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The History of Meditation: A Brief Timeline of Practices and Traditions

Meditation started to become really mainstream around the turn of the millennium—but few people are aware of how old and broad this art really is, and how it got developed in different parts of the world. In this short essay, I'll attempt to give a general map of the history of meditation, and its many contemplative traditions.

The information in this article was collected from my years of study in different traditions. Other than that, it's not easy to find this information laid out like this, as each tradition tends to focus only on its own history, and offers just one piece of the puzzle.

Understanding the bigger picture of meditation will allow you to discover which tradition or which [type of meditation](#) you would like to explore.

Finally, part of the material here was also published in my new book [Practical Meditation](#), and is reproduced here with the permission of Dorling Kindersley Limited (DK).

1. Cave Yogis and Vedic Sages



Meditation was first developed in India, a very long time ago. The oldest *documented* evidences of the practice of meditation are wall arts in the Indian subcontinent from approximately 5,000 to 3,500 BCE, showing people seated in meditative postures with half-closed eyes.

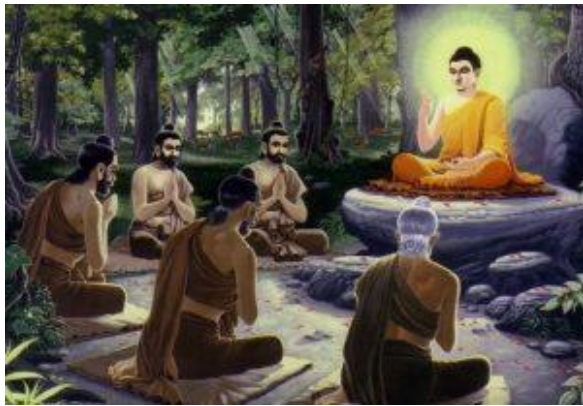
The oldest written mention of meditation is from 1,500 BCE in the Vedas. That is the time when the Vedas made it to paper, but it must be understood that the Vedas had been memorized and passed down as an oral tradition for centuries, long before they were finally written down.

During this ancient time, meditation was a practice for religious people and wandering ascetics, who through it sought to transcend the limitations of human life, connect with universal forces (personified as deities), and union with the transcendental reality (called *Brahman* in the Vedas).

The Hindu tradition of meditation includes both the **Yogis** meditating in caves, as well as the **Sages** (*rishis*) of the Vedic culture. It is the oldest meditation tradition on Earth—still alive and thriving. It has hundreds of lineages and techniques.

The modern Yoga movement, which emphasizes postures and breathing exercises, is an adaptation of just one of these hundreds of Yogic schools (the Hatha Yoga school). In general, Yoga is a wisdom tradition whose core is meditation and spiritual development—not a system of stretches and breathing practices.

2. The Buddha



In the 6th century BCE, Siddhartha Gautama abandoned his royal life as a prince and set out to attain Enlightenment. In this process, he learned meditation and philosophy from the best Yogis he could find in his region.

After a while, still dissatisfied with what he learned, he diverged from that tradition and created his own methodology. He achieved the Enlightenment he sought and became the Buddha. He then spent the next decades of his life teaching meditation and spiritual awakening to thousands of people.

Over the next several centuries, Buddhism spread all over Asia, and many different lineages were formed. Nowadays, the Buddhist styles of meditation ([Vipassana](#), Samatha, [Loving-Kindness](#)) are perhaps the most widely practiced forms of meditation in the West.

3. Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism



In the same “golden century” as the Buddha, three other religions were born, all with their own approaches to meditation. They are:

- Jainism in India (founded by *Mahavira*)
- Taoism in China (founded by *Lao Tze*)
- Confucianism in China (founded by *Confucious*).

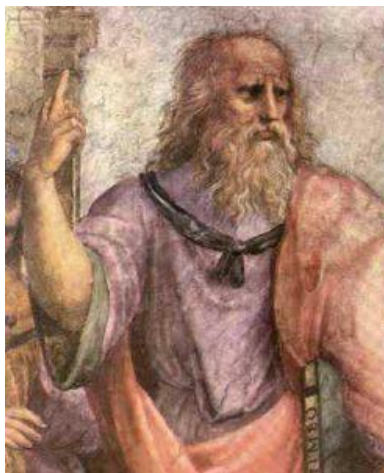
Jainism is a very ascetic tradition that places great emphasis on self-purification, self-discipline, contemplation, and non-violence. The Jain meditation techniques involve [mantra repetition](#), [gazing](#), breath awareness, visualizations, and self-inquiry,

Taoism emphasizes union with Tao, or cosmic life/nature. You can learn more about Taoistic meditation [here](#), and check the chapters on *Zuowang* and *Neiguan* in my book for step-by-step practices from this tradition.

Confucianism focuses more on morality and community life. Meditation was developed in this tradition centuries later, with a focus on self-contemplation and self-improvement. It is called [Jing Zuo](#).

These traditions are still alive today, although not as popular outside their home countries as Buddhism and Yoga are.

4. Greek Philosophers



The Greek philosophers, partially under the lively influence of sages and yogis of India, developed their own version of meditation. Such cultural influence was enhanced by Alexander the Great's military exploits of India (327–325 BCE), which brought both cultures in touch.

In the words of the scholar George Feuerstein, in his excellent book [The Psychology of Yoga](#):

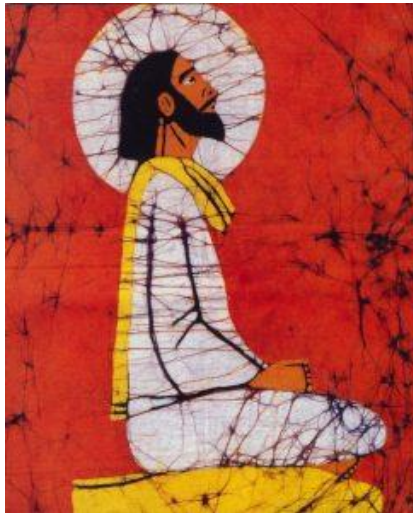
“Plato and Aristotle, as well as the historian Herodotus, freely admitted the influence of the Orient upon Greek thought. (...) For the Greeks, the Indian sages exemplified the highest virtues of the philosophical life that they themselves sought. The Greeks admired the sages’ apparent immunity to pain and

discomfort, as well as their disinterest in pleasure and what the Greeks saw as their contempt of death.”

Greek philosophers practiced navel-gazing (*omphaloskepsis*), as an aid to philosophical contemplation. Later on, philosophers *Philo of Alexandria* and *Plotinus* also developed meditation techniques, especially involving concentration.

The influence of Eastern thought and contemplative traditions on the West was cut once Christianity began to dominate Europe—and for many centuries. It was only in the 20th century that the dialogue East-West began to flourish again.

5. Christian Mysticism



Christian mystics developed their own form of meditation, mostly based on the repetition of a religious word or phrase, and the silent contemplation of God.

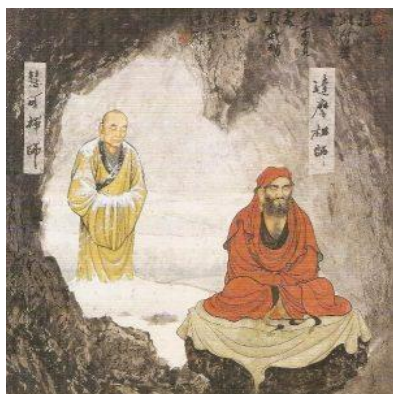
One form of Christian meditation is called **Jesus Prayer**, which was developed between the 10th and 14th centuries in Greece, in the Hesychasm Christian tradition. Historians speculate that this group of Christians might have had contact with the [Sufis](#) and the Indians, which is where the influence of meditation might have come from.

Another form is found in the Eastern Christian sect, also involves repetition of a phrase, and is much older than Hesychasm.

Further developments of Christian meditation happened by the work of Benedictine monks, *Ignatius of Loyola* and *Teresa of Avila* (16th century), and the Trappist monks.

To learn more, check out my article on [Christian Meditation](#).

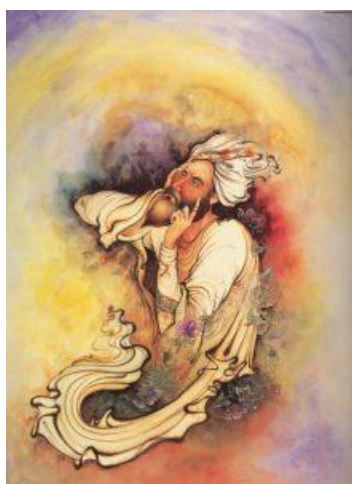
6. Zen Buddhism



Zen is a popular school of Buddhism founded by the Indian/Persian monk Bodhidharma, who in the 8th century traveled to China to teach meditation. From that point, his teachings developed into the lineage of *Chan* in China, being later exported into Korean (*Seon*), Japan (*Zen*), and Vietnam (*Thien*). All of these are known collectively as “Zen”.

Nowadays the [many types of Zazen](#)—which is the meditation technique of Japanese Zen—are still popular forms of meditation in the West.

7. Sufism

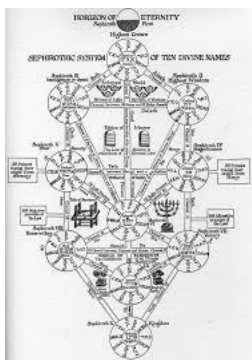


The tradition of the Sufis (the mystics of Islam) goes as far as 1,400 years back. Sufism, under some influence of Indian contemplative traditions, developed meditation practices based on breathing, [mantra](#), and [gazing](#).

The core of their practices is connecting with God (*Allah*). They also developed their iconic Sufi whirling, which can be seen in Turkey even today.

To learn more, check out my article on [Sufi Meditation](#), and the chapter *Sufi Heartbeat Meditation* in [my book](#).

8. Jewish Meditation



The Jewish esoteric tradition of Kabbalah, especially under the influence of Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291) and some later contemplatives, also developed its [own forms of meditation](#). These are mostly based on the deep contemplation of philosophical principles, names of God, symbols, prayers, and the Three of Life.

9. Modern Western World

In the 1700s, several texts of Eastern philosophy began to be translated into European languages—especially the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Buddhist Sutras*. By the 18th century, the study of Buddhism in the West was a topic for intellectuals, with the philosopher Schopenhauer being perhaps one of its most famous admirers.

Yoga and meditation were introduced to the United States early in the 20th century by a yogi called *Swami Vivekananda*. His charismatic and rationalist presentation at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893) triggered a big interest in Americans in Eastern philosophy and spirituality.

As a result of his influence, in the 20th Century several famous Indian spiritual teachers migrated to the USA, including: *Paramahansa Yogananda* (Self-Realization Fellowship), *Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (teaching Transcendental Meditation) and *Swami Rama* (Himalayan Institute). Likewise, representatives of several schools of Buddhism made their way to teach in the West—the main ones being Zen, Theravada, and Tibetan Buddhism.

Most of these eastern masters had western disciples as the torch-bearer of their teachings. With this, the practice of meditation began to be taught in a more westernized way, often simplified and decoupled from its spiritual context. Scientific studies began to emerge, and people realized that meditation is not only for those who are seeking spiritual enlightenment.

10. The Era of Meditation and Science

According to the scholar George Feuerstein, the first piece of scientific research on meditation happened in 1936, and the first one using the EEG was in 1955. The first collection of scientific studies on meditation was made in 1977 by James Funderburk, a student of Swami Rama of the *Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science*.



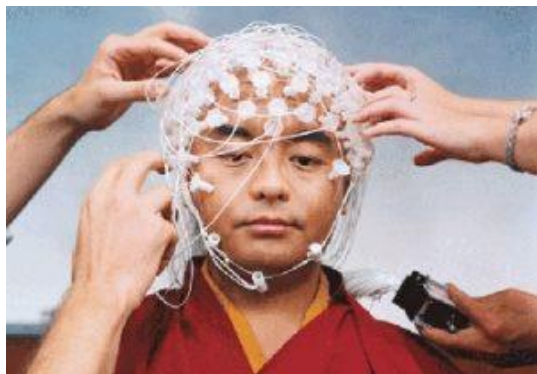
In fact, Swami Rama was one of the first yogis to be studied by Western scientists. In the 1960s he was examined by scientists at the [Menninger Clinic](#), where he demonstrated his ability to voluntarily control his bodily processes (such as heartbeat, blood pressure, and body temperature) which science had up until then considered being involuntary.

Among other things, he demonstrated:

- Altering his heartbeat while sitting motionless, to 300 beats per minute for 16 seconds, and then within a few minutes completely stopping his heart from pumping blood for some seconds.
- Producing different skin temperatures on adjacent sides of his hand by consciously dilating and contracting his blood vessels with his mind.
- Producing *alpha*, *delta*, *theta* and *gamma* brain waves on demand.
- Remaining fully conscious of his environment while his brain was in deep sleep.

[See the book [Yogi in the Lab](#) for more details.]

These and other demonstrations triggered interest in the scientific community to further study the effects of meditation in the body.



As a result, over the next five decades, the number of scientific studies on meditation increased considerably, and so did their quality. Advanced practitioners of other traditions, particularly Zen monks and Tibetan lamas, were also studied and gave mind-over-body demonstrations.

Another pioneer in this process was Dr. Herbert Benson, who probed the effectiveness of meditation through his research at Harvard University in the early 1970s. Before that time, meditation was still considered a religious practice, and thus not appropriate for healthcare purposes. With his contribution this began to change.

Meditation Today



Now, in the early 21st century, meditation has become mainstream and greatly secularized. Even though spiritual meditation continues to exist, it is the secular approach to the practice—for its benefits to the body, mind, and wellness—which is the reason for its ever-increasing popularity.

Where to go from here?

- Do you want step-by-step guides to try out the techniques of any of these traditions? Check out my book, [Practical Meditation](#).
- Do you want to learn more about the philosophy of these traditions? Check out my [book recommendations](#).
- Do you want guided meditations to follow along any of these techniques? Check out my [Meditation Library](#) membership.

Your Next Steps

Meditation is a wonderful practice that improves your well-being, sharpens your mind, and opens many doors. It allows you to *master you mind*, and thus *master your life*.

Meditation can help you transform yourself. It is a powerful path for overcoming anxiety, stress, and mental noise. It empowers you to be **calm**, **centered**, and **focused**.

But for that to happen, we need the **Three Pillars of Meditation**:



How are your three pillars going?

Figuring out and practicing these three pillars on your own can be very hard. It requires dedication, time, effort, self-discipline and patience.

But it doesn't need to be that hard. You don't need to do this all on your own.

Over the past several years I've helped *thousands* of people start, deepen and integrate a meditation practice. And I have created an online program that helps you build those three pillars gradually, with the support of a community. Check it out: [Limitless Life](#).

