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Meditation

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Meditation is a term whose definition shifts significantly with a religious or spiritual context. Its long use in Christian discourse hews most closely to its etymology, with the English word deriving from the Latin *meditatio*, or the Old French *meditacion*, denoting sustained reflection on a religious subject in a discursive and possibly imaginative way, of which the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola are the best known expression. In ascetical practice, such forms of meditation are intended to lead beyond structured thought to mystical participation in the divine, for which the traditional term is contemplation.

Newer discourses shift this definition. Beginning with sustained contact between European and Asian cultures, by the 18th century at the latest, meditation has been used to describe mind and body practices for cultivation of deliberately nondiscursive states for spiritual purposes that vary significantly depending upon religious context—from absorption into the godhead to a clear seeing of ultimate reality. Simply, then, the older definition refers to practices that engage the discursive mind, while the newer refers to practices that seek to disengage from it or find a way around it. This newer definition of meditation has become dominant in popular discourse, particularly since World War II, as practices derived from Asian-originating religions have been adopted by Western religious practitioners, adapted as therapeutic interventions in medicine and mental health care, and included in approaches to secular spirituality.

Parsing the Newer Term

The newer senses of meditation may yield more easily to understanding when a distinction is made between two types. This distinction occurs most often in modern discourses of Buddhist practice, although it can be useful in broader contexts of religious and spiritual practice. Meditation may refer to concentrative practices (for which the Pali term *Samatha* may be used), in which the attention is focused on an object—such as the breath, sound, or a word or phrase (*mantra*)—to be returned to again and again when the attention wanders. This capacity of the mind to focus on a single point can be trained—indeed, it is measured and graded in some traditions. Importantly, even at beginner levels, the practice leads to calmness and tranquility. An example is Transcendental Meditation, derived for the West in the 1960s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi from Hindu meditation forms. In Buddhist practice, training in a concentrative form may be seen as prelude to the use of the second form of meditation, opening to one's direct experience (for which we might use the Pali term *Vipassanā*). This mode of practice offers opportunity for insight—seeing-into the way one's self and world are constructed—a characteristic aim of Buddhist meditation. An example is mindfulness-based stress reduction, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 for secular medical and mental health care settings, a model for many other interventions in clinical, educational, and organizational settings.

Social and Historical Context

The process by which this newer definition of meditation has come to dominate popular discourse may clearly be seen to have emerged in the post-World War II period. Westerners were exposed to Buddhist thought and practice, particularly during the American occupation of Japan. As a result, in the context of the post-war existential crisis, artists, writers, psychoanalysts, and adherents to Western religions looked for meaning to the abiding calm and improvisatory clarity of Zen Buddhism. Through the 1950s and early 1960s, some, like the composer John Cage and the painter Robert Motherwell, applied new insights to their work, while others, such as the poet Gary Snyder, made the commitment to monastic practice in Japan, and still others, like the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, welcomed interfaith dialogue and adopted practices to freshen and expand their own traditions. In the later 1960s, currents from Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist culture began to flow—in psychedelic colors—and concentrative, mantra-based meditation became the exemplar, as a stream of celebrities joined the Maharishi in Transcendental Meditation. Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson saw the calming potential for a secular version, which he called the *Relaxation Response*, ushering in a therapeutic

tic turn. The mindfulness-based interventions, led by mindfulness-based stress reduction, followed, through the 1980s to the present, making use of the insight form of meditation and bringing the term *mindfulness* to popular currency, where it has come to rival *meditation* as a general term. Mindfulness meditation, driven by its secularized identity and ever-expanding scientific evidence base, has engaged Western culture with a potential to transform not only individuals but also communities and organizations, as it continues to expand application from schools to corporations, to the military, and more.

Meditation as a practice fits easily within what Charles Taylor refers to as the imminent frame, the widely shared worldview that does not admit the transcendent. One can learn and practice meditation as a life skill, within one's secular cultural and ethical expectations, without engaging the more circumscribed way of life and thought of a particular religious tradition. Of course, the invitation to practice within a tradition is also always extended for consideration and acceptance. The tension evident in such alternatives is illustrative of the social and historical context in which meditation is practiced today.

See also [Buddhism](#); [Catholicism](#); [Christianity](#); [Hinduism](#); [Secular Spirituality](#); [Secularization](#); [Spirituality](#)

Further Readings

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