Mysticism in the Indic Religious Tradition

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I

The title of this essay consists of two ambiguities—mysticism and the Indic religious tradition, and trying to juxtapose the two may give rise to a third, as if two are not enough. But there is good news. Philosophers agree that one major role of philosophy, apart from many others, is that of elucidation, a word the dictionary defines as "to make clear esp: to make intelligible by clear explanation or careful analysis."[1]

Let me then begin by making our terms of reference clearer, by stipulating what we shall take them to mean in this writing. First mysticism. Mysticism is a word notoriously treacherous to define but it is surprisingly rewarding to stick to the meaning it is given in a dictionary. Webster's dictionary defines mysticism as follows: "The doctrine or belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality or comparable matters is attainable through direct intuition, insight, or illumination and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination."[2]

Ordinarily we gain knowledge of things in this world through sense perception or reasoning. I come to know of the presence of fire because I see it, because the senses called my eyes perceive it. Or I know that fire is present when I see smoke. I don't *see* the fire, I see the plume of smoke but from that I reason that where there is smoke there is fire, because there is fire there is smoke. The fancy words for these two ways of knowing are empiricism and rationalism and ordinarily our knowledge is based on sense-perception or reason.

But note what the dictionary does by implication. It rules these two out as ways of knowing God or ultimate reality, when we are dealing with mysticism. Then what is left? Two *other* ways of knowing are left. One of

1. Philip Babcock Gove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G.&C. Merriam, 1961), 736.
2. Ibid., 1497.

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them is *emotion—feelings*. The way spouses know each other or parents and children know each other, cannot properly be said to be based on either sense-perception or reason. So far as sense perception is concerned, others also see the same person whom the husband sees. But the random onlooker does not know the wife the way a loving husband does, although physically both see the same person. In other words: emotion can also be a way of knowing. You might say it is a very different kind of knowing than through the senses or reason, but it is precisely this difference which constitutes the experience of marriage. So emotion can also be a way of knowing. Now I ask you: How do you know that you have eyes? Have you seen your eyes? You might have seen them in a mirror but what you see in a mirror is not your eye but a reflection of your eye. So you do not perceive your eyes directly. Nor do you reason: I can see, only a person with eyes can see, therefore, I am a person with eyes. But you just know you have eyes, although this knowledge is not mediated by either sense perception or reasoning. Of course, it can be *expressed* in terms of sense perception and reasoning because one can sometimes come to know a thing in more than one way. I can see a house on fire, I can deduce from smoke that it is on fire, someone can come and tell me a house is on fire. In all these three cases I gained the same knowledge but in three different ways. The way we know we have eyes is not through sense-perception or reason but what we might call *intuition*, a nice, almost fancy word for *direct* knowledge, not mediated by sense perception or reasoning.

Now we are ready to identify the mystical claim. Mystics claim that one can acquire knowledge of the ultimate reality, but that such knowledge cannot be acquired through sense perception or reason. But as they say of life, if one door closes, another opens. Mysticism closes the gates of sense perception and reasoning but then it opens two other portals—those of emotion or intuition, as ways in which we can acquire knowledge of God or the ultimate reality. Such a claim has also been made by the mystics of India, who have appeared from time to time in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—the four religions which comprise the Indic religious tradition. This essay is an exploration of the mystical elements in these four religions of Indian origin.

Now there are many ways in which we can proceed from this point. We could, for instance, separately and synoptically survey the mystical elements found in these four traditions mentioned above. Alternatively,

we could select leading mystical figures in the Indic religious tradition and enliven the presentation with accounts of their mystical experiences. And so on. I would like to propose, however, that we adopt a different procedure—by comparing *emotion* and *intuition* as ways of knowing the ultimate reality in the context of the Indian religious tradition. In this respect, the four traditions we described as constituting the Indic religious tradition present an interesting picture: Buddhism and Jainism emphasize intuition, Sikhism emphasizes emotion, that is to say, devotion, and Hinduism includes both. The terms which correspond to intuition and emotion in the vocabulary of Indian religions are *jñana* and *bhakti* respectively: *bhakti* standing for emotional knowledge, that is, devotion, and *jñana* for intuitive knowledge.

Before we proceed further it may be useful to get back to the examples we used to illustrate the workings of emotion and intuition. We illustrated emotion with the example of the knowledge that spouses have of each other, the devotion that a husband, for instance, may harbour for a wife. You will notice that this way of knowing consists of knowing the other person as a *person*, as distinguished from an object. We can acquire knowledge of *an object* through sense perception but we cannot come to know *a person* in this way because while the knowledge we have of an object, is, well, objective, the knowledge which we have of a person is affective. Note that only a person can know another person. If, now, the mystics say that God or the ultimate reality can be known in this way, then this reality has to possess the dimension of personhood in some sense, for only then could we as persons can come to know it via emotion. This raises the interesting question: Is the ultimate reality like a person in some sense?

Similarly, other mystics claim that God, or the ultimate reality, can be known by intuition. We used the example of eyes. Now *you* can say I have eyes because you can look at them as an object, but I can't. Yet I know I have eyes, but not because I see them but because I see through them. I know my eyes in a perhaps even more intimate way than one who is looking at me because, for me, my eyes are a part of who I am, while you see my eyes as somebody else's eyes. Now, if one way of knowing God or the ultimate reality—the mystics tell us—is intuition, then the interesting question arises: Does it mean that the ultimate reality is part and parcel of us already, just as my eye is? And I have just not realized it; that I have kept my eyes closed to it? Note that I did not come to know I have eyes through sense

perception or reason or emotion. I came it know of its existence through intuition. This raises the question already hinted at earlier: Is the ultimate reality something as obviously part of me as my eyes? As intimately part of me like my eyes? And notice how different this way of knowing through intuition is, compared to knowing through emotion. We come to know *another* person through emotion, but we come to know something about *ourselves* through intuition.

This difference is central to our discussion of mysticism in the Indic religious tradition, for it leads us to a crucial divide within it. But let us briefly recapitulate the ground we have covered before it is highlighted. Mysticism is about knowing God or the ultimate reality. We identified four ways of knowing: (1) sense perception; (2) reason; (3) emotion and (4) intuition. Mysticism, as it is defined, rules out ordinary sense perception and reason as ways of knowing God or the ultimate reality, leaving us with emotion and intuition.[3] If these two are valid ways of knowing God or the ultimate reality, then we have a problem. If we use emotion to reach this ultimate reality, then it must be something other than us, a "person" to whom we can relate as a person. Thus the ultimate reality would be something personal. If, however, intuition is a way of knowing God or the ultimate reality, then this way of knowing points to that reality being *within* us, and although we are persons, God or the ultimate reality need not be a person or only a person. Note that eyes are a *fact*, not a person.

What this means is that emotion, as a way of knowing, generates the possibility that the ultimate reality is in some sense a *person*, while intuition as a way of knowing generates the possibility that the ultimate reality may be *impersonal*, something which is just there. At this point, a division of labour of sorts emerges in the context of the Indic religious tradition: Buddhism and Jainism emphasize the impersonal nature of the ultimate reality and reject the claim that it can be personal; Sikhism emphasizes that it is personal and rejects the claim that it is impersonal. Hinduism accepts the possibility that it could possess both these aspects, famously captured in

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3. Although sense perception is thus ruled it, it has nevertheless sometimes been used as a model for understanding mystical knowing, see Stephen H. Phillips, "Could There a Mystical Evidence for a Nondual Brahman? A Causal Objection," *Philosophy East & West* 51.4 (October 2001): 492–506.

the two expressions: *nirguṇa brahman* and *saguṇa brahman*. But this does not settle the issue and it takes the following form within Hinduism: granting that the ultimate reality possesses both these aspects, the question remains: Is the ultimate reality, ultimately, *nirguṇa* or *saguṇa*? In other words, which one has priority over the other, if the ultimate reality possesses both these dimensions? The debate is at least three thousand years old in Hinduism and continues to rage, although some mystics themselves are leery of it. I hope you are not expecting me to resolve it in the next few pages.

II

I now wish to proceed as follows. I shall first take a look at *jñāna* or intuition as a way of knowing God or the ultimate reality and then turn to *bhakti* as a way of doing the same within the Indic religious tradition. Then I shall examine how Hinduism tries to bring them together and the problems it raises.

Let me now first turn to Buddhism and Jainism, which are often described as atheistic religions. As they don't believe in God, *bhakti* can only play a rather limited role in their context. Out of the two, allow me to choose Buddhism as representative of this type, since readers are more likely to be familiar with it, although Jainism is said to be older of the two.[4]

Indian Buddhism is a good example of the path of intuition or *jñāna* and the kind of knowledge it represents. Buddhist mysticism is characterized by a certain reluctance to describe the ultimate reality which it calls *nirvāṇa*[5]; but we do have a famous statement of Buddha in the matter in which he comes as close as one can get to doing so. I quote him now:

> O bhikkhus, there is the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned. Were there not the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned, there would be no escape for the born, grown, and conditioned. Since there is the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned, so there is escape for the born, grown, and conditioned.

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4. For more in the Jaina tradition in this context see Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

5. Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove, 1974), 39.

> Here the four elements of solidity, fluidity, heat and motion have no place; the notions of length and breadth, the subtle and the gross, good and evil, name and form are altogether destroyed; neither this world nor the other, nor coming, going or standing, neither death nor birth, nor sense-objects are to be found.[6]

This should not leave us with the impression that nothing is gained by realizing *nirvāṇa*, for it represents the acme of happiness. But its reality is so different from our everyday concepts of reality that "even the word 'happiness' (*sukha*) which is used to describe *nirvāṇa* has an entirely different sense here. Sāriputta once said: 'O friend, Nirvāṇa is happiness! Nirvāṇa is happiness!' Then Udāyi asked: 'But, friend Sāriputta, what happiness can it be if there is no sensation?' Sāriputta's reply was highly philosophical and beyond ordinary comprehension: 'That there is no sensation itself is happiness.'"[7]

If we keep the illustration of eyes in mind, it is also worth noting that *nirvāṇa* is "to be realized by the wise within themselves."[8] I quote the Buddha again: "Within this fathom-long sentient body itself, I postulate the world [of sorrow], the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world."[9] One notes here an allusion to the Four Great Truths of Buddhism.

Sikhism emphasizes devotion. We used the analogy of the affection between husband and a wife to understand this way of knowing and it comes in handy now. The ultimate mystical experience is sometimes described as *ānanda* or bliss in Sikhism also, and "Guru Arjan tried to express it through the idea of love. In the words of a bride he wrote: 'My friends met me and they asked me to describe my husband. I was so filled with the bliss of his love that I couldn't answer them!' (AG 459)[10] All she can say is that when she lies in her husband's arms she experiences peace, joy and bliss. In another hymn he used more matter-of fact language but the emphasis was much the same:

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6. Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 37.
7. Ibid., 43.
8. Ibid., 44.
9. Ibid., 42.
10. W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (second fully revised edition) (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998), 86.

> The one who has the love of God's commands in the heart is said to be jivan mukt [liberated whilst in the body]. Release is a present reality; joy and sorrow are both the same, happiness is eternal, there is no separation from God.
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> As is gold so is dust; as is nectar so is bitter poison. Honour and dishonour are the same. The pauper and the king are alike. Whoever regards success in this world as an enterprise ordained by God, is said to be liberated whilst in the body. (AG 275)."[11]

Unlike Buddhism and Jainism, which are non-theistic religions, Sikhism is theistic. In the following passage Guru Nānak (1469–1539) seems to reject the kind of meditation which guides intuition to the knowledge of an impersonal ultimate reality:

> *The Great Question: How Is Truth to Be Found?*
> [*Japjī*, I, *Ādi Granth*, trans. By Gurbachan Singh Talib, *Japuji*, p. 39]
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> Ritual purification, though done a million times, may not purify the mind; Nor may absorption in trance silence it, however long and continuous. The possession of the world will not quench the rage of greed and hunger. A hundred thousand feats of intellect will not bring Liberation. How then is Truth to be attained? How is the veil of illusion to be destroyed? Nānak says, through obedience to the Divine Order, which is written in your heart.[12]

The Hindu tradition accepts both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* dimensions of the ultimate reality. Thus sometimes we find God, or *saguṇa brahman*, to be known by devotion, being given priority over *nirguṇa brahman* as the ultimate reality, and sometimes *nirguṇa brahman*, known by intuition, being given priority over *saguṇa brahman*.

What is interesting about Hinduism is that two of its great mystics in modern times apparently experienced the ultimate reality by both the routes mentioned above and yet displayed a preference for one over the other. Thus Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1838–1886) was a worshipper of Kālī—of God as a person, and this case, as the feminine principle. He describes his experience of her in these words:

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11. Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*, 87.
12. Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition* (second edition) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 501–502.

> I was then suffering from excruciating pain because I had not been blessed with a vision of the Mother. I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered by a great restlessness, and a fear that it might not be my lot to realize Her in this life. I could not bear the separation any longer; life did not seem worth living. Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. Determined to put an end to my life, I jumped up like a madman and seized it, when suddenly the blessed Mother revealed herself to me, and I fell unconscious on the floor. What happened after that externally, or how that day or the next passed, I do not know, but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss altogether new, and I felt the presence of the Divine Mother.[13]

Here the reality is clearly known through emotion—devotion. Then, under the tutelage of another adept, he had the following experience. The passage contains a reference to the system of Advaita Vedānta in Hinduism, famous for its insistence that the ultimate reality is impersonal and is to be known through intuition or *jñāna*.

> After the initiation, my *guru* began to teach me the various conclusions of the *Advaita Vedanta* and asked me to withdraw the mind completely from all objects and dive into the *Atman* (self). But in spite of all my attempts, I could not cross the realm of name and form, and bring my mind to the unconditioned state. I had no difficulty in withdrawing the mind from all objects except one, the all too familiar form of the Blissful Mother—radiant and of the essence of Pure Consciousness—which appeared before me as a living reality, preventing me from passing beyond the realm of name and form. Again and again I tried to concentrate my mind upon the teachings of *Advaita* (non-dualism), but every time the Mother's form stood in my way. In despair I said to the *guru*, "It is hopeless. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and come face to face with the *Atman* (Self)." He grew excited and sharply said, "What! You can't do it! But you have to." He cast his eyes round, and finding a piece of glass, took it up; then, pressing the point between my eyebrows, he said, "Concentrate the mind on this point!" Then with a stern determination, I again sat to meditate and as soon as the gracious form of the Divine Mother appeared before me, I used my power of discrimination as a sword and with it severed her form in two. There remained no more obstruction to my mind, which at once soared beyond the relative plane, and I was lost in *samadhi* (subconsciousness).[14]

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13. Cited in Swami Ghanananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message* (London: The Ramakrisna Vedanta Centre, 1970), 27.
14. Ibid., 61.

However, despite this experience "Ramakrishna continued to the end of his life to worship Mother Kali in the most intensely devotional of ways, even to the point of willing to give back, as it were, the full experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi*: 'O mother, do not plunge me in the knowledge of brahman and take away my consciousness!' He pleaded in a moment of intense illness not long before his death. 'I am but thy child. I have fears and anxieties! I do want my mother! A thousand salutations to Brahman-*jnana*. Give it to it to him who wants it, O mother.'"[15] Thus here we have the case of a mystic who experiences the reality both through emotion and intuition, but ultimately comes to prefer emotion.

The foundational mystical experience of Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), on the other hand, was the experience of an impersonal reality. It was quite impersonal and did not involve God at all. He underwent this experience in his seventeenth year, spontaneously, as follows:

> . . . on that day as I sat alone there was nothing wrong with my health. But a sudden and unmistakeable fear of death seized me. I felt I was going to die. Why I should have so felt cannot now be explained by anything felt in my body. Nor could I explain it to myself then. I did not however trouble myself to discover if the fear was well grounded. I felt "I was going to die," and at once set about thinking out what I should do. I did not care to consult doctors or elders or even friends. I felt I had to solve the problem myself then and there.
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> The shock of fear of death made me at once introspective, or "introverted." I said to myself mentally, *i.e.*, without uttering the words—"Now, death has come. What does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies." I at once dramatized the scene of death. I extended my limbs and held them rigid as though *rigor-mortis* had set in. I imitated a corpse to lend an air of reality to my further investigation, I held my breath and kept my mouth closed, pressing the lips tightly together so that no sound might escape. Let not the word 'I' or any other word be uttered! "Well then," said I to myself, "this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body, am 'I' dead? Is the body 'I'? This body is silent and inert. But I feel the full force of my personality and even the sound 'I' within myself—apart from the body. So 'I' am a spirit, a thing transcending the body. The material body dies, but the spirit transcending it cannot be touched by death. I am therefore the deathless spirit." All this was not a mere intellectual process, but flashed before me vividly as living truth, something which I perceived immediately, without any argument

15. Jane I. Smith, "Sri Ramakrishna's Approach to Religious Plurality," in Claude Alan Stark, *God of All: Sri Ramakrishna's Approach to Religious Plurality* (Cape Cod, Mass.: Claude Stark, 1974), 189–190.

> almost. 'I' was something very real, the only real thing in that state, and all the conscious activity that was connected with my body was centred on that. The 'I' or my 'self' was holding the focus of attention by a powerful fascination from that time forwards. Fear of death had vanished at once and forever. Absorption in the self has continued from that moment right up to this time. Other thoughts may come and go like the various notes of a musician, but the 'I' continues like the basic or fundamental *śruti* note which accompanies and blends with all other notes. Whether the body was engaged in talking, reading or anything else, I was still centred on 'I'. Previous to that crisis I had no clear perception of myself and was not consciously attracted to it. I had felt no direct perceptible interest in it, much less any permanent disposition to dwell upon it. The consequences of this new habit were soon noticed in my life.[16]

One result of this experience, interestingly, was to make him more devotional and throughout his life he advocated both *bhakti* and *jñāna* as ways of approaching the ultimate reality, but, when metaphysical push came to shove, he conceded that the illusion of a personal God is the last illusion to go. Ramana Maharshi did acknowledge however that ultimate reality could also be experienced if one surrendered to this God.

III

This may well be the right time to bring matters to a close. This essay can be reduced to the following propositions:

(1) According to one widely held view of mysticism, it allows for a "direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, ultimate reality or comparable matters through direct intuition, insight or illumination, but in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination," thereby leaving open two avenues to the ultimate—emotion and intuition;
(2) These correspond broadly to the paths or *yogas* of *bhakti* and *jñāna*, as understood in the Indic religious tradition;
(3) Of the four religions which comprise the Indic religious tradition, two are atheistic, or more properly, non-theistic. These are Buddhism and Jainism. As devotion is largely a theistic phenomenon, these two religions are more oriented towards *jñana*;

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16. B.V. Narasimha Swami, *Self-Realization: Life & Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1985), 20–21.

(4) A third Indic tradition, Sikhism, is theistic and devotional in nature and therefore Bhaktic in its orientation;
(5) Hinduism, as a fourth Indic religious tradition, is characterized by the presence of both *bhakti* and *jñana* in full measure, the former involving the concept of an ultimate reality as God or *saguṇa brahman* and latter that of the Absolute or *nirguṇa brahman*; which of the two is ultimately ultimate is a matter of debate within this tradition, but the ultimate reality is said to possess both these aspects, although their relative priority is a point of dispute.