants described major subjectively or objectively positive shifts in lifestyle, career paths, and social environments, such as moving away from chaotic or substance-focused settings toward simpler, more peaceful lives. These changes sometimes occurred due to enhanced self-awareness or perspective-taking. As Participant 21 noted: “Hugely...completely changed everything. I was very much heading down a road of losing all the things dear to me; I was very self-absorbed, selfish, lots of ego, lots of attaching external success to my identity. [...] But this element of being able to just see my own behavior more honestly, and be able to alter my behavior ... changed everything for me. So having just more perspective [...] is the bit that moved my life in a different direction.”

The second subtheme, *Application of Meditation Insights to Daily Life*, involved consciously using insights or skills obtained from meditative practice (e.g., recognition that

happiness is internally generated, appreciation of “wishlessness,” or valuing stillness) to guide behavior and coping in ordinary situations. The last theme, *Positive Impact on Interpersonal Relationships*, captured reports of being easier to be around, more emotionally available, more emotionally attuned, and more positively influential on others, with some describing themselves as a “source” of joy or stability in their social networks.

Positive Clinical and Non-Clinical Transformative Experiences

The sixth major theme, *Positive Clinical and Non-Clinical Transformative Experiences*, encompassed reports of profound psychological changes that were either therapeutic in nature or reflected a fundamental shift in mental health or well-being. These experiences were often framed as transformations from suffering to clarity, instability to balance, or pathology to health. In the *Transformation from Negative to Positive Experiences* subtheme, meditators described moving through periods of intense suffering, existential distress, or retreat-related difficulty that culminated in dramatic shifts toward beneficial psychological outcomes, such as clarity, joy, amazement, an appreciation of the present, and a renewed sense of beauty in ordinary experience. These transitions frequently involved surrender, confrontation, or endurance through a period of intense emotional or existential difficulty.

The *Improvements in Psychiatric Mental Health Conditions or Symptoms* subtheme included reports of substantial or complete reductions in symptoms consistent with DSM-5-TR and ICD-11 diagnoses, such as general and social anxiety, panic disorder, trauma-related conditions, addictions, anger-related problems, and ADHD. For example, Participant 12 reported: “[P]robably twelve years after I started meditating. My ADHD stopped. I couldn't experience it anymore.” Likewise, Participant 10 described: “The panic attacks went away [...] after the first physical manifestation of the chest opening.” And Participant 28 highlighted: “I was riddled with anxiety in the past. Like, absolutely broken from anxiety. I lost my job, lost my friends, alienated my family. But nowadays I feel pretty good.”

Participants attributed these improvements, including full recovery from severe and active suicidality, to advanced meditation practice, often describing it as a decisive turning point that enabled them to disengage from deeply ingrained cognitive-affective patterns: “My option was suicide, or it was health. Right? [...] I had gone through the total disenchantment phase of, you know, people, situations, and I think I'm a very fortunate individual. [...] When I started seeing things in meditation, I was like, wait a second. There's something better to this. There's something better to this life. [...] I'm happier than I've ever been, ever.” They emphasized that their advanced meditative skills translated directly into clinically meaningful benefits, noting that the ability to access specific meditative states, stages, and endpoints enabled them to intentionally increase positive psychosomatic states and diminish negative ones, resulting in substantial improvements in psychological healing and well-being.

Other Domain

The *Other* domain included themes that were not straightforwardly positive or negative in valence but instead addressed topics adjacent to advanced meditation practice.

Therapy Experiences

The first major theme concerned *Therapy Experiences*, in which participants reflected on the relationship between meditation and psychotherapy. Some described advanced meditation as enhancing therapy by facilitating vivid experiential access, emotional depth, and stability during therapeutic work: “I found it really helpful when I started doing psychotherapeutic work, having access to those states, because it made the other methodologies I'd use much easier.” (P32) Others reported using therapy to help process insecurities, trauma, or challenging material triggered by meditation. Several noted a synergistic interplay, in which insights from one modality informed the other. At the same time, a subset of participants expressed

skepticism about the efficacy of conventional therapy compared with intensive contemplative practice, perceiving therapy as providing only partial relief relative to the deeper changes afforded by advanced meditation.

Comparison and Connection to Psychedelic Experiences and Other Substances

The final theme, *Comparison and Connection to Psychedelic Experiences and Other Substances*, captured participants' reflections on how advanced meditative states related to experiences with psychedelics and other drugs. Some described specific absorption states as phenomenologically similar to psychoactive effects (e.g., opioid-like warmth): "Three is like an incredibly warm filling up the bathtub [...] it has an opioid-like response. And then when I sit in that for a while, it goes up through my head like it kind of fills up my body, and then I just lose track of it." (P24). Others reported that psychedelic experiences catalyzed renewed commitment to meditation or enhanced endurance in practice. Participants also compared insights from meditation to those from psychedelics, noting both overlaps (e.g., psychedelic-induced repeated "ego death" and re-emergence that resembled meditation-induced dissolutions of self; or cessations of experience) and differences (e.g., sense of agency, integration, and the possibility of accessing similar states without substances).

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effects of advanced meditation on mental health using exploratory phenomenological and thematic analytic approaches. Drawing on, to our knowledge, the largest qualitative sample of AMs to date, we identified wide-ranging positive effects spanning affective, cognitive, relational, and existential domains. These included: (1) substantial improvements in baseline well-being, often independent of external circumstances; (2) heightened positive attitudes, such as increased openness, psychological flexibility, and acceptance; (3) enhanced positive affect, including improved emotion regulation, equanimity, and baseline happiness; (4) greater mental and perceptual clarity, attentional stability, and cognitive balance; (5) positive shifts in life orientation, including more sustainable and prosocial values, improved coping strategies, and deeper interpersonal connections; and (6) transformative changes in psychological health, including complete reversals of previously diagnosed clinical conditions. Many participants reported deeply meaningful experiences of insight, non-attachment, and perspective change, often emerging through the resolution of significant psychological hardship. Reports also highlighted the context-dependent value of psychotherapy and potential synergies between psychedelic experiences and meditative development.

We contextualized these findings using a pluralistic framework, distinguishing *functional well-being*, which denotes the full expression of a person's capacities and flourishing more broadly, from *experiential well-being*, which, by contrast, refers to the felt experience of well-being and reduced distress (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025b). Participants reported enhancements in functional well-being (adaptive coping, resilience, interpersonal attunement, flexible perspective-taking), alongside gains in experiential well-being (reduced distress, emotional disturbance, and psychiatric symptoms, as well as elevated baseline joy and mental clarity). These outcomes closely align with prior research on LTMs and AMs, which documents elevated happiness, reduced negative affect and stress, improved emotion regulation, compassion, and

interpersonal relationships, and fewer psychiatric symptoms (Sparby et al., 2025). Integrative neurocognitive models suggest that these effects may reflect enhanced cognitive–sensory integration, affective decoupling, autonomic balance, and large-scale network reorganization, including reduced default mode network connectivity and greater integration of attention and emotion systems (Ehmann et al., 2025c, 2025d; Sezer et al., 2022).

Despite the significant neurocognitive changes observed in LTMs, little research has investigated the unique benefits of AMs' mastery of mental skills. Preliminary findings suggest that LTMs engaging in advanced practices report increases in compassion, flourishing, and self-transcendent outcomes, including non-dual awareness—where subject-object distinctions in perception dissolve (Ehmann et al., 2025b). Several models attempt to explain how such perceptual transformations characteristic of AMs relate to enhanced cognitive-affective functioning and well-being. The Mindfulness-to-Meaning theory posits that meta-awareness and decentering promote cognitive reappraisal and positive affect, ultimately facilitating self-transcendence and non-dual awareness (Ehmann & Gawrysiak, 2025; Garland & Fredrickson, 2019). Complementary models emphasize meta-cognitive self-regulation across attention, emotion, and conceptual processing as a core mechanism of meditative development (Dorjee, 2016). Together, these neurocognitive mechanisms may enable access to increasingly refined existential modes, described here as meditative states and stages, marked by reduced reification, a lessened tendency to experience mental contents as inherently solid, and a weakening of subject–object boundaries. With continued practice, transient self-transcendent states may consolidate into enduring traits, resulting in a fundamentally altered mode of psychological functioning characterized by heightened interconnection and lasting gains in both functional and experiential well-being (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2024; Ehmann et al., 2025d). AMs, such as those in the present study, may therefore represent the apex of meditative development, distinguished by high capacities for meta-cognitive self-regulation, meaning-making, self-transcendence, and access to existential modes of awareness.

Despite an overall positive trend, participants frequently described *non-linear trajectories* of functional and experiential well-being (Galante et al., 2023). Transformative shifts, from distress to insight, contraction to release, or suffering to clarity, were prominent, with several participants reporting breakthroughs that fundamentally altered their experience of self and world. These changes often involved confronting suffering, which ultimately led to deeper joy, perspectival shifts, and experiences of what has been called liberation. Through engagement with active, receptive, and nondual practices (e.g., ACAM, AIIIM), AMs cultivated refined discernment of mental phenomena alongside positive qualities (Dahl et al., 2015; Sparby & Sacchet, 2022). suggesting that advanced meditation functions as an intentional process of deep mental development through which existential anxieties are transformed (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025c). Notably, although overlapping with clinical aims, advanced meditation is uniquely oriented toward experiential insight into existential realities, such as impermanence, with the goal of culminating in radical meditative endpoints characterized by profound reductions in suffering (e.g., not merely forgiving a specific person, but experiencing complete forgiveness toward all phenomena) (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025a). These realizations, considered forms of awakening, are associated with profound changes in mental health, but often extend beyond to include changes in moral values, prosocial behaviors, and ontological realizations (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2024; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). This capacity for self-transformation, which involves flexibly molding perception in accordance with beneficial mindsets, uniquely situates advanced meditation at the intersection of science, religious studies, and philosophy, highlighting the need for an interdisciplinary framework that accommodates diverse ontological assumptions while remaining grounded in empirical rigor (Galante et al., 2023).

In this spirit, and contributing to a 'planetary ontology' that rejects both dogmatic universality and cultural relativism in favor of mutual transformation through intercivilizational dialogue (Thompson, 1986), one may draw on several cross-cultural thinkers who emphasize that engagement with suffering is essential to transcending existential despair and cultivating

liberation and well-being (Gueullette, 2009; Heidegger, 1927; Nishitani, 1982; Tillich, 2000). Closely aligned with the participant's themes, in *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich, a German existential philosopher and Christian theologian (1886–1965), articulated three core ontological anxieties that arise from our human existence as beings who enact a world of significance: the anxiety of fate and death, social guilt and condemnation, and meaninglessness and emptiness (Tillich, 2000). Tillich argues that these anxieties can be overcome through the experience of the “God above God”, a non-conceptual awareness of being that provides the courage to affirm life despite its ultimate threats. This resonates with Buddhist practices that aim to cultivate a non-conceptual understanding of reality and the roots of suffering (Thompson, 2023), and with Christian mystical frameworks, in which suffering is seen as directly connected to the divine (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025b). Through engaging with suffering, the practitioner may reduce dualistic ego-fixations built on craving and aversion (Grabovac et al., 2011) or realize the divine presence in suffering itself (Gueullette, 2009), each offering a potential gateway to liberation by dissolving the perceived separation between a separate self and the rest of existence (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025b).

Indeed, both Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), a German existential philosopher focused on the phenomenology of being, and Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), a Japanese philosopher of the Kyoto school concerned with nihilism and nothingness, laid out an existential ontology that aims to challenge traditional Western metaphysical assumptions, opening the possibility of a nondual, planetary frame of being (Heidegger, 1927; Nishitani, 1982; Thompson, 1986). In his analysis of authentic existence in *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that the human being, whom he calls *Dasein* or ‘there-being’, the being that takes its own being as an issue, does not simply exist as a detached observer of life, but is *thrown* into a world where suffering, finitude, and care are integral to its existence (Heidegger, 1927). In confronting the anxiety of death, the certain possibility of non-existence, *Dasein* is presented with an opportunity for a more authentic, open

life. Rather than fleeing from existential suffering, *Dasein* may come to own and dwell within it, thereby disclosing a new horizon of meaning.

The reports in this study echo this existential insight: advanced meditation appears both to reduce suffering and reframe its meaning. Nishitani further develops Heidegger's ideas (Heidegger, 1927; Nishitani, 1982; Thompson, 1986). Nishitani begins by describing how suffering confronts us with the contingency of existence, accidents and illnesses may occur at any time without any apparent reason. This uncertainty may lead to *nihilism*—the sense that nothing matters. Suffering may represent a turning point if one faces the threat of meaninglessness directly, without retreating into distraction, conceptualization, or transcendental guarantees (e.g., an imagined realm free of pain and despair). In what Nishitani terms *trans-descendence*, one does not escape suffering but passes through it, opening into *absolute nothingness* (*śūnyatā*), not a mere void, but an experiential field of radical interdependence and freedom.

As part of this transformation, self-identity is likewise reconfigured: the experience of an isolated, stable self gives way to a more relational and dynamic sense of selfhood. In this context, suffering is no longer framed as a mere privation or insoluble problem, but as a potential site for existential and psychological transformation (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2024; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). This shift was echoed by many participants in the present study, who reported that relinquishing self-centeredness and a rigid self-identity brought about a profound sense of freedom and peace, a transformation that many advanced meditators described as central to their experience of positive mental health.

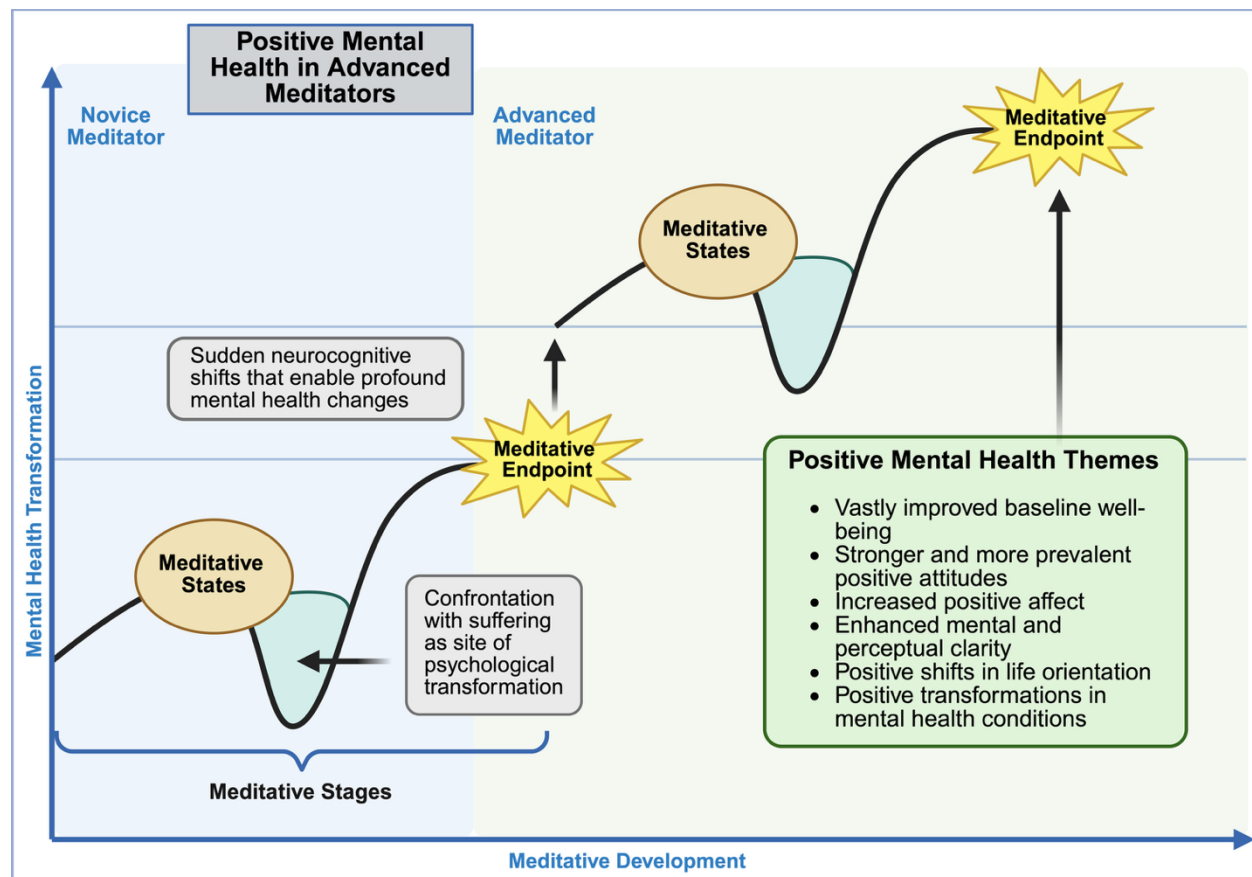
This ontological reversal offers an alternative to both clinical symptom reduction and existential despair: it gestures toward a planetary mental health framework where suffering is not merely a deficit to be treated but a site of potential realization. Meditative development, and particularly later stages of meditative development, may thus cultivate a skillset in which these ontological anxieties, rather than being eliminated, are confronted, integrated, and transformed

into a broader horizon of meaning, insight, compassion, and awareness (Dahl et al., 2020; Sparby & Sacchet, 2025c). Such development may constitute not only a psychological shift but also an epistemological and ontological self-transformation toward a more peaceful, resilient, and liberated mode of existence. In a time of escalating global mental health crises (Santomauro et al., 2021), these findings point toward underexplored and potentially powerful tools for psychological flourishing. Future research should examine how components of advanced meditative development might be responsibly adapted for clinical contexts and how they may synergize with emerging neurotechnologies and psychedelic-assisted interventions (Ehmann et al., 2025a; Ehmann & Gawrysiak, 2025; Lord et al., 2024; McAlpine et al., 2024; Smigielski et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, more research is needed to understand the role of negative experiences in meditative development (Grabovac, 2015). Such experiences may appear as direct opposites to happiness and well-being and can manifest in both experiential (e.g., felt distress) and functional (e.g., impairment) forms (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025b). Determining whether these experiences are beneficial or problematic for long-term mental health and transformation depends largely on the interpretative framework applied. Clinical perspectives may pathologize them, whereas existential or contemplative frameworks might frame them as necessary confrontations with suffering that catalyze growth. For example, passage through relative nothingness or existential nihilism may be an essential phase in realizing the freedom of absolute emptiness (*śūnyatā*) (Nishitani, 1982). This trajectory parallels the unfolding of AIIM stages, in which practitioners often encounter the “dark night” (*dukkha ñāṇas*) before attaining equanimity and deeper insight into ‘no self’ (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025a, 2025c, 2025b). Cultural values and therapeutic models thus critically shape whether meditative difficulties are viewed as pathology or as integral to transformation (Sparby, 2015). A schematic depiction of this non-linear unfolding is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Influence of Later-Stage Meditative Development on Mental Health and Well-Being



Note. This figure depicts the non-linear progression of meditative development across proficiency levels (Galante et al., 2023). Advanced meditators are defined by their mastery of skills that enable reliable access to profound meditative states, stages, and endpoints. Transient states unfold within intermediate cycles of meditative stages, which can culminate in meditative endpoints, sudden neurocognitive shifts into greater well-being (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025c). These stages can include temporary psychological and existential distress that supports later insight and growth (Sparby & Sacchet, 2025b). Our qualitative findings suggest that advanced meditators express the highest potential for mental health transformation, reflected in the six major themes.

As this third wave of meditation research continues (Sacchet et al., 2024), it may serve not only to improve clinical interventions but also to revitalize our understanding of what it means to live fully, to suffer meaningfully, and to flourish radically. At its most profound, meditative development may help to illuminate dimensions of human experience that are at once psychological and ontological, opening a transformative space in which suffering is not merely endured or cured, but encountered as a site of depth, transformation, and beauty. As participants suggested, these states are not abstract ideals but lived possibilities, gesturing toward new models of mental health grounded in intimacy, presence, and existential courage.

Conclusion

Advanced meditation and later stages of meditative development appear to foster profound transformations across affective, cognitive, interpersonal, and existential domains. Participants reported tremendous reductions in suffering and psychiatric symptoms, as well as enduring gains in experiential and functional well-being. These changes unfolded through a non-linear progress through meditative states, stages, and endpoints, in which psychological hardship was often confronted and integrated rather than avoided. By cultivating awareness, flexibility, and existential understanding, advanced meditation may offer a unique developmental pathway toward both healing and flourishing. While these findings remain qualitative and exploratory, they provide foundational evidence of the transformative potential of advanced meditative development and lay important groundwork for future interdisciplinary research that bridges contemplative practice with clinical, biological, and psychological sciences. Future research should investigate how meditative development might be responsibly adapted and cultivated for broader mental health applications while honoring its depth, complexity, and transformative potential.

Author Contribution Statement

Sebastian Ehmann contributed to the methodology of the present manuscript, as well as formal analysis, validation, writing – original draft, and visualization. Terje Sparby contributed to conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, validation, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, supervision, and project administration. Vanessa R. Naughton contributed to formal analysis, validation, data curation, and writing – original draft. Matthew D. Sacchet contributed to conceptualization, methodology, resources, writing – review and editing, supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition. The corresponding author attests that all listed authors meet authorship criteria and that no others meeting the criteria have been omitted.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the first author used ChatGPT-5 (OpenAI, 2025) to improve the clarity and style of the written content. The tool was not used to generate new content, ideas, or citations. After employing this service, the first author carefully reviewed and edited all text. All authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the publication.

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