

The History of Meditation

by Simone Cole

The natural world we live in is truly magnificent and as a human race we can endlessly learn from its wonders. However, as we enter 2024, many people find themselves frantically caught up in the "rat race" or struggling with daily life in the aftermath of a global pandemic. Society has become a little lost, mental health issues have increased, resulting in the term "wellbeing" being widely used, and numerous suggestions on activities to improve health and wellbeing. However, knowing where to start your wellbeing journey can often seem a little overwhelming.

For decades campaigns have heightened our awareness to the importance of physical exercise to keep us physically fit and healthy, but what has often been overlooked, is the importance of exercising our mind and the direct benefits this can also have on our mental and physical health. Meditation, which can be practiced in several different ways, can be an excellent way to exercise, and so strengthen, the mind.

Whilst the benefits of meditation for our mental health are becoming more topical in wellness and mindfulness discussions, it is certainly not a new concept, nor is it something that is linked to one religion or tradition. Dating back thousands of years, meditation is a natural method to reconnecting with yourself and your environment. It is something that unifies many religions and groups, but remains secular and can be practiced anywhere, at any time, without the need for specific space or equipment. The benefits, regardless of a scientific or spiritual approach remain the same.

When we explore the history of meditation, we can truly grasp its magnitude in terms of how it has been practiced globally, dating back to the days of early man. With evidence of its existence first found in early cave paintings, it is believed that early man would stare at the flames of a fire and induce a trance like state; something we can still relate to today.

Before organised religions were recorded, meditation was a key part in most ancient spiritual practices, for example journeying in Shamanism, which is believed to have originated in the Palaeolithic (Old Stone) Age. This practice involves a practitioner interacting with the spirit world through altered states of consciousness, such as trance.

It was in ancient Hindu scriptures c. 1500-1200BC that the earliest written record of meditation was found. Yogic meditation practices are central to the Hindu religion and by 4th Century AD, the development of the Tantra tradition emerged.

Today, many of us will associate meditation with Buddhism. Meditation is completely at the heart of Buddhism, a religion founded around 500BC by Royal Prince Gautama Siddhartha, who in rebellion against the brutal Vedic rituals of his culture, transformed

his life to seek spiritual enlightenment. He passed his knowledge and understanding on to others, and in present day, Buddhism is one of the four main schools of meditation and one of the four largest religions in the world. In the heart of Buddhist teachings there are four truths, which can be achieved by following Buddhas other main teaching known as the eight-fold path. Concentration, Insight and Loving Kindness meditation practices are at the heart of Buddhism. Zen (also known as Zen Buddhism) is another of the four main schools of meditation, which was founded in the 6th Century AD, and developed significantly in the 12th Century AD and is now a considerable influence on Japanese culture. The philosophy behind Zen is that we all have a Buddhist nature within ourselves and so we can all seek to attain enlightenment through meditation, self-contemplation, and intuition, as long as we overcome our ignorance by rejecting scriptures and religious practices in favour of meditation. Zen places an emphasis on mindfulness as a meditation practice.

At a similar time to the introduction of Buddhism, the practice of Taoism was recorded; a philosophy which centres around meditation to develop focussed attention and mental tranquillity.

Somewhat relatable to today's modern way of life, it was way back in the second century AD, that the first monks of the Christian tradition escaped the busyness of everyday life and set off to live in the desert so that they could focus on creating a quiet sanctuary and use meditation as a way into the soul. Whilst relocating to the desert is not a realistic option for most, allocating time and space in a quiet space to reconnect certainly is. Today, contemplative meditation practice is the main focus in Christianity.

Around 1000BC Jewish mystics devised Kabbalistic Meditation, which enhanced awareness to higher planes of consciousness. In essence, this practice is used to enable peace and happiness through a union with God and bring joy, love and understanding to those who practice. At a similar time, the Sufi's, who followed a pious form of Islam also introduced meditation techniques to develop their connection with God.

It was during the 1960's that Transcendental Meditation (TM), which originated from ancient Hindu traditions, was popularised in the western world initially by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and subsequently, maybe more famously, The Beatles. Today, TM is one of the main schools of meditation. Taught only by an approved TM teacher, but in as little as a weekend, students are given a personal, secret mantra to repeat silently, twice daily for twenty minutes, in order to relax and refresh the mind and body.

Back to modern day and meditation has come full circle with Mindfulness. Another of the four main schools of meditation, Mindfulness, which originated from Buddhism and Zen, was widely developed as a practice by Jon Kabat-Zinn who began teaching the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) at a Stress Reduction Clinic in 1979. The eight-week MBSR programme combines meditation and Hatha yoga to help enhance everyday lives and cope with stress, pain and illness. Mindfulness is widely

practised in the USA, is being used by UK GPs, and is also recognised in NHS guidance on complimentary therapies.

Understanding the history of meditation practices and how they have evolved over the centuries provides reassurance that it is not a fad, nor is it purely based on religious practice. Meditation is a free tool accessible to everyone and can be accessed using various methods to best suit personal preference and needs.