

EARLY VIEWS OF MEDITATION

While meditation techniques have been used by many different cultures around the world for thousands of years, the first articles in psychology journals starting in the 1930s viewed meditation as inducing a dissociative state or even catatonia.

Alexander. Franz (1931). [*Buddhistic Training as an Artificial Catatonia. Psychoanalytic Review*](#), 18:129-145

Then in the early 1970s Herbert Benson, MD's (now Professor Emeritus at Harvard Medical School) pioneering research established the efficacy of meditation for healthcare through his research. Dr. Benson's first articles on meditation appeared in the *Scientific American* and the *American Journal of Physiology*. His book, [*The Relaxation Response*](#) topped the bestseller lists in the mid-1970s, and is still widely read (and frequently updated). Dr. Benson and his colleagues' studies showed that meditation acts as an antidote to stress. Under stress, the nervous system activates the "fight-or-flight" response. The activity of the sympathetic portion of the nervous system increases, causing an increased heart beat, increased respiratory rate, elevation of blood pressure, and increase in oxygen consumption. This fight-or-flight response has an important survival function by allowing an organism to run quickly to escape an attack or to fight off an attacker. But if activated repeatedly, as happens for many people in modern societies, the effects are harmful. Many researchers believe that the current epidemic of hypertension, heart disease and depression in the Western world is a direct result. Benson's early research demonstrated that the effects of the relaxation response induced by TM and other meditation practices generates the opposite of the fight-or-flight response. Meditation decreases the heart rate, decreases the respiratory rate, decreases blood pressure, decreases oxygen consumption, and decreases muscle tension.

Although Benson's research did not specifically focus on mindfulness as a meditative practice, nonetheless his work, the first scientific study of any form of meditation, laid the groundwork for future interest and research in mindfulness as a clinically effective intervention. As such, we present his story here as pioneering work paving the way for the interest in mindfulness to follow.

TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

Herbert Benson's original research subjects were TM practitioners (they approached him with the idea of doing research on meditation). Dr. Benson conducted studies of the physiological and health impact of TM meditation which involves the repetition of a word or phrase (called mantra meditation). He documented the then considered surprising benefits of TM (see below):

Example of an early article on TM:

Wallace RK, Benson H, Wilson AF *Am J Physiol*. 1971 Sep;221(3):795-9. [*A Wakeful Hypometabolic Physiologic State*](#). Dr. Benson used TM as the basis for developing his relaxation response method which he created as a non religious version of the TM technique with the goal of achieving the relaxation response that TM triggers. TM was brought to the Western world in the mid-twentieth century by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an Indian spiritual teacher (see Youtube of him below). TM has been widely credited with being the first form of meditation to be practiced on a mass scale in the West. Some 4 million people have received training in TM. TM practitioners continue to conduct research documenting the effectiveness of TM for many *mental and physical health issues*.

Example of a Recent Review of the Literature on TM:

Anderson JW, Liu C, Kryscio RJ. [*Blood Pressure Response to Transcendental Meditation: a Meta-Analysis*](#). *Am J Hypertens*. 2008 Mar;21(3):310-6. Epub 2008 Jan 31.

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RELAXATION RESPONSE

After conducting these initial studies, Dr. Benson concluded that, It made no sense to say that TM was the only way to evoke this quieting response, so I looked for the basic steps that made up Transcendental Meditation. Ultimately, I felt there were two: Step one was repetition, of a sound, a word, a prayer, a phrase, or a muscular activity. The second step was that when thoughts came to mind, you tacitly disregarded them and returned to the repetition. When I looked for these two steps in the religious and secular literatures of the world, I was astounded to find that in every single culture of man that had a written history, these two steps were described. Interview from [*Shambala Sun*](#)

Instead of using sanskrit or other religious words as is done in TM and other religious practices, he had research participants use "neutral" words like "one" and even Coca Cola. This approach allows those who are not religious, or whose beliefs may conflict with the teachings connected to a particular meditation system, to nonetheless participate fully in this mind-body activity. Benson theorizes that the multitude of meditation techniques all have the final common pathway leading to the relaxation response.

An additional benefit has been observed by Herbert Benson, MD. Even using his spiritually sanitized version of meditation, he found one result that surprised him:

Not only did my research -- and that of my colleagues -- reveal that 25% of people feel more spiritual as the result of the Relaxation Response, but it showed that those same people have fewer medical symptoms than do those who reported no increase in spirituality. It became clear that a person's religious convictions or life philosophy enhanced the average effects

of the Relaxation Response in three ways: (1) People who chose an appropriate focus, that which drew upon their deepest philosophic or religious convictions, were more apt to adhere to the Relaxation Response routine, looking forward to it and enjoying it; (2) affirmative beliefs of any kind brought forth remembered wellness, reviving top down, nerve cell firing patterns in the brain that were associated with wellness; (3) when present, faith in an eternal or life transcending force seemed to make the fullest use of remembered wellness because it is a supremely soothing belief, disconnecting unhealthy logic and worries.

[Examining the Faith Factor](#) by Dr. Herbert Benson, MD

Some groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, have criticized even the secular forms of meditation:

Dr. Benson's formula is not neutral but religious; it derives from Eastern Religions, Mysticism and Gnosticism...Dr. Benson's formula is incompatible with Christianity, and dangerous. [Jehovah's Witness Web Site](#)

Yet Buddhist practitioners emphasize, and Benson has actually found the opposite, namely that meditation often strengthens individuals' religious beliefs.

Many Jewish rabbis and Catholic priests and nuns meditate--even regularly practicing Buddhist meditation--without changing their religious affiliation. Moreover, there are various kinds and styles of meditation that have developed with Buddhism. Some involve visualizing and invoking Buddhist deities (archetypal representations of the highest spiritual qualities within us), while others have virtually no Buddhist content. Buddhism is not intent upon converting anyone, and there is no conversion ceremony in Buddhism. Meditation, in short, is an excellent example of a spiritual practice that transcends "isms" and schisms. It's post-denominational and can deepen any religious quest. (In addition to Buddhist meditation, there are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Christian, Taoist, and other forms of meditation, by the way.) Meditation helps awaken and enlighten us, grounding us more in the present moment, the holy now.

[Surya Das](#), an American-born Tibetan lama, I Sit, Therefore I Am...a Buddhist?

Examples of Early Research on the Relaxation Response

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Recent review of research on the relaxation response

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In his later work, Dr. Benson identified an additional faith factor which he conceptualized as a way to harness the placebo effect of the client's own healing capacity of remembered wellness. "Your thoughts can have enormous power. You can actually be chased by someone or dream you're being chased, and the reaction will be the same because it's a reality in your brain. We could take advantage of that, and by appropriately believing in what can heal, we can remember those patterns in our brain and turn on remembered wellness." [PBS Interview](#)

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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