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MYSTICISM IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

In various cultures and in various ages through myth and mystery mystics have struggled to put into words the strange insights they received. Thus have developed the great religions of the world. To the common man these insights were hardly intelligible. The paths traced by the mystics were too difficult, and so some disciples developed rituals to give some experience of the divine to common folk, whose credulity was unfortunately exploited by vested religion. However, many have always been experimenting for themselves (perhaps not so many in the Christian tradition because of its strong regimentation, except among monks and the religious). Their experiences and writings have been very valuable guides to other seekers. Most of them pointed to the need for quiet silent introspection—in Indian terms *antaradrishti*, which is not the same as a introspection. Introspection is examining one's thoughts, feelings and mental processes. Antaradrishti emphasizes looking inwards, not so much examining as seeing, experiencing and learning, being aware of one's true interiority.

In the regimented religions like Islam and Christianity men of interiority—experience were easily misunderstood, often persecuted, because they "strayed off" the beaten track. This has sometimes happened in the permissive religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism also, though many were later respected and treated as spiritual guides. The choice of a guide should be done with caution, because, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, one who prophesies correctly on one occasion need not prophesy correctly again, for the pseudo-mystic too can be carried away by adulation.¹ Yet the common factors among the mystics from various religions, different cultural backgrounds, often opposite beliefs are truly astonishing.

1. A typical example may be St Bernard of Cluny, a mystic, who also preached the Second Crusade, which was a failure. Even a mystic must be humble enough to accept that some inspirational ideas may be from his own psyche.

Traditions Believing in a Personal God

Those accepting belief in a personal God,² like Christians, Muslims, Jews and the Hindus following the *Bhakti Marga* (way of loving devotion) approach the divine with intense and loving devotion which develops ultimately into an intense desire for unity or merging with the divine, or at least a merging of two persons like a couple in love. The devotee seems to be transported into another world where time is of no consequence. The divine being may assume various forms before merging, like a being radiating light, or for a Hindu devotee of *Shakti* a beautiful woman. The devotee may talk, seek knowledge, clarification, get answers or just remain in a transport of bliss. To a Christian it could be Jesus Christ, the resurrected Jesus with his marks of crucifixion from which exude rays of light, or just the figure of a man whom he intuitively recognizes as Jesus. However, the devotee's love can be impure when the devotee has an element of self-gain in his devotion/service to the Lord. This has to be purified by trials before he reaches the state of trance unity with the divine.

In the Jewish tradition God is transcendent. Even his name is not to be uttered. Yet this unity is sought in divine attributes personified. *Wisdom* 8:2 says:

I loved her and sought her from my youth,
and I desired her for my bride,
and I became enamoured of her beauty.

There does not seem to be much deep mystic experiences in Jewish history. Perhaps it is due to their concept of the transcendence of God, whose very name they were forbidden to take even in prayer. To them God was Yahweh "The One who is true to Himself." Yet in Numbers 12:6 to 8 we have God telling those who tried to belittle Moses:

Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech: and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

2. Most religious Theologies make a personal God into an anthropomorphic God.

St Paul and St John, the evangelist have used very personalistic language to describe the state of union between man and God. "For me to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21); or the more well known Col 2:20 "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Paul was no recluse but an active worker in spreading the good news of salvation.³ Yet his expression is that of a realized contemplative mystic, suitably toned down for the general Christian layman. Narrating the final discourse of Jesus, who had to break through the Jewish apprehension of the otherness of God, St John presents Jesus as saying:

Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me (Jn 14:1).
If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (Jn 14:23).

Thus Jesus explains to fishermen the mystic union of a devotee with the divine. St John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic, says that,

The soul delights in prayer, fasts, seeking counsel, reading books; but true devotion is from the heart. As love of God increases love for material things even arts like music decreases. Then comes a time when one may be lured by spiritual exercises; resolutions may fail, one goes from one meditation to another trying to visualise different scenes

Sense of aridity grows; then comes spiritual aridity; even meditation produces little favourable responses in the soul. This is a period of test, to humble the soul, says John. Don't give up; although the greater the yearning for God, the deeper is the dryness.⁴

In the Indian tradition the same experience of yearning and dryness has produced some of the most plaintive songs of Mirabai, Tukaram, Chaitanya and Tyagaraj. The devotee is encouraged to recall that light in itself is invisible and only dust in the air makes the rays visible, The unlearned Tukaram who could only compose in the vernacular and was, therefore, despised by the Brahmins, produced penetrating insights into the Vedas, yet declared "these are not my words, I know nothing

3. Paul tries to explain to the gentile Athenians that God is not far from any of us, for "in Him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28).

4. John of the Cross, *The complete works of St John of the Cross*, translated by E.A. Peers, London, Burns Oates and Washbourne - Ch. xiii.

of their meaning."⁵ In all these traditions mystical understanding is not of the mind. One knows, yet knows not how one knows.

The great mystic of recent times in Hinduism was Sri Ramakrishna, whose teachings were so ably explained by Swami Vivekananda. He had adopted Kali as his spiritual mother, and groaned for her vision, as a child who is deprived from seeing his mother. As he was driven to attempt suicide in despair, the vision came to him. Then followed visions of other Hindu personal gods. Later he went on to attempt other forms of mysticism which are numerous in India. Then he tried Sufism and his biographer⁶ says that for those days he would live outside temple precincts, dress like a Muslim, say namaz 5 times a day and do everything required of a Muslim devotee, and banish all devotions to Hindu gods and goddesses. He was blessed with a vision of Mohammed, and then passed into a realization of the Absolute Brahman without attributes, i.e. impersonal God. His biographer also reports that Ramakrishna had the Bible read to him, meditated on pictures of Jesus and the scenes depicted therein, specially the Madonna and the Child to such an extent that his reverence for Hindu gods and goddesses faded and a deep regard for Christ, his teachings and the church pervaded him. One day while out walking he saw a remarkable foreigner with beautiful eyes, whom he intuitively recognized as the Christ who had poured out his blood and suffered for redemption of man. Christ embraced him and they merged. He became unconscious and in this state experienced his union with God. He thus became convinced that Christ is an incarnation of God as taught by Christians. He also had great respect for the Buddha and for the Tirthankaras of the Jains specially Mahavira whose statue found a place in his room with an *agarbatti* (an incense) constantly burning before it.

These experiences of the undoubtedly greatest mystic of modern India, though not educated in the modern sense, have been narrated here in detail for this short article, because they seem to show the importance for the devotee of a life of detached purity, childlike simplicity, depth of understanding of the Divine (in the form in which he worships him), a deep overwhelming appreciation and love, leading

5. *Ishanand Venpeny, S.J. Inspiration in non-Biblical Scriptures*, (Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 1973), p. 196.

6. Swami Ghananada, *Shri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message*, 5th edition, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1987.

to a craving to be one with that personality, and most important an acceptance that, that personality had merged with the Absolute Godhead (Brahman for Sri Ramakrishna). It is as if the words of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6) were literally true for Sri Ramakrishna.

Personalistic Approach as the Common Man's Way to Divine Life—the Bhakti Marg.

The methods to be followed to achieve divine life in the various systems seem to be very similar. Spiritual exercises like "renunciation" of not only wealth but also of pomp and power, are necessary. Also there is the need for the human spirit to be crushed to very severe strains; such purifying experiences, like Jesus at Gethsamane seem necessary. Through all these one has to maintain both balance of mind and the ultimate purpose, and that too in absolute purity. What about the vast majority who are left low and dry?⁷ Will they not reach the bliss of "seeing God face to face"? Yes, to the extent that their daily chores permit, or that they sacrifice their holiday to the beach for a quiet time in an ashram, retreat house, or to the extent that they are aware of the suffering humanity around them and lend them a helping hand, they can certainly participate in the bliss and contentment of a correctly led life divine. Further by meditation they can have the assurance of better relationships with the divine and with others; greater ability to deal with problems met with in life with equanimity, neither excessive elation at success nor deep depression at failure; greater creativity in the field of their own natural abilities; and above all, a deeper understanding of the fundamental truths of life. To lay common folk this is their share of life-divine, and it is no mean share in this vale of tears!

The Path of Yoga

Gurus who believe in a personal God welcome also disciples who believe in a non-personal entity, or even in the universal Self of the cosmos. Their only conditions are: keep an open mind always; and follow the directions of the system of discipline and obedience to the Guru, even if you cannot mentally agree.

7. Ps. 82:6 "You are gods, sons of the Most High *all* of you." It seems to make little difference as to which religion one belongs, nor does it seem valid before God to grade humans as called or not-called. cf. William Johnson, *The Inner Eye of Love-Mysticism and Religion*, (London, Font Paperback, 1981), p. 31.

For those who opt for a non-personalistic approach to divine, unity, the path of yoga⁸ is generally prescribed, though it is also equally valid for those who follow the Bhakti Marg. The eightfold discipline (*ashtangayoga*) consists of the following principles of personality training:

Leading a sound moral life by avoiding hurting others, being content with what one has; performing one's duty in this life, accepting its ups and downs; in brief practise *yama* and *niyama* and then the rest of the disciplines of *ashtanga yoga* namely the *asanas* (proper positioning of the body), breathing practices (*pranayama*). The disciple then starts practising *pratyahara* (turning the mind inwards avoiding external influences), *dharana* (concentration of the mind on some representation of the non-personal Reality, an object without wavering). Only then will he advance to *dhyana* or meditation. As the disciple proceeds deeper into the meditative practice, detached completely from the outside world he at first is aware only of himself, and then even this awareness fades till he remains immobile, oblivious of time, floating in a seemingly different universe. He attains *samadhi* (unity with Reality). Experience of *samadhi* may vary from person to person.

Somewhere along this path the disciple may get "extra sensory perceptions." But he is warned⁹ that these powers will only lead him

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8. Cf. Shri Yogendra, *Guide to Yoga Meditation*, (The Yoga Institute, Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1986).
9. A very important caution common to all mystics. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, (Penguin Books Ltd., reprint 1976, article 50) warns against "all other forms of sweetness or consolation." Lawrence Le Shan in "How to Meditate," (Bantam Books, New York reprint 1981, p. 83) points out that the Buddha warned against feats of levitation. Similarly Zen Masters warn against "great white lights." Johnson, William, S.J., in "Silent Music" (William Collin & Sons, Glasgow, reprint as paperback, 1977, p. 92) says that a person who begins to roam in the caverns of his own mind may easily get lost unless he has the depth of faith and singleness of purpose of John of the Cross, which enabled him to "go over the mountains . . . pluck no flowers . . . fear no wild beasts." Mention is also made on p. 97 that in early Buddhism misuse of psychic powers for self glorification led to expulsion from the monastery. Christian tradition has the warning, "Do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are of God," (1 John 4:1). "By the fruits you shall know them," and also "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness . . . self-control," Gal 5:22.

away from his goal of attaining divine unity. Various persons get different powers and these to varying degrees (like psycho-kinesis or knowledge) of an event about to happen; clairvoyance or seeing something without being physically present in the place; extraordinary physical powers much beyond what a human can be expected to have, powers to move objects from a distance without touching them and similar powers which demonstrate the power of mind over matter. Had he been an atheist, so say the gurus, he would have got during his meditations, experiences which would convince him of divine existence. This is not a rational conviction but is an intuitive knowledge that is far more potent than rational arguments of believers. Having thus come to this knowledge the next step would be merging with the divine, i.e. in his meditation he would get this experience (*Samadhi*). Similarly, different persons seem to get experiences which suit their value systems, including the fundamental beliefs ingrained in them since infancy and knowingly or unknowingly an integral part of their psyche (not just mind, conscious sub-conscious or unconscious). Everyone will not reach the goal of having divine unity to his satisfaction even temporary experiences of it, but every sincere seeker will, say the gurus, share in it. This life divine will firstly give life as is lived by the individual in the world a meaning; the ups and downs will not rock him off his rocker; he will find solutions to various problems in his work and in social life much more easily; illness will heal quicker (a lowering of blood pressure and cholesterol levels is widely established). A number of cases are on record where persons, who had to make decisions on the spur of the moment and did so only to find an apparent error, found in the long run that the decision was valid and correct. Yet failures are to be expected. One should expect to be tested. Gold is only purified in the fire. There are, however, a few cases where persons leading loose lives of pleasure have had such experiences.

Buddhist and Zen Approach to Life Divine

The methods adopted by the masters of Buddhism and Zen mysticism in educating their disciples are very similar.¹⁰ In earlier times both among the Hindus and the Buddhists, adolescent aspirants had to live with their gurus. Often they were not initiated straightaway into the necessary practices, but given various household tasks, including tending

10. Needless to say Zen also insists on the eight-fold noble path: right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

to the vegetable garden or the cow. Later the practices would be rigidly enforced according to the limit of endurance. No wonder many would leave at various stages. The guru has not worried. The final stages would perhaps during his whole life be imparted to only a very few. He was not worried. It was quality that counted. The tradition was that the disciple should attain a deeper life divine than the guru and at least one such should be there to continue the tradition. Knowledge gained must not be lost to humanity. Even so a disciple though superior in many respects would always bow to his guru, till the latter's death. In Zen tradition, excess use of reasoning like disputations is considered a hindrance. Just the opposite is the *jnana marga* of the Advaita tradition, although it must be emphasized that here too intuitive knowledge was given a higher place than what we would term knowledge through reason and through the senses.

Nirvana, the ultimate state of enlightenment for the Buddhist, can be attained by meditating upon anything, a material object, an image or vision, an imagined sunset, or even an abstract idea. A stage comes when the disciple merges into the thing meditated upon completely oblivious of his surroundings, and the thing meditated upon appears to be the only reality at the moment. Thus the meditator becomes one with the cosmos whatever he meditates on. Obviously this is no easy task and the training too therefore requires a supremely disciplined mind. Many stories are told of the strictness of Zen masters. The disciple has been meditating upon a stone in the garden for a week (or a koan like "when do you see nothingness?") and now comes to report to the Master and sits before him. The Master shows no sign of knowing his presence, yet he is aware. Now he looks at him and asks for his experience. The disciple explains. The Master knows which are the desirable experiences and may often tell the disciple to go back and meditate for another week on the same stone. A tinkle of a little bell tells the disciple that his interview is over and no questions can be now asked. Or a meditating disciple may get a severe rap which knocks him off his seat. He is expected to regain his posture and to continue meditating as if nothing happened.

Although there is no concept of divinity in Zen, (other Buddhist *Mahayana* cults worship the Buddha, perform rituals like the Hindu ones, aim at getting visions of the Buddha and at becoming one with him), there is a concept of a universal something pervading the cosmos, specially living beings and man. There are monks who do hold to the concept of merging with the Buddha, although they are advised by the Master that

they should concentrate on their breathing and the visions would stop. An important change after the war was *seshin* (a week of retreat) for the layman some of whom may have mental problems; but the discipline is so severe that some find their problems worsen. Laymen find benefits similar to those mentioned under Yoga.

Universal Interest in Meditative Experience

There is in the various parts of the world a surprising awakening of interest in life divine or some form of it depending upon the culture of the area. A substantial contribution to this awakening is made by disappointment with modern life governed by science, technology and economics. A few top brains in these fields who could be expected to stand by the scientific mechanistic culture as the only rational culture worth serious consideration, are themselves skeptics. Some have taken to such religious practices as meditation. Zen seems to be popular. The so called "uncertainty principle" has shaken many a hard core physicist.¹¹ David Bohm of Birkbeck College feels that there is something beyond the purely material, and a scientist should not close himself up in a materialist prison, if he wishes to be a true scientist. Brian Josephson, the astro-physicist and Noble laureate of 1973, hopes to gain insights into objective reality by practising eastern meditational techniques.

Aldous Huxley¹² opened the doors wide to experimentation with drugs like mescaline and opium derivatives which have given a short cut to those seeking only mystic experiences or an escape from reality instead of the Reality. This raises the question:

Are mystic experiences truly religious and spiritually uplifting? Since in most religious traditions there have always been orthodox believers who questioned and even persecuted those who claimed mystical knowledge which differed from tradition in that religion, the genuineness of mysticism is again called to question.

Conclusion

There seems to be little doubt that the mystic experience is a highly subjective one; yet it is authentic. It is reliable. The mystic who follows

11. Boslough, John: *Stephen Hawkin's Universe* (William Morrow & Co. Inc; New York), p. 126.

12. Huxley, Aldous, *The Doors of Perception* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1954).

the path of loving devotion to a personal God, may achieve a vision which gives him intense joy—a beatific vision. The Vedantist or Yogi may find that he achieves a deep sense of unity with the divine or with nature, or a sense of unity with the cosmos, which gives him (or her) an understanding of oneness with the world, with humanity, and a sense of deep bliss and contentment. This may also be experienced when the Buddhist through Zen reaches the ultimate goal of his meditation in which he achieves *sunya* or the void, where he senses that the universe fades away, that there is neither virtue nor vice. Yet in this experience many get the feeling of a something pervading the universe. Similarly we find St John of the Cross, Eckhart, Suso, mentioning that they experienced oneness with God which one would expect to be the experience of the Vedantist. Sufi Muslims, who believe in one absolute and transcendental God, also have the same experience and have been condemned as heretics for insisting on their oneness with the divine—something that they cannot explain, yet know to be true.¹³ Some Christian mystics, too, have been similarly persecuted.

Another surprising understanding may be contradictory like an experience of the world as an illusion (*maya*) and yet one is a part of it; or an experience of good and evil being the same; or light and darkness; or the meditator in whose tradition the ultimate is darkness may get an experience of blinding light; or the Christian may feel eternal bliss in darkness.¹⁴ Jung explains it as the emotional principle 'anima' which is feminine interacting with the male principle "animus," the spirit.¹⁵ Some see the meeting of opposites the feminine *yin* with the masculine *yang* of the Chinese Tao. Mystic knowledge is therefore not normal human understanding. It is not rational. It is not irrational in the sense of being wrong. Such wide experiences in different religious traditions cannot be wrong. Rather there

13. Nicholson R. A., *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, (Cambridge, 1921), p. 91, quoting the Sufi Abu Sa'id bin Abil-Khayr. Other well-known Sufis are Ghazali and Hallaj who was persecuted.

14. *The Cloud of the Unknowing*, Editor E.B. Rieu, The Penguin Classics, publ. 1961, reprint 1976. The author says "For if you are to feel Him or to see Him in this life, it must always be in this cloud, in this darkness" (p. 54). Also John of the Cross (cf. *The Complete Works*, Ch. iv) explains that to be effectively guided by faith, the soul must be in darkness.

15. R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, (Oxford University Press, London, 1961), p. 148.

seems to be a unifying principle operating in all of them. If the Christian believes that it is the Holy Spirit in his case, can he deny the same Spirit to those of other religions, and is he not stressing similarity in Mystical Experiences?¹⁶

"All believers of whatever religion have always heard His revealing voice in the discourse of creatures"¹⁷ (Vat II, *Gaudium et Spes*, para 36). . . "For God, revealing Himself of His people to the extent of a full manifestation of Himself in His Incarnate Son, has spoken to the culture proper to different ages"¹⁸. (*Ibid.* para 58).

16. Bede, Griffiths, "The Mystical Dimension in Theology," *Indian Theological Studies*, 14, 1977, p. 246: ". . . the Indian genius is for mystical experience. Theology in India will therefore be above all a mystical theology."

17. Vat II, *Gaudium et Spes*, para 36.

18. *Ibid.*, para 58.