**Definition:** Meditation from The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

A practice in which the individual focuses his or her attention inward to achieve a greater sense of clarity and stillness. Involving both mind and body, meditation has been linked to increases in wellness and life adjustment. It is practiced in secular and religious contexts.

**Summary Article:** Meditation from Encyclopedia of Global Religions

Meditation practices develop mental focus, which is used for the attainment of particular states of consciousness. Meditation is most readily associated with Hinduism and Buddhism; however, it is also practiced in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, numerous indigenous traditions, and a variety of new religious movements. The global dissemination of meditation practice is traced in this entry from India through China as well as from the Middle East through Europe and the Americas.

**India: Yoga, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Tantra**

Among the earliest representations of meditation practice are figures sitting in what appear to be meditative postures on seals from archaeological sites in the Indus Valley civilization (ca. 2700 BCE). The first extensive recorded treatment of meditation practice in Hinduism is found in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (100 BCE to 200 CE). In this classic text, dhyana (meditation) focused on the cessation of thought. Samkhya philosophy, a dualist philosophy that sees the cosmos as consisting of two radically different forces, purusha consciousness (spirit) and prakrti (matter), is the metaphysical foundation of the Yoga Sutras. Yoga meditation practices were designed as psychophysical disciplines to unite these two cosmic forces. The mind is understood as being continuously engaged in thoughts of past actions, and these thoughts shape the present and create the future. Yoga meditation techniques are a means for stopping this constant stream of thoughts. When the mind becomes still, it can gain awareness of the essential reality that is beyond the subject-object dualism.

Hindu Tantric practices reached maturity during the 10th century CE and focused on the acquisition and use of energy. In its classical form, Tantra is an amalgam of Samkhya philosophy and regional religious traditions focused on The Goddess and Shiva. Tantric meditation differs from that described by Patanjali in its extensive use of visualization, recitation of sacred mantras (sounds), and hand mudras (gestures). As a result of its use of erotic imagery and metaphor, Tantra captured the imagination of the early British colonialists and has generated a contemporary cultural phenomenon often quite different from the classical teachings. Classical Tantric meditation is a discipline for the transcendence of the cosmic duality via the full integration of the spiritual consciousness into the human body.

**Nepal, Southeast Asia, Japan, and China: Buddhist Expansion and Chinese Meditation**

At the same time when the teachings of the Yoga Sutras were circulating orally (sixth century BCE), the meditation practices of Buddhism were being developed in India. In contrast to Hindu teachings, Buddhism focused on the attainment of nirvana, the ultimate freedom from suffering. According to Buddhism, suffering results from the misperception that appearances, sensory perceptions, and mental
formulations are real. In the two major schools of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, bhavana (meditation) focuses on creating a consciousness of samatha (calm) and vipasyana (insight or higher vision). Together these states constitute the mindfulness practice, which develops an awareness of the body and a general sensation of tranquility that prepares the consciousness for absorption in a state of sunyata (emptiness). Once emptiness is achieved, then nirvana can be experienced. Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism developed as a branch of Mahayana and, like the Hindu Tantra, matured in the 10th century CE. Once Vajrayana practice entered Tibet, it underwent further development, and today, it remains at the core of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Theravada Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, whereas Mahayana Buddhism progressed eastward into China (second century CE) and Japan (fifth and sixth centuries CE). In both instances, Mahayana developed into Zen (in Chinese, Ch'an) and its meditative practice zazen by the eighth and ninth centuries CE. The goal of Zen practice is the attainment of knowledge that results from a radical change of perception (satori). Zen satori, like the attainment of nirvana, is an experience beyond subject-object dualism and results in union in absolute reality.

Outside Buddhism, Chinese traditions of meditation focus on the practice of quiet sitting and are rooted in the philosophical traditions of Daoism and Confucianism. Daoist meditation, like that of the Buddhist traditions, develops the attainment of mental focus for the achievement of absorption in the absolute reality. Confucian meditation employs quiet sitting for accessing the absolute that resides within the individual. In many of the traditions that developed from India and Asia, the states of consciousness that result from meditation are meant not only for attainment of spiritual goals but also for use in the living experience and actions of the adept.

The Middle East and Continental Europe: Monotheistic Meditation Practices

Monotheistic traditions became the primary religious practices of Europe and the Middle East by the medieval period. In these traditions, meditation is a part of the practice of intensely focused contemplation and contemplative prayer. The goal of these practices is to bring oneself into the presence of God and into communion with Him. Once communion is achieved, the participant can enjoy a state of rapture in the divine presence and engage in conversation with God. From its earliest inception, Judaism employed intense contemplation on the Torah for the attainment of knowledge of the texts’ meaning as well as a way of accessing the presence of God and knowing His mind. In Islam, the prophet Muhammad received the Qur'an during extended periods of contemplation in the desert, and meditation practice is prescribed for all Muslims in the Qur'an. Another Muslim practice for the achievement of communion with God is the trance state that can be produced by dhikr, or continual remembrance of God. Medieval Catholic mystics employed intense contemplation and trance states for the attainment of an ecstatic form of communion with God. Today in Catholic and Protestant sects, contemplative prayer is practiced for the attainment of knowledge as well as communion. The focus on communion with God as opposed to absorption in or awakening of absolute reality is one of the key differences between Western and Eastern forms of meditative practice, respectively.

Meditation: Contemporary Global Phenomenon

In the late 18th century, along with European political and economic expansion, a process of religious exchange was initiated by early Christian missionaries. Christian missionaries, many of whom were linguists and early social scientists, were responsible for some of the earliest expositions on non-Christian religious traditions and their practices. By the late 19th century, scholars such as Max Müller and Rhys Davis began producing the first widely disseminated translations of Hindu and Buddhist texts.
These texts greatly influenced the early Transcendentalist thinkers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, as well as the Theosophist Madame Blavatsky. During the 1893 World Parliament of Religion in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda introduced Hindu teachings, and the Zen priest Shaki Soen those of Buddhism, to Western scholars and theologians. Following the World Parliament, Vivekananda lectured extensively in Europe and the United States and established the Vedanta Society. Zen teachings were later disseminated in the West by Soen's disciple D. T. Suzuki, who first came for an extended lecture tour at Columbia University in 1931. Among Suzuki's early students were several future authors who would exert a profound influence on the "beat generation" of the 1950s and the counterculture of the late 1960s: Alan Watts, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac.

In 1959, the Dalai Lama was forced into exile in India, and Tibetan Buddhism began its movement westward. Chögyam Trungpa and Tarthang Tulku were among the first Tibetan teachers to travel west in the early 1960s. Chögyam Trungpa came to Oxford in 1963 to study Western philosophy and comparative religion. In 1968 and 1970, respectively, both Tarthang Tulku and Chögyam Trungpa arrived in the United States and established meditation centers. During this time, students from the United States and Europe began traveling to Asia in greater numbers to study meditation. Also, in the late 1960s, teachers such as Swami Sivananda (Sivananda Yoga), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation), and A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (Krishna Consciousness) left Asia and established centers in the Americas and Europe.

Focus on Christian meditation increased during the late 1960s, in part due to the teachings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton and his integration of Zen practices. The rise of Hindu and Buddhist meditation in the West has resulted in increased interest in other forms of meditation practice such as those found in Islam (Sufism) and Judaism (Kabbalah). While the concepts and techniques for meditation vary, many traditions recognize the value of mental focus.

See also
Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Vajrayana, Tibetan, Zen Buddhism

Further Readings

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