

# INVESTIGATING THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF MEDITATION

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## Abstract

Meditation means deep thinking or focusing one's attention on only one thing. In modern psychology, meditation is a practice to achieve a relaxed state of mind. Meditation is of two types, (a) nonfaith-based Meditation, and (b) faith-based Meditation. The faith-based meditation is part of faith and spirituality of every religion. We have described a brief historical account of faith and spirituality of different religions in this paper to assess which is the best course of meditation in the light of the historical facts. This paper is divided into four sections, (1) A brief description of nonfaith-based meditation, (2) Historical account of different faiths in the world, (3) A brief description of spirituality, and (4) Meditational practices of different religions in the world. We hope it will help our readers to find the most authentic meditational practice which is beneficial to them physically and spiritually.

*Keywords – Meditation, Belief, Psychology, Philosophy, Islam*

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## Nonfaith-based meditation

Nonfaith-based meditation is related to knowing one's emotions and how they influence the body and behavior. There are of two types of nonfaith-based meditations, (a) concentration, and (b) mindfulness. Often, these two concepts overlap with each other.

### (i) Concentration

In concentration, one focusses on one thing at a time, forgetting about everything else. The purpose of concentration is to experience the thing being focused, which could be anything; like one's breathing or an object in front of the eyes, or whatever work he is involved in. This is opposite to multi-tasking. It is scientifically proven that a person involved in multitasking, switching from one thing to another in quick succession, is prone to making more mistakes. Multitasking

reduces efficiency of the brain while focus on one thing improves its efficiency.

### (ii) Mindfulness

Mindfulness is related to be aware of oneself, and be involved in the present moment, and be mindful about one's body and thoughts, judging every thought with utmost neutrality. Mindfulness helps in stress reduction. This is used by psychologists in cognitive therapy. Mindfulness is to know how your mind works so that it could be trained to be neutral, be peaceful, and not get overwhelmed with certain events of the past or present or possible happenings of the future. It is the ability of human mind to be fully present, be aware of where he is, and what he is doing, and ignoring what is going on around him if it is not related to him. Like when we take a cup of tea and drink it with attention towards it, we feel the warmth and aroma of it and enjoy it to the maximum. This helps to stop our mind in wandering in unrelated and often harmful territories at that moment. This practice is equally good while we eat or do exercise, or sleep, or on our way to office. While we are driving, our focus and presence of mind will help us avoid accidents.

## Historical account of different faiths in the world

Faith-based Meditation is related to spirituality which is part of every religion in the world. To understand it, we need to first understand (a) what religious beliefs of a person are and (b) his understanding about spirituality. We have discussed these issues in detail below.

### Religious beliefs

*(a) Historical perspective of Polytheistic religions*

All ancient religions of Mesopotamia, Iran, Egypt, Greece, China, and India were based on Idol worship. Hinduism is the offshoot of ancient Indian Vedic religion of India, and Buddhism, and Sikhism are the offshoots of Hinduism.

Overall, the beliefs, narratives, and mythology in the world was based on polytheism, worship of different gods and goddesses. They all shared Idol worship. The Idol gods they worshiped were not the same all the time. They worshiped certain Idol gods and later these gods were abandoned, and new gods were added. Some people worshiped dying and reviving gods who were called Avatars.

When we ponder over the history of mankind and go back deeper and deeper and reach to the first man and woman, from whom all of humanity grew, we realize that the first man, the father of humanity, is the commonality among the diverse cultures of human beings. He is the ancestor of humanity. This fact is undisputed and generally accepted by all of us. The most popular names of the father and mother of humanity are known to be Adam and Eve.

In Christianity and Judaism, Adam and Eve were created by God to take care of His creation and to populate the planet earth. In Islamic tradition they are known as Adam and Hawwa (عليهما السلام). Other religions may have different stories/names about the first human being, but they all agree that humans belong to the same father and mother whom they call with different names. It is also logical to believe that the father of humanity was also the first teacher, and his religion was the first religion of humanity.

Scottish anthropologist Andrew Lang (1844-1912) said, the first religion of humanity was Ur-monotheism or Ur-religion which is also known as Original Monotheism, Primeval Monotheism, Primitive Monotheism, etc. Andrew Lang concluded that non-monotheistic and polytheistic religions in the world were the degenerated forms of this original religion.

German scholar Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), in his work 'Der Ursprung der Gottesidee' opposed the 'revolutionary monotheism theory' which claims monotheism was the gradual process spanning over the classical polytheistic religions of antiquity. He argued that the Supreme Being became dim only among later generations of human beings.

The first generation of human beings consisted of the children of Adam and Eve. They followed Adamic religion. The question is what was the religion of Adam? In Bible, the name Adam, the first person to have been created, occurs in the narrative of creation (Genesis 2:5–7, 2:15–4:1, 4:25). Quranic accounts confirm that Adam (عليه السلام) was an Apostle of God who taught the oneness of the Creator of this Cosmos to his children.

When people grew in numbers, they spread to different parts of the world in search of fertile lands. Over a few generations, their beliefs started to change. The main cause behind this change was, when human beings looked at this Cosmos, they were overwhelmed by it and considered that to run this massive Cosmos, there cannot be just one God taking care of such diverse works. There may be different gods who are working for different works. Then they named these gods, which was followed by their imaginary pictures in their minds which resulted in carving those images in mud and mettles and worshiping them. This type of worship was carried out to please idol gods, for favors. This is how people deviated from the original religion of their father over hundreds and thousands of years. Later stories were developed about this Cosmos and its origins by relating the Cosmos to their Idol gods.

*(b) Historical perspective of Monotheistic religions*

The Abrahamic religions are known as monotheistic religions. These consist of, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All Abrahamic religions are prophetic religions. A brief historical account of them is provided below.

*(i) Judaism*

It is an accepted fact that all Prophets sent to Jewish people, believed, and taught the same Adamic religion.

There is a reference about it in the Quran - 'Say, we believe in Allah and that which has been sent down on us (the Quran), and sent down on Abraham (Ibrahim عليه السلام) and Ishmael (Isma'eel عليه السلام), Isaac (Is-haq عليه السلام) and Jacob (Ya'qub عليه السلام), and the Tribes, and in that which was given to Moses (Musa عليه السلام) and Jesus (Isa عليه السلام), and (among) the prophets of their Lord; we make no division between any of them.' (2 - 136).

The Quran also says – 'Say, Allah is one. Allah is independent. He does not have children. Nobody has given birth to him. Nobody can match Him or equal Him.' (112: 1- 4).

The Torah says, 'God, the Cause of all, is one. This does not mean one as in one of a pair, nor one like a species which encompasses many individuals, nor one as in an object that is made up of many elements, nor as a single simple object that is infinitely divisible. Rather, God is a unity unlike any other possible unity. (Yesode Ha-Torah 1:7).

Over centuries, the identity of one God blurred in Judaism and Christianity under polytheistic influences on their societies. First Jews changed the name of their god from Yahweh to Elohim. Later, they introduced Monolatry, which is the worship of one God but not denying that there are some divine beings/gods in the Cosmos. They believed that angels were the daughters of God and certain prophets were the sons of God.

There is a reference about it in the Quran - The Jews call (Prophet) Uzair (عليه السلام) a son of God, and the Christians call Isa (عليه السلام) the son of God. That is a saying

from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers (polytheists) of old used to say. (9:30)

*(ii) Christianity*

Those who are aware of the history of Christianity know how Christian orthodoxy debated about the nature of God. Some denied incarnation of God into many people, except Jesus Christ. This philosophy was known as Docetism. Some defended Father Arius's (256-336 CE of Alexandria) philosophy which claims Jesus is the son of God, but different from the Father God. Meaning Jesus was a smaller god. In 325 CE, Roman emperor 'Constantine I' convened a council of churches, who debated different concepts about God and Jesus Christ for a long time and by a majority vote decided that Jesus is the son of God and is equal to Father God.

The above decision was further changed by Cappadocian Fathers, namely, (i) Basil, the bishop of Caesarea (330-379 CE), (ii) Gregory, the bishop of Nyssa (335 – 395 CE), and (iii) Gregory of Nazianzus, the Patriarch of Constantinople (329-389 CE), who decided that God is a triune entity or trinity composing of, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Currently all Christians believe in this Trinity.

*(iii) Islam*

Muslims believe their first Prophet was Adam (عليه السلام) and their last Prophet sent to humanity was Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) and the Quran is the revealed book, which remains unaltered for the past 1450 years. This means, the teachings of Islam remained the same till today.

Quran says - 'Allah, there is no God but He, the living, eternal, self-subsisting, ever sustaining. Neither does slumber come near Him nor sleep. To Him

belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. And who can intercede with Him except by His command? Known to Him is all that is present before men and what is hidden (from them), and not even a little of His knowledge can they grasp except what He wills.' (2:255)

The Islamic history also witnessed certain scholars who, under the influence of Greek philosophy, tried to mix Greek mythology with Islamic teachings. However, Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali and others vehemently refuted them and helped in maintaining the purity of Islamic teachings. In the recent past also, some sects within Muslims, like Salafis, Wahhabis, Deobandis, etc., have started to believe in a planet size God with physical body and limbs, who is sitting over the skies. Meaning, they have created an imaginary Idol God for themselves. These sects have also been refuted by all truthful Islamic scholars.

With the above discussion of polytheistic and monotheistic religions we understand that Adamic religion is the original religion of mankind whose teachings are oneness of the creator of this Cosmos who is all powerful. Whatever is there in the Cosmos his creation. This teaching constitutes the foremost article of Islamic faith.

## Spirituality

Spirituality is of three types, (i) Spirits spirituality, (ii) Mystical spirituality, and (iii) Glorification of God, the creator of this Cosmos and supplications for his beneficence.

### (i) Spirit's Spirituality

When we see the cloudless sky in the night, we witness many stars. Scientists say that the stars visible to an individual cannot be more than 10,000 because of the limitation of our vision from our physical eyes. However, we know that there are billions of stars and galaxies in the Cosmos which cannot be seen by us from our physical eyes. When we use massive earth-based telescopes or special cameras operating on our

satellites orbiting the earth, we can witness far more than what we can see by our plain eyes.

Spirituality can be understood from the above example. Philosophers, sages, and scholars explain that there are many realms of existence in the Cosmos which are hidden from our physical eyes. The different realms of existences are inhabited by spiritual beings, spirits, energies, etc., who do not have physical bodies like human beings. They are provided with the ability to change their shapes like we change our clothes. We cannot see them with our physical eyes, but certain people with the help of spirituality can get in touch with them.

Since science is related to the 'how' of existence and is not with 'why' of existence, spirituality cannot be measured in physical terms. It is restricted to the individual experience of a person which may vary from one person to another depending upon his religious beliefs. Rejecting spirituality altogether does not make sense. Like hypnotism which is related to a kind of spirituality is a well-accepted fact that can be achieved by practice of focus of attention.

Some people try to get in touch with the spirits of the different realms by their focus and concentration and recitations of mantras and it is said that once contact is established, they become visible to them. With the help of these spirits, these people show some supernatural acts to other people and try to mislead them into believing what they propagate.

It is important to know that spirit-based spirituality is not just related to focus of attention towards the spirits, or recitation of mantras and hymns, rather it is related to getting in touch with them and making use of their spiritual powers. Since the spirits can change their form at will, they appear to their callers as per his religious beliefs. Therefore, it is possible that spirits can appear to different people in different shapes as per their beliefs. Certain powerful spirits are treated as deities and gods in polytheistic religions.

There are 1,028 hymns in Rigveda, the primary text of Vedic religion (1500-500 BC) for calling

specific spirits and deities, like Indra, Vritra, Vala, Agni, Soma, Surya, Vishnu, Sarasvati, etc.

The number of spirits and deities worshiped in Hinduism are reported to be 330 million. These include, Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, Ganesha, kartikeya, Parvati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Kali, etc. Hindus believe that their deities and gods also manifest as incarnations in human forms, like Krishna, Rama, etc. Hindus also worship stars, like Sun, some animals and plants as their gods. Similar is the case with Buddhism who venerate and worship deities like Prajnaparamita, Vasudhara Cundi, Fudo-Myo, Gosanze, Gundari, Daiitoku, Sambhogakaya, Dakinis, Dharmapalas, Asuras, Maras, Caturmaharajakayikas, Yakshas, etc.

### (ii) Mystical Spirituality

Mystical spirituality is known as Mysticism. Mysticism is claimed to be an altered state of consciousness or ecstasy. This is practiced in many religious traditions. It is claimed that Shamans access the spiritual world through Shammanic mysticism.

There are many types of mystical ecstasies, like (a) theistic, (b) monistic, (c) Dualistic, (d) Pluralistic, etc.

In theistic mysticism, different types of deities / gods are claimed to be visualized. In monistic mysticism, it is claimed that the person visualizes the reality of a consisting of a single element while smaller gods are working under a superior God. In dualistic mysticism, it is claimed that the person realizes that the cosmos consists to two elements, good and bad. In pluralistic mysticism a person realizes that the cosmos consists of multiple elements, deities, gods who sometimes cooperate and sometimes fight with each other.

Mystical spirituality is broadly divided into two categories, extrovertive and introvertive. In extrovertive mystical experience a person visualizes the unity of the external world and in introvertive mysticism, he realizes nothingness.

Those who claim truthfulness of all religions, like Perennialists / Universalists / Theosophists, etc.,

claim that mystical experience is an individual expression of perennial truths intrinsic in all religions. Medical fraternity claim that mystical experience is nothing but a neurological process of human brain which may be the result of a dysfunction of a part of the brain. Philosophers claim that mystical experience is the result of the practices and expectations of the concepts and beliefs of the mystic.

It is obvious that spiritual meditation is part of spirituality practiced by different religions. If a person is involved in spiritual meditation of a particular religion, the results he may achieve are obvious for him. It is important to know that in faith-based meditation, you may also achieve some of the benefits of nonfaith-based meditation mentioned above.

### (iii) Glorification of God, the Creator of this Cosmos

As we have described above that the religion of the father of humanity was, belief in one omnipotent God who is the creator of this Cosmos. His religion, known as Adamic Religion, was the first religion of mankind and his spirituality was based on glorification of the Creator of this Cosmos and supplicating Him for alleviation of all problems related to our life on this planet. All prophets sent by Him, as teachers of humanity from Adam (عليه السلام) to the last Apostle Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) preached the same thing and their spirituality in His glorification and supplications remained the same till today.

## Meditational practices of different religions

### (i) Hindu meditation

The goal of Hindu meditation is to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Each meditational practice has a component of Yoga which include Vedanta, Raja Yoga, Surat Shabd Yoga, and Japa Yoga. Among these, Japa Yoga is most popular in which the names of Hindu gods are used as a mantra. Most common among them is Om, So-ham, Om Namah Shivaya, Om Mani Padme Hum, Rama, Yam, Ham, etc. While

practicing it, they sit with their spine erect, eyes closed and repeat the mantra silently in mind.

### (ii) Buddhist meditation

Meditation is an essential part of Buddhist religion. They claim that Buddha taught meditation to free oneself from suffering. The most common form of Buddhist's meditation is the attention on one's breath. Certain Buddhists traditions have different forms of breath meditation, like Vipassana, and Zazen, etc. The modern so-called nonfaith-based meditations popular in the West are based on Buddhist meditative practices.

### (iii) Christian meditation

The most popular form of meditation in Christianity is based on deep breath, inhaling from nose, and exhaling from the mouth and reciting mantras like, 'O Lord my Shepherd', 'Maranatha' (old Bible mantra), etc.

Some Christian groups practice 'Examen' which was taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola in which they focus their attention on Father God and pray.

### (iv) Sikh meditation

The popular form of Sikh meditation is also based on breathing exercise known as 'Pranayama' while sitting straight, erect, eyes closed, then reciting the mantra 'Waheguru'.

### (v) Islamic meditation

As we have described above, the faith and meditative practices of Islam are in existence from Adam (عليه السلام) to Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), till today. Islamic meditation is of three types, (a) Zikr (remembrance of Allah known as Tasbeeh), (b) Dua (supplication to Allah), and (c) Litanis (Auraad) which are collections of Prophetic prayers. Some people claim that these have been initiated by certain Sufi Shuyookh of Ihsan in the Muslim community. This is a wrong understanding.

(a) Ibn Abbas (رضي الله تعالى عنه) narrated that *to raise the voice for Zikr of Allah after the people had finished their obligatory prayer was the*

*practice during the time of the Apostle of Allah (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم). Ibn Abbas (رضي الله تعالى عنه) said, by this Zikr, I used to know when they have finished the prayer and would listen to the Zikr of Allah. (Sunan Abu Dawood, Bk 2, Hadith # 614).*

(b) It is in Hadith - Ibn Abbas (رضي الله تعالى عنه) narrated that *some poor people came to the Apostle of Allah (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) and said, 'O Apostle of Allah (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), the rich pray as we pray, they fast as we fast, but they have wealth with which they free slaves and which they give in charity.' The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), 'when you perform Salah, then recite, 'Subhan Allah' (سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ) thirty-three times, 'Al-Hamdulillah' (الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ) thirty-three times, and 'Allahu Akbar' (اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ) thirty-four times, and 'La ilaha illallah' (لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ) ten times. With that you will have surpassed them, and none would surpass you afterwards.' (Jami at-Tirmidhi, Bk 2, Hadith # 263)*

Various Azkar (remembrances of Allah), Duas and Auraad have been suggested by Sufi Shuyookh of Ihsan in Quadri, Chishtee, Naqshbandi, Shadhuli, and other Sufi orders which are based on the teaching of Islam from Adam (عليه السلام) to Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) in an unbroken and authentic chain of narrators. Details are available in their authentic books.

## Conclusion

Details about nonfaith-based meditation and faith-based meditations have been provided in the paper in detail. We are positive that these details will help individuals in choosing the most authentic meditation to benefit them physically and spiritually.

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## About the Author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.