

How Meditation Made it to America

(Excerpted from the Introduction to the article *The Physical & Psychological Effects of Meditation* published online by the Institute of Noetic Sciences)

The Westernization of Meditation and Eastern meditative traditions began seeping into American popular culture even before the American Revolution through the various sects of European occult Christianity that transplanted themselves to such new settlements as Germantown and Ephrata in William Penn's "Holy Experiment," which he named Pennsylvania.

Early framers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were influenced by teachings from mystical Sufism and the Jewish Kabbalah through their membership in secret fraternities such as the Rosicrucians.

Asian ideas then came pouring in during the era of the transcendentalists, especially between the 1840s and the 1880s, largely influencing the American traditions of spiritualism, theosophy, and mental healing.

The Hindu conception of Brahman was reformulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson into the New England vision of God as the Oversoul, while Henry David Thoreau's ideas on civil disobedience arose out of his reading of Hindu scriptures on meditation, yoga, and non-violence.

At the same time, spiritualists—those who believed that science had established communication with the dead through the medium of the group séance—also dabbled in Asian ideas. Helena Blavatsky, co-founder of the International Theosophical Society, is usually credited with introducing Hindu conceptions of discarnate entities into American spiritualist circles.

In this context, the Theosophists also translated Hindu texts on meditation and for the first time made them available in popular form to English-speaking audiences. Similarly, New Thought practitioners—followers of the healer Phineas P. Quimby—also included meditation techniques such as guided visualizations and the mantra into their healing regimes.

In general, by the late 19th century Americans appropriated Asian ideas to fit their own optimistic, pragmatic, and eclectic understanding of inner experience. This usually meant adapting ideas such as reincarnation and karma into a very liberal and heavily Christianized, but nevertheless secular, psychology of character development that was closer to the philosophy of transcendentalism than to doctrines in any of the Christian denominations.

The World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, was the landmark event that increased Western awareness of meditation. This was the first time that Western audiences on American soil received Asian spiritual teachings from Asians themselves. Thereafter, Swami Vivekananda taught meditation to the spiritualists and New Thought practitioners in New Hampshire and went on to found various Vedanta ashrams around the country in his wake.

Anagarika Dharmapala lectured at Harvard on Theravada Buddhist meditation in 1904; Abdul Baha followed with a 235-day tour of the US teaching the Islamic principles of Bahai, and Soyen Shaku toured in 1907 teaching Zen and the principles of Mahayana Buddhism. By then, the idea of comparative religions had caught on as an academic field of inquiry in the universities.

Following the Sacred Books of the East Series, edited by F. Max Mueller, and major translations of the Theravada scriptures by the Pali Text Society in England, the Harvard Oriental Series appeared after 1900 under the editorship of Charles Rockwell Lanman. Meanwhile, the Cambridge Conferences on Comparative Religions, carried on by Mrs. Ole Bull in her Brattle Street home near Harvard University, and the Greenacre School of Comparative Religions, operated by Sarah Farmer in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, had been bringing ideas about meditation to interested New Englanders since the late 1890s.

During the 1920s, American popular culture was introduced to the meditative practices of the Hindu yogi Paramahansa Yogananda. Gurdjieff, the Georgian mystic who had toured the US in 1924, was spreading the gospel of meditation in action to American expatriates in Paris by the 1930s. A young Hindu trained in theosophy named Jidhu Krishnamurti had been touring the US around that same time. Settling in Southern California in the 1940s, Krishnamurti would soon be joined by English émigrés fleeing the European war, such as Christopher Isherwood, Gerald Heard, and Aldous Huxley, who were themselves writers and practitioners of the meditative arts.

During World War Two, Huxley, Heard, and others became disciples of the meditation teacher Swami Prabhavananda, head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Together, they produced such influential books as *Vedanta for the West* and assisted in the popular dissemination of texts such as the Hindu Upanishads and the Yoga Sutras.

Another momentous event introducing Asian ideas to the West was the arrival in 1941 of Henrich Zimmer, Indologist and Sanskrit scholar, who had been a friend and confidant of C. G. Jung. Zimmer brought the young Joseph Campbell, comparative mythologist and folklorist, to the attention of the newly formed Bollingen Foundation. Subsequently, the Foundation produced the English translation of Jung's collected works, as well as numerous books by Zimmer, which Campbell edited, among other titles.

Perhaps the most influential product of this endeavor was the Bollingen edition of the I Ching, or Chinese Book of Changes. The I Ching was a Taoist oracle book revered in Chinese religious history as one of the four great Confucian classics. Translated by Richard Wilhelm with a preface by Jung, the work has continued to enjoy immense popularity since its first publication in 1947. The 1950s represented a major expansion of interest in both meditation and Asian philosophy. Frederick Spiegelberg, a professor of comparative religions at Stanford, opened the California Institute of Asian Studies in 1951, which highlighted the work of the modern Hindu mystic and social reformer Sri Aurobindo Ghose.

Alan Watts, a student of Zen and former Episcopalian minister, soon joined the faculty and within a few years produced such best-selling books as *Psychotherapy East and West* and *The Meaning of Zen*. It was also during this time that Michael Murphy first came under the

influence of Speigelberg, was introduced to the teachings of Sri Aurobindo, and began the practice of meditation. With the assistance of Abraham Maslow, Alan Watts, Willis Harman, Aldous Huxley, George Leonard and others, Murphy would soon collaborate with Richard Price to launch Esalen Institute, which quickly became the world's premier growth center for human potential.

During the same period of the early 1950s, with the help of Watts, D. T. Suzuki came from Japan to California and introduced Zen to a new generation of Americans. Suzuki settled in New York, where he accepted a visiting professorship at Columbia. His seminars were open to the public and subsequently had a wide influence. Thomas Merton visited him. The neo-Freudians such as Karen Horney and Erich Fromm were his students. Suzuki even took Horney on a three-month tour of the religious shrines in Japan. John Cage heard him, as did J. D. Salinger. Soon, Suzuki was profiled in The New York Times, and many of his previous works on the history and philosophy of Zen, published in relative obscurity, were translated and reprinted for American audiences. Zen, embraced by the beat generation, had suddenly come to the West.

What occurred next opened an entirely new era of popular interest in meditation. This was the confluence of three major cultural events in the 1960s: the psychedelic revolution, the Communist invasion of Asia, and the rise of the American counter-culture, especially in terms of widespread opposition to the Vietnam War.

By the early 1960s, mind expanding drugs were being taken by a significant segment of the post war baby boom, a generation which numbered some 40 million people born between 1945 and 1955 who came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This led young people in their teens and twenties to collectively open the doors of inward perception, experiment with alternative lifestyles, and question established cultural norms in Western society. An entire generation soon established their own alternative institutions which began to operate in defiance of traditional cultural forms still dominated by the ideology of their parents' generation.

Subsequently, this was to have important political, economic, religious, and social consequences in the West, especially in the United States as enduring but alternative cultural norms began to take root in the younger generation of the American middle class.

At the same time, the increased Soviet influence in India, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Communist Chinese takeover of Tibet and Mongolia, and the increased political influence of Chinese Communism in Korea and Southeast Asia were key forces that collectively set the stage for an influx of Asian spiritual teachers to the West. An entirely new generation of them appeared on the American scene and they found a willing audience of devotees within the American counter-culture.

Swami A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, Swami Satchitananda, Guru Maharaji, Kerpal Singh, Nayanaponika Thera, Swami Rama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Chogyam Trungpa, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, Sri Bagwan Rujneesh, Pir Vilayat Kahn, and the Karmapa were but a few of the names that found followers in the United States.

While there remain numerous contemporary voices, such as Guru Mai, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Maharishi, and Sogyal Rinpoche, there can be little doubt, historically, that the most well-known and influential figure in this pantheon today remains Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

As a result of such personalities, there has been a tremendous growth in meditation as a spiritual practice in the United States from the 1960s to the present. This phenomenon remains largely underestimated by the pundits of American high culture who see themselves as the main spokespersons for the European rationalist tradition in the New World. In the first place, from a socio-cultural standpoint, it is clear that from the 1920s to the 1960s, Freudian psychoanalysis was the primary socially acceptable avenue through which artists, writers, and aficionados of modernism gained access to their own interior unconscious processes.

For a new and younger generation of visionaries, however, psychoanalysis was soon replaced by psychedelic drugs as the primary vehicle for opening the internal doors of perception. This occurred as a result of experiments undertaken in military and university laboratories associated with the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA was interested in developing mind-control drugs for potential use in psychological warfare. At the same time that the CIA began testing substances such as LSD on unsuspecting populations of soldiers, businessmen, and college students, some of these chemicals came into the hands of the scientific and medical community. Researchers themselves began ingesting mescaline and LSD. Soon, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, from the psychiatrists' couches in Hollywood to the hallowed halls of Harvard University, the youthful and educated elite of the American middle class began to experiment with psychedelics in ever increasing numbers.

The counter-culture movement that followed was considered a revolution in consciousness, driven by mind-expanding drugs, as well as defined by spiritual teachings from Asian cultures, each creating the conditions for expansion of the other. As the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s subsided for the post-war baby boomers maturing into the 1970s, meditation, and all that it implied, then became fixed as an enduring ethic of that generation.

The belief was that meditative practices not only cleansed consciousness of psychedelics, and confirmed the commitment to pursuing alternative lifestyles, but they also informed the socio-cultural direction that the lives of many young people would soon take in establishing new and permanent forms of lifetime spiritual practice.

Now, after 30 years, these developments have produced advanced Western practitioners, who themselves are qualified senseis, roshis, swamis, and tulkus. We know them as Ram Dass, Sivananda Radha, Jiyu Kennet Roshi, Maureen Freidgood, Jack Kornfield, Richard Baker Roshi, and others. They have begun to teach these Asian traditions to Western audiences. In so doing, they are also participating in their modification by forming new lineages of meditation practice that, while informed by Asian influences, turn out to be uniquely Western.

Such teachings are already being transmitted to a second and third generation of younger people in the United States and Europe as well, altering irrecoverably the shape and direction of spiritual life in contemporary Western culture. Not the least of these influences has been

renewed interest in the Western contemplative traditions. Examination of Western mystics had increased dramatically since the 1960s. Witness, for instance, establishment of the Classics in Western Spirituality Series, published by the Paulist Press, or the appearance of the newly formed Mysticism Study Group within the American Academy of Religion.

Westerners within a new and younger generation have appeared who are fast becoming skilled interpreters of these non-Western traditions as legitimate worldviews in their own right. Their vehicle, the practice of meditation, could potentially set the stage for an exchange of ideas between East and West that may yet turn out to be unprecedented in the history Western thought.