The History of Meditation

By Roger Gabriel (Raghavanand)

The history of meditation is actually the history of existence itself, so this will be the shortened version!

Modern science tells us that the universe came into being with a big bang. Actually, it wasn’t a bang but rather a big Om, which didn’t just happen once but is happening continuously. The absolute, pure consciousness is the potential for everything but is nothing in itself, which means it is also pure silence. At some point, the Absolute decided it wanted to have an experience but, as nothing else existed, it could only experience itself. As experience is by contrast, the Absolute had to move within itself to experience itself.

Movement creates friction, which creates sound. However, by definition, the Absolute is silent, so this sound had to be forced out of pure consciousness and became conditioned or modified consciousness. This first sound was Om, which then diversified into all the sounds and vibrations of the manifest creation.

To paraphrase the Gospel of John, in the beginning was the word (Om), and the word became flesh (manifest creation), and the one became many. From the Vedic texts, we learn that the non-dual Om (the sound of silence) emerged from the supreme unmanifest Absolute, becoming the three letters A U M. From these came the physical realm (bhur), the subtle, causal realm, (bhuvah), and the celestial realm (suvar). From these emerged the great Gayatri mantra. From the Gayatri mantra emerged knowledge of the transcendental nature of the cosmic being (purusha). From this emerged the entire meaning of the Vedas. From the Vedas, Brahma created the manifest universe as the personal soul (jiva); the subtle realm of the ego, intellect, and mind; and the physical realm that includes our body and the environment.

The importance of the mantras Om and the Gayatri cannot be over emphasized. Aligning ourselves with the sound of Om aligns us with the whole of creation. By knowing and chanting the Gayatri mantra, we are drawn back through all the layers of evolution to that subtlest level of being.

Om is the beginning and end of the story of meditation. It is the creator breathing out and breathing in. The exhale is the evolution of the entire manifest creation, and the inhale is its return to source. All the sounds, all the vibrations of the universe, all the mantras, are contained within and emerge from Om. We are the creators of the universe, exhaling it into existence and inhaling it back into the unmanifest. The entire story of meditation would end here except for one small detail—we have forgotten...
that we are the creator. We have become so attached to the exhale and all its multifold creation that we have forgotten to breathe in. It’s as though we are holding our breath out and forgetting who we really are.

The path of meditation is the story of learning how to take a spiritual in breath and return to our essence.

**The Unfolding of the Yugas**

The Vedas describe four periods of time called Yugas, lasting for tens of thousands of years. Sat Yuga was the Golden Age when satwa guna dominated and most people were enlightened and had use of yogic power. This was the dawn of Vedic times, a time of balance and harmony between humans and nature. The four Vedas, Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva, contain all the knowledge of the external world and each have four parts. The Samhitas contain the mantras, the Brahmanas explain the sacred rituals, the Aranyakas focus on the inner meanings of the rituals, and the Upanishads discuss atman, Brahman, and the inner meaning of life. The Upanishads later became the foundation of what we now know as Vedanta, the culmination of the Vedic wisdom. Upanishad literally means “to sit near” so this was special knowledge reserved for the advanced students who would hear it directly from a teacher. This was also the beginning of meditation practices as tools to explore the inner world, rather than the outer.

Over time the purity of the teachings began to diminish and moral decay opened the door to the less enlightened Treta Yuga, where the forces of the satwa, rajas, and tamas gunas were equal. We started to forget who we really are, our souls wandered lost, and the cycle of accumulating karma and the need for rebirth began. The oneness of Brahman was lost to duality and the concept of Ishwara, a personal God, and the multitude of gods and goddesses emerged. The six “enemies of the soul” (desire for sensory pleasure, anger, greed, delusion, pride, and jealousy) were born. This was the time when Lord Vishnu, the maintainer of the universe, incarnated as Rama, the ideal human, to try to restore life’s values of kama (joyous relationships), artha (material security), dharma (ethical values), and moksha (liberation). This period gave us the great teachings of the Ramayana and the Yoga Vasistha. Meditation was reserved for those who had access to a teacher.

The fortunate few souls climbed out of samsara (the cycle of birth and death) but for most the decline continued into Dwapara Yuga, where rajas guna dominated. Once again Lord Vishnu incarnated, this time as Krishna, and gave us the greatest of all the Vedic texts, the Bhagavad Gita. While the Upanishads show us pictures of different parts of our spiritual journey, the Gita is like a practical guidebook. Krishna introduces
us to the four paths of yoga—bhakti, karma, gyana, and raja—and in doing so, makes spiritual practices available to everyone. He teaches “established in being, perform action,” which is the root of meditation. Again only a few listened and, as delusion and chaos continued, most souls slipped even further into darkness.

Now we find ourselves in Kali Yuga, the current period dominated by the inertia of tamas guna, overshadowed by materialism, fear, selfishness, doubts, greed, and lust. In this state of ignorance, the energetic body can become inverted in relationship to the physical body, leading to the senseless destruction, suffering, and confusion we experience around us.

There is, however, a glimmer of hope. When things are going well, we often forget to say thank you and we forget to appreciate the divine quality in life. This has happened in the previous Yugas, causing our downfall. However, when our lives are really miserable, we finally ask, “Isn’t there something better?” and our spiritual journey begins. We meet teachers, learn techniques, and slowly begin to remember.

Throughout all these Yugas or ages, there have been great meditation teachers. However, most are now lost to antiquity or mythology. In more recent times, we fortunately have more direct links to the wisdom of enlightened masters. The Buddha gave us awareness and Vipassana meditations. The great religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have given us prayer and contemplation. In the Vedic tradition, Patanjali consolidated much of the teaching in his Yoga Sutras, giving us a very practical path through the eight limbs of yoga. Later, Adi Shankara revived the knowledge of the oneness of Brahman and the non-duality of Advaita Vedanta.

The Essence of the Great Teachings

Most of the teachings of the Chopra Center are reflections of the lineage of the Shankara tradition, which includes such great luminaries as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo, Paramhansa Yogananda, Anandamayi Ma, and Osho. Most recently, we have the teachings of Swami Brahmananda Saraswati and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Many other teachers, too many to mention, have and still today walk our planet, sharing their wisdom.

Deepak’s insight has now brought together the essence of many of these great teachings in our Primordial Sound Meditation program, encompassing mindfulness, breath awareness, self-inquiry, neti neti, silent repetition of a mantra leading to transcendental consciousness, resting in the ground state of awareness, and planting the seeds of intention for a life in perfection.
The ever-unfolding process of evolution gives us the illusion of a universe with all its aspects. Meditation is a process of involution, a journey back to our source, where we realize that the universe and all its multiplicity are merely expressions or appearance of one essential reality, Brahman.

There has never been a time when it was easier to learn meditation or when it was more needed. As we work together to realize Deepak’s goal of one billion meditators, we can create a conscious shift back into Sat Yuga. The journey will be complete, and the story of meditation will reach its happy ending.

About the Author

Born in Liverpool, England, Roger Gabriel spent his formative years in the United Kingdom and first learned meditation there in the early 1970s. It instantly became his passion and he soon trained to be a meditation teacher under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

After moving to the U.S., Roger began studying Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of health care. In 1985, while helping to establish centers for Ayurveda and meditation, he met and became friends with Deepak Chopra. Since then, Roger has assisted Deepak with numerous training programs, seminars, and workshops; taught thousands of people on all continents to meditate; and assisted in training hundreds of people to become teachers of meditation, Ayurveda, and yoga.

Roger has been blessed to meet and study with great teachers in India and the West, and he has traveled extensively in India. He incorporates much of what he has learned in his practices and teaching. In 2006, Roger received his spiritual name Raghavanand from Shree Satuwa Baba Maharaji of Varanasi, India.

As time permits, he involves himself with charity programs in India and takes like-minded seekers on tours to some of his favorite pilgrimage sites there. Roger currently serves as a member of the Chopra Center Certification’s Advisory Board and is a Chopra Center–certified Master Educator who teaches regularly at the Center’s workshops, seminars, and teacher training programs. When not traveling, he lives in Encinitas, California.