

# Perspectives on Mysticism

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The popular versions of “mysticism” associate it with something misty, vague, mysterious and mystifying. However, in actuality, mysticism is something far from all these associations. In order not to get trapped into the faddish descriptions of mysticism, we need to convert the question of “What is mysticism?” into three important questions that go to its very core. They are: “Who is a mystic? What is the mystic seeking? And “What is a mystical experience?” The answers to these questions might lead to unraveling the genuine nature of this very significant phenomenon as part of the human experience.

Who is a mystic? The answer to this question has been provided by the history of mysticism in both the Eastern and Western traditions. A mystic is an exceptionally sensitive person whose five senses are so finely tuned to the kaleidoscopic inner and outer natures, whose emotions are so effected by the colorful inner and the outer worlds and whose mind is so engrossed in the panoramic scenery of the internal and external realities that nothing escapes his/her notice. With these natural endowments the mystic is seeking something important, significant and meaningful. By grasping and experiencing this state, the mystic hopes to find the purpose of life and thus feel fulfilled.

But what is the mystic searching? What is this quest? Through his/her impressionable senses, passions and mind, the mystic seeks to experience the underlying unity that is hidden behind the diversity of phenomena. It is this unity that the mystic aspires to experience with utmost intensity. Some mystics have called this underlying unity the “divine spark,” while others refer to it as the “signature of the creator” through which the maker has stamped every creature. Mystics yearn to experience this “mark of the creator” that lies embedded in the diversity of the outer world and hidden under the multiplicity of the sense-intellectual inner world. When the mystics find this state, they describe it variously as positive, meaningful, gratifying or fulfilling and designate it as “mystical experience.”

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What then is mystical experience? Historically, both the Eastern and Western mystics have described their mystical experience in terms of a special kind of awareness called “mystical consciousness.” In contrast to our day-to-day awareness that consists of sensations, perceptions, emotions, desires, images, and ideas, the mystical consciousness is a complete void. While undergoing this experience, though the mystics are absolutely sure of it, they are at a loss to describe it in any concrete terms. Their descriptions might vary from: “experience of the void,” or “experience of no-thing” or “experience of nothingness” to “zero experience.” But once the experience has taken place, the mystics might describe it by using words, terms, and concepts borrowed from their unique religious or non-religious backgrounds by describing it as “the experience of fulfillment” or “experience of completeness” or “experience of infinite bliss.” However, the mystics would warn against taking these descriptions too literally because none of them could communicate what was grasped during the mystical experience.

In the above introduction, I have indicated that a mystic is in pursuit of the underlying unity, which is the spark of divinity or the signature of the creator that lies hidden under the diversity of the external world and the multiplicity of the inner world. This unity within and without that is the focus of mysticism has been pursued in terms of both introvertive and extrovertive mysticism. In the extrovertive variety, the universe of matter, mind and spirit blends together to reveal the underlying unity and this oneness is experienced by some mystics as the presence of divinity in the external world whereas others have assigned to it the property of transforming power. However, in the introvertive variety, the mystic takes a mental voyage within, by crossing the world of sensations, perceptions, feelings, images, ideas, and concepts, finally experiences divinity or signature of the creator or the transforming power at the core of one’s being.<sup>1</sup>

In the traditions of India, China and the West, there have been various kinds of mysticism. However, all of them can be put under the two headings of extrovertive and introvertive mysticism because their quest is concerned with either the external or internal union.

I will begin with the description of mysticism in India through its original presentation in the *Gayatri Mantra* (1500 B.C.E.), its exposition

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1. Ashok Malhotra, *Instant Nirvana: Americanization of Mysticism and Meditation* (Binghamton, NY: Global Academic Publishing, 1999), 4.

in the philosophical works of the Upanishadas (1000 B.C.E.) and its modification in the thoughts and lives of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (19<sup>th</sup> Century). This will be followed by a short description of mysticism in the Chinese tradition as presented by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. The final section will offer philosophical interpretation of mysticism as presented by W.T. Stace in his work *The Teachings of the Mystics* and by William James in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

## Mystical Traditions in India

### Gayatri Mantra (1500 B.C.E.)

There is an ancient story told by Dr. Usharbudh Arya that pertains to the understanding of the mystical tradition in India. The four Vedas that contain the mystical philosophy of India were supposed to be memorized by the students by heart. When a few of these students found it difficult to commit thousands of pages to memory, they approached their master teacher, the *guru*, with a request to condense this teaching into a few words. Listening to their pleas, the *guru* offered them in only sixteen words the quintessence of the Vedas. This condensing of the mystical knowledge of the Vedas came to be called the *Gayatri Mantra*. Below are the sixteen words of the *Gayatri Mantra* where the secret knowledge of Hindu Mysticism resides:

AUM BHU BHUWA SWAHA,  
TAT SWITUR WAREE NIYAM,  
BHARGO DEVASYA DHI MAHI  
DHIYOYO NAHA PRACHO DIYAT.

The meaning of the Gayatri mantra is explained as follows:

AUM – The first sound or cosmic vibration  
 BHU – The earth or the physical world  
 BHUWA – The universe of stars or the entire universe  
 SWAHA – The all-encompassing space where everything resides  
 TAT – That which dwells in each created being  
 SWITUR – The radiant or the brilliant one  
 WAREE NIYAM – The adorable, venerable, highest goal  
 BHARGO – The magnificent one, which is full of attraction  
 DEVASYA – The divine one which is pure and shining  
 DHEEMAHI – One that requires one-pointed attention

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DHIYOYO – One who is the brilliant or the cosmic intellect

NAH – We or us

PRACHODAYAT – One that inspires through light or illumination

The first line, “AUM BHU BHUWA SWAHA,” describes AUM as the original cosmic sound in the universe. Brahman, the ultimate being, revealed itself concretely through AUM, which congealed itself by becoming the earth (BHU), the heavens (BHUWA) and the space-in-between (SWAHA). AUM solidified further by creating all the creatures including human beings, thus residing in them as their divine spark. In human beings it revealed itself through their breathing.

The second line “TAT SWITUR WAREE NIYAM,” delineates: “That AUM became the sun, which in turn gave birth to all life. Through this light of the sun everything was born and preserved. This light abided in each creature as his or her divine spark. Since the realization of this divine spark was the final goal of our life, we should bow before it, adore it and offer ourselves to it.

The third line, “BHARGO DEVASYA DHI MAHI,” states that since this divine spark, residing at the core of our being, was the most brilliant, illumined, and lustrous, it should be meditated upon and assimilated. One must get in touch with it at all costs, even when one had to let go of everything else.

The fourth line “DHIYOYO NAHA PRACHO DIYAT,” asserts that since our ordinary mind was constantly disturbed and was out of control, we should arrest its powers by directing it towards this divine spark. Through constant and continuous meditation on this inner light, one would be able to experience the essence of one’s existence that would lead to total fulfillment.”<sup>2</sup>

The sixteen words of the *Gayatri Mantra* should be chanted in the morning, afternoon, evening and at night as well as on any occasion that was auspicious. By reciting it daily at the various times one was bound to experience the underlying unity that resided at the core of one’s being, thus reaching the goal of one’s life.

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2. Ashok Malhotra, *The Drama of Consciousness: Yoga, Taoism, Zen, and Existentialism* (forthcoming), 9–10.

### The Upanishadas (1000 B.C.E.)

The *Gayatri Mantra* was offered as a formula for grasping the mystery of existence. Since it worked for some while not for others, various thinkers and systems throughout the Indian tradition explored it in their unique ways to reach mystical states. The Upanishadas made the pioneering attempt at this exploration. They believed that the secret of human life resided in discovering the nature of the universe, the nature of the human being and the relationship between the two. They directed their speculation towards getting answers for these three concerns. Their dedicated speculation led to the greatest mystical discovery that consisted of three steps: first, they discovered the underlying unity of the external world to be *Brahman*, which they called as the immutable objective essence of the universe; second, they discovered that the underlying unity of the inner world to be *Atman*, and they called it the immutable subjective essence of a human being; and third, they discovered that this subjective essence (*Atman*) of a human being was not only similar to but identical with the objective essence (*Brahman*) of the universe. This last discovery was presented as the quintessence of mysticism because the experience of this identity between oneself and the universe was responsible for the eruption of the infinite joyful consciousness designated as mystical consciousness.

A person, who was dedicated to regular meditation through the aid of different sacred sound-symbols called the mantras, would come to the realization that there was no difference between the core principle of the human reality and the core principle of the reality of the universe. According to the Upanishadas, the realization of this identity of the *Atman* and the *Brahman* was the ultimate goal of life. This was what the mystic was seeking in all earnest. When s/he would find it, it would be experienced as *Satchitananda* (*sat* – infinite existence, *chit* – consciousness and *ananda* – bliss) or as eternal joyful consciousness. This state, which was the final goal of life, was sought by many but experienced only by a few.

The Upanishadas discovered the secret of meaningful existence through the mystical consciousness, which they designated as an extraordinary intuitive experience of feeling, sensing and thinking the identity between the inner essence of *Atman* and the external essence of *Brahman*. The equation of *Atman* as identical with *Brahman* became the core principle of the mystical union.

Though the Upanishadas were very clear about the experience of this identity as the key to the realization of an ecstatic consciousness, they created a number of very stringent rules to reach this state and to learn this teaching. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that two innovators and revolutionaries of India brought this esoteric and secret wisdom to the level of everyday folks so that they could experience this ecstatic consciousness in an ordinary way.

### **Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (19th Century)**

The two votaries of Indian spirituality and mysticism, who stand out during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Though they were diametrically opposite, they had an ideal teacher-student relationship comparable to Socrates and Plato. Ramakrishna was a mystic in the traditional sense of the word. Though he had no formal schooling, all his learning and wisdom came from his personal experiences with the ordinary folks and from his heart. In contrast, his disciple Vivekananda was highly educated in the philosophy, religion, arts and languages of both India and the West. He lived in the clouds of rational thinking far removed from the ordinary folks before he encountered Ramakrishna. While Ramakrishna was brought up in the lap of nature and was grounded in the experiences of daily life, Vivekananda was a rebel, who could not accept anything that did not go through the ironclad scrutiny of reason. Though both of them were influenced by the thoughts of the Upanishadas, because of the radical differences in their backgrounds and training, they conveyed their understanding of these works in their unique ways. Ramakrishna presented his teachings through parables and stories, which were easily accessible to the ordinary folks, whereas Vivekananda offered his thoughts through rationally formulated arguments.

Moreover, Ramakrishna was an example of a living mystic, who had undergone a number of mystical experiences and was speaking from his heart that carried with it the personal authority, whereas Vivekananda tried to convey his teacher's wisdom through rationally organized speeches. For Ramakrishna, the mystical union with his chosen deity (Kali) was the goal of life and he aspired to live this experience each day. However, for Vivekananda, this living god was revealed in the daily lives of masses of humanity. Vivekananda asserted that one could experience this mystical union with the deity by serving the masses through feeding, clothing and

educating them. He took Ramakrishna's personal insights on mysticism and transformed them into a tool for the social elevation of ordinary people.

### ***Ramakrishna's Personal Mysticism***

Of all the Indian thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ramakrishna fits perfectly well into the mold that satisfies the three questions raised regarding mysticism. He was a mystic par excellence, who had undergone a number of mystical experiences that brought him an altered state of consciousness comparable to enlightenment. Moreover, he had undergone the disciplined training to obtain these mystical experiences at will and described them in great detail to his disciples. Ramakrishna was so steeped in spirituality that he spent his entire life seeking mystical union. Since he was rewarded with these ecstatic experiences many times, his disciples called him a "God-intoxicated man."

Ramakrishna was the child of nature, who was educated by the earthly wisdom of the ordinary people and by the folk culture. His closeness to the rural India and the country folks as well as his childlike longing to have a mystical union with his chosen deity oriented him to prefer personal experience and self-realization to intellectual comprehension. He conveyed his personally experienced wisdom through allegories and tales, which were closer to the heart of simple folks and a breath of fresh air for the sophisticated intellectuals. Since his style was reminiscent of Jesus, his down to earth insights appealed to people of diverse religions and cultures. Roman Rolland, a French intellectual, called Ramakrishna's teachings "as pages from the book of life."

Ramakrishna was a born mystic with a keen physical, emotional and mental sensitivity to the outer and inner worlds. From his childhood onwards, he put himself through strict spiritual discipline to experience god in person. His agonized search materialized into "a series of mystical experiences during which he saw god in a variety of manifestations—as a Divine Mother, as Sita, as Rama, as Krishna, as Mohammad, as Jesus Christ, and worshipped Him in the manner of Muslim, Jains, and Buddhists—in each case suiting his dress, food and meditation to the particular religious tradition concerned."<sup>3</sup>

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3. WM. Theodore De Bary, Ed, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 85.

In the beginning, Ramakrishna underwent his mystical experiences through intense devotion to goddess Kali, but as the frequency of his experiences was amplified, any sight or sound or touch would send him into a trance. Here are some of these examples:

One day, Ramakrishna had gone to visit the Zoological Garden in Calcutta. As he approached the lion's cage, he saw the lion in his majestic form, which induced in him a trance where he saw in the lion's energy, the omnipotence of God. . . . On another occasion, once he was watching a parade, where he saw an English boy leaning against a tree, which presented to him the vision of the young Krishna, he immediately went into a trance. . . . Another time, he saw a prostitute in a blue dress. This vision brought before him the form and purity of Sita. From then on, he experienced each woman as an incarnation of the goddess, Kali.<sup>4</sup>

When asked about the nature of his mystical experience, Ramakrishna described it through such characteristics as vividness, completeness, realness, playfulness, transformation, passivity, authority, fulfillment and ineffability. According to Ramakrishna, a mystic who had undergone such an experience might talk about it in these diverse ways because of the cheerfulness and excitement generated by it, but would ultimately end up declaring it to be indescribable. Ramakrishna believed that since the mystical experience was the epitome of fulfillment it would lead to total silence. He conveyed this through a number of simple and down to earth parables. A few of them are worthy of mention here:

A bee might buzz around while it is looking for honey. It may go from flower to flower making all kind of noise, but when it has collected the nectar of honey, which fulfills her, it goes back to its hive and becomes silent. Similarly, when guests are invited to a banquet, before the dishes are served they are talkative and noisy. But when their stomachs are full and they feel satiated, they will stop talking and go into silence. Likewise, when an empty pitcher is dipped into the river, it keeps making a gurgling sound. But when it is full, the sound stops. In the same way, when a person is devoid of the mystical experience, one makes a lot of noise through talking. But when the experience happens, the intellectual mind comes to a total silence. The experience is so fulfilling that there is nothing more to be said. And even when one makes an attempt, one would find out that it couldn't be communicated through the concepts and categories of our ordinary language.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Malhotra, *Instant Nirvana*, 21–22.

5. Vishwanath S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978), 74.



### ***Vivekananda's Social Mysticism***

The simplicity of Ramakrishna's mysticism and his childlike manner of presentation through parables won the heart of diverse disciples including Vivekananda. Before his death in 1886, Ramakrishna charged Vivekananda with the task of spreading India's spiritual message to the West, which he did by attending the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, where he communicated it in the most forceful manner.

Since Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were temperamentally different, each understood the mystical teachings of the Upanishadas in their own unique ways. While Ramakrishna grasped the Upanishadic core discovery of the *Atman/Brahman* unity in terms of a personal experience of the goddess Kali, Vivekananda added to it a social dimension. Using the intellectual equipment at his disposal, Vivekananda tried to draw out the social implications of the mystical discovery of "*Atman is identical with Brahman.*" He surmised that if *Atman* was the essence of a human being and that it was absolutely the same as *Brahman* then a human being possessed the divine essence. Realizing this, Vivekananda came up with the following inferences: *Atman equaled Brahman* meant that each human being was god; each human being was divine; each human being was total freedom; each human being was creative; each human being was the architect of one's destiny; each human being was the other's brother or sister; and though humans looked different and spoke different languages, each one was created by the same artist using the same brush. This was a revolutionary transformation of the mystical doctrine of the Upanishadas. Through this modification, Vivekananda infused the following social message into his master's teachings: If all human beings were divine, then all of us were not only neighbors but also related to each other as brothers and sisters. The same blood flowed through our veins. We were interconnected like the cells that provided life and nourishment to our body and the brain. Thus Vivekananda believed that our society was an organism similar to our body. Like the body, each member of the society was divine.

Vivekananda used the mystical wisdom of the Upanishadas to uplift the status of the downtrodden people of India. He was able to draw out two fundamental insights from the *Atman/Brahman* identity, which he put to their best use.

First, if each one of us was divine, then it was logical to believe in our divinity by having faith in ourselves and by becoming the architects of our own fate and destiny. He challenged each individual by declaring that in the past, it was said that if one did not believe in God, s/he was called an atheist. But this day onwards, Vivekananda would call a person an atheist who did not believe in herself or himself. Therefore, for Vivekananda, to be divine meant that one should have self-esteem and total faith in oneself and one's destiny.

The second insight led Vivekananda to the assertion that we were all brothers and sisters. Our problems were shared-human-problems. We were not born just to make money but to help others by reducing their suffering. Our real nature was to be compassionate towards others. He understood compassion as seeking for others with the same intense passion with which we were driven to seek for ourselves. Giving the other priority over us would transform our passion into co-passion or compassion. This attitude of compassion would connect us to others because we were all born of the same source and were divine relatives. Vivekananda presented this insight by challenging others that if they could not see the living god in a child who was lying on the road and needed help, then it was futile to find it in a non-living stone statue in a temple. Vivekananda transformed the core mystical discovery of the *Atman/Brahman* identity into a tool for uplifting humanity by emphasizing the divine connection among all human beings. His mystical maxim took the form of "experiencing divinity through feeding, clothing, educating and serving the masses."

## **Mysticism in Taoism**

### **Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu (600–400 B.C.E.)**

Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were the first two thinkers to give a succinct description of mysticism in the Chinese tradition. They were the founders of Taoism. Lao Tzu presented his views on naturalistic mysticism in a short book called the *Tao Te Ching*, whereas Chuang Tzu added to them a metaphysical element.

Both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu believed that the ultimate reality was *Tao*. Since it could not be captured by the words and names of our language, *Tao* was ineffable. However, when human beings attempted to grasp it by

using the categories of the sense-intellect apparatus, the *Tao* that became accessible to the human intellect was called the manifest one. The original *Tao* was the creator of everything. It had left its artistic mark on all created things. In human beings, this distinguishing indicator constituted their nature called the *Te* or the inner power. The goal of life was to get in touch with this inner power so as to live one's entire life in harmony with it. A life so lived expressing the inner nature in every thought, action and deed would be happy, contented, serene, fulfilling and fulfilled.

Most of us lived our lives without ever getting in touch with our *Te*. We functioned according to the dictates of the family and social institutions without ever experiencing our authentic inner nature. One day we might wake up to find out that we had been dead. This awakening would be an indication that we had been denying the expression of our real nature. Though we existed, we had been behaving like puppets whose strings were pulled by some external power. This wake up call might lead us to the reflection that there was still time to take charge of our lives by expressing our inner nature.

Most of us were stressed out, unhappy, sad and miserable because we had never been reflective about our natural endowments or our real nature. We had been lulled into doing others' biddings. This wake up call would direct us to our inner nature, which was in dire need of expression.

How should one become aware of one's *Te* or the inner nature? Do the Taoists suggest a method or a way to get in touch with it? Both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were adamant in suggesting a method that would lead us to such a realization. All methods were futile in reaching the *Te* because they would be like sounding the drum to locate a fugitive. However, both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu suggested certain attitudes that could lead to this realization.

### ***Lao Tzu's Naturalistic Mysticism***

Lao Tzu emphasized nature, which he regarded as the best teacher. Nature, to him, was an open book of wisdom. It was ready to disclose its myriad secrets to one, who came to it with an open mind and heart. Every part of it was pulsating with lessons of knowledge, wisdom and compassion. There was much to be learned from the flight of the birds, the movement of the water in the brook, the sunrise and the sunset, the movements of the stars, the waves

of the ocean, the birth of a baby, the buzzing of the bee and the rain drops falling on one's heads. Each had a story to tell and a mystery to reveal. By opening our entire being to the book of nature we would encounter the best examples of compassion showered by the selfless giving natures of the earth and the sun, the universe displaying its beautiful flowers, trees and hills, the oceans presenting themselves with their majestic power and the starry heavens revealing their awe inspiring wonders. Since through nature, *Tao* was continuously revealing its harmonious serenity, Lao Tzu recommended that its contemplation was the best way to get in touch with the harmony and serenity of *Tao*. Sensing, feeling and knowing this harmony in nature would help us to imbibe and cultivate this harmony in our own life. Living in tune with nature would lead to a happy, contented and fulfilled life.

### *Chuang Tzu's Metaphysical Mysticism*

To this natural mysticism of Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu added meditation on the inner self. He believed that one could experience this harmony by taking the inward journey through contemplation by going beyond sensations, feelings, emotions, ideas and ego. This inner journey required a unique kind of mental attitude called the *Wu Wei*, which consisted of knowing intuitively the mysterious laws of nature and acting in accordance with them. *Wu Wei* was the performance of an action spontaneously and effortlessly. It could be cultivated through idleness where mind was totally alert and body acted without the strains of the rational planning mind. However, idleness should not be confused with laziness. Unlike laziness where a person would be dull and unaware, in idleness, an individual would be fully awake to the reality within and without. Idleness would make possible the experience of this harmony that resided in our inner being. It was through idleness that one would become forgetful of the external world, thus letting the *Tao* reveal itself through the *Te*, one's inner nature.

Since the goal of a mystic was to experience the underlying unity through which s/he could live a happy, contented and fulfilled life, it could be achieved through the regular contemplation of nature and the daily practice of idleness. Though Lao Tzu and Chung Tzu did not offer a specific method to achieve this mystical union, they suggested a certain kind of life style as follows: "Live a simple life; prefer obscurity; regard all values as human creations and thus relative; eliminate the fear of death; abandon

the need to win; develop cosmic humility, and center your being on the *Tao* rather than on yourself.”<sup>6</sup>

## Western Mysticism

### The Philosophical Mysticism of Stace and James

In the West, there have been many mystics who have given descriptions of their mystical experiences in terms of extrovertive and introvertive mysticism; however, there are two major philosophers who have provided categories to facilitate the understanding of the phenomenon of mysticism. W.T. Stace in his work on *The Teachings of the Mystics* and William James in his book on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* offer us clear guidelines about how to understand mysticism.

According to Stace, in the popular parlance, the word “mysticism” has been associated with something misty or vague; mysterious or mystery-mongering; hearing voices or seeing visions. However, when one looks at the history of mysticism as well as the writings of the mystics from both the East and the West, one will find that mysticism is neither misty nor vague, neither mysterious nor involved with visions or voices.<sup>7</sup> In the words of the mystics, mysticism has nothing to do with any of these associations because mystical experience is as crystal clear as the blue sky or the sparkling water or the rays of the sun. The confusion arises from the fact that although mystics are absolutely clear and certain of their experience and its intensity, they are unable to find words, terms, and concepts to capture the reality and intensity of this occurrence. All of their attempts and those of others are futile because the mystical experience will always remain impervious to any description provided by the concepts and categories of our sense-intellect apparatus. An endeavor to capture the extraordinary through the apparatus of the ordinary is like the scientist who is trying to catch the contents of the vast ocean through a fishing net that measures only 4 times 6 square feet.

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6. Douglas Shrader and Ashok Malhotra, *Pathways to Philosophy: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 274.

7. W.T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: Mentor, 1960).

Our ordinary awareness operating through precepts and concepts, although helping us to know our surroundings so that we can live safely and in comfort, offers us only a minuscule perspective on the vast and complex universe that escapes and overflows the grasp of its network. Our finite mind with its finite perspective can give us only a limited glimpse of the infinite. However, when a mystic is able to undergo the experience of the infinite as revealed in the mystical experience, s/he is absolutely certain about it; and yet in returning to the limited world of ordinary awareness, s/he is hard put to capture it with the colored eyeglasses of the ordinary awareness. Seeing the difficulty of describing what is indescribable, William James, a renowned psychologist and philosopher comes to our rescue.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James provides some useful philosophical insights on the topic of mysticism. He utilizes his psychological and philosophical training to unearth four distinct attributes that might guide us in grasping the complexity and richness of mystical consciousness. These are *ineffability*, *noetic quality*, *transiency* and *passivity*.

Historically, in both the Eastern and Western traditions, mystics are persons who have undergone mystical experiences and have described these experiences as unspeakable or beyond words. Mystics are unanimous in their pronouncement that the network of our day-to-day precepts and concepts cannot trap the mystical experience or mystical consciousness because the experience will always remain impervious to their grasp. They declare in no uncertain terms that mystical consciousness is indescribable, inexpressible, incommunicable and thus ineffable.

In our discussion of both the Chinese and Indian mystical traditions, we find this to be clearly evident. This is attested to by the Chinese text of the *Tao Te Ching* which opens with the declaration regarding the ineffability of *Tao* by stating: “*Words that describe Tao, do not capture the real Tao; Names that represent Tao, do not express the eternal Tao.*”<sup>8</sup> This assertion indicates that our ordinary language is totally inadequate in capturing the essential nature of *Tao*. In a similar vein, the Indian text of the *Upanishadas* declares that *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, is beyond descriptions. The correct way to grasp its true nature is through the negative phrase of “*Neti Neti*” that means “not this, not this.” Though *Tao* or *Brahman* is experienced

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8. Ashok Malhotra, *Wisdom of the Tao Te Ching: The Code of a Spiritual Warrior* (Oneonta, NY: Oneonta Philosophy Studies, 2006), 4.

directly by the mystic in the state of mystical consciousness, it cannot be conveyed through any descriptions or passed on to another person who has not gone through the experience oneself. Beyond the precepts and concepts of our sense-intellect apparatus, defying the entrapment of our ordinary language and being non-transferable to others, the mystical consciousness will always remain ineffable.

Though this mystical consciousness is indescribable, it is considered to possess a noetic quality, which brings with itself the authority of a special kind of knowledge designated as wisdom. While it is unlike the discursive knowledge, this wisdom might come in an intuitive flash in the form of an illumination or a revelation which for the mystic, might be steeped in significance and importance.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this experience is noteworthy because it brings with it a sense of authority. Since the mystic undergoing the experience is totally convinced of its validity, s/he believes that the reality so revealed is more real than the ordinary perceptual and conceptual world. This experience impinges upon the mystic with such intensity and forcefulness that it has a deeply transforming effect on his/her personality.

Another interesting feature of a mystical consciousness is that it is ephemeral and short lived. It has a transitory life span like an insight or hindsight or a foresight. A mystical consciousness may come upon the mystic all of a sudden and may take over the individual's personality with vehemence, but it also goes away as quickly. Various mystics report it to last for a few minutes to a few hours but they are unable to sustain it any longer than that.

Some mystics report that these states happen without their will while others could bring them about through training. An excellent example is the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna whose devotion to the goddess Kali and his training from age seven onwards brought for him a number of mystical experiences. Through perfecting his devotion and developing control over his body and mind, Ramakrishna could bring about these experiences at will; but when the mystical experience was in progress, he had to submit to it like an obedient child. Other mystics have reported a similar kind of passivity while undergoing a mystical experience. Though they had trained themselves to obtain these mystical states voluntarily, once the experience happened, it

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9. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

took over their bodies and minds where their whole being became a mere receptacle for the experience. During the mystical experience, they felt that some higher power had taken control of their being and they were helpless before its jurisdiction and expression. The experience was an undergoing of inner transformation, which became the light posts to the journey of their lives.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the foregoing discussion, I had tried to offer a summarized version of various perspectives on mysticism ranging from religious and social to philosophical in the Indian, Chinese and Western traditions. The discussion of the Indian and Chinese viewpoints centered more on the religious, social and experiential rather than philosophical aspects of the mystical experience. The views of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were chosen for discussion because they were involved in the experiential aspect of mysticism as a way of life rather than as a philosophical issue that was of interest to intellectuals and scholars only. In contrast, both Stace and James, who might not have undergone a mystical experience themselves, were using the philosophical tools of logic and reasoning to make sense of this very complex phenomenon. By providing rational concepts and categories, both of them offered meaningful ways to approach this topic that had occupied the thinkers of both the East and West. Whether it is the religious, social or philosophical perspective, in my discussion I tried to convey that the subject of mysticism allows for both an experiential understanding and philosophical analysis. It is a phenomenon like others, except that when it occurs it overwhelms the experiencer with utmost intensity and tenacity. It is a unique way of experiencing the ordinary moment as extraordinary, where one sees “all as one and one as all”, and moreover where “the time past and the time future are experienced to be present in the time now.”