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Mysticism: A Perennial Journey From self To The Self

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ABSTRACT

Mysticism has lived as an essential element throughout the history of mankind. In its refined form, Mysticism is assimilating the wisdom of the Ultimate and the union with the Absolute. Through it, the human spirit attains total harmony with the transcendental order. Mystics in all cultures intuit a truth that is beyond the senses of rational intellect. They rack up the capability to grasp the unity of all things and perceive the co- immanence of the eternal and the temporal. This apprehension leads to the direct experience of God. The mystics realize God as fountainhead of all existence and divorce all that is merely phenomenal and achieve an understanding of the Real.

The present paper upholds the thesis that irrespective of time and space, any individual, in the mystical domain, transcends the worldly limitations and barriers and takes on to the path of the Supreme. It is in this domain that the synthesis of the self and the Self takes place—the union of the finite and the Infinite, respectively.

Keywords: Mysticism, self, union, God, consciousness, finite, Infinite etc.,

Down the human history, mysticism, at its highest and best, has been always and ever the same. For its practitioners, it is an ascertainable way and a practical method by which we validate for ourselves the essential basic truth that there is a soul in man. This idea is to make man realize that he can know himself only by realizing his theomorphic nature. The mystics ardently express the same to convey the everlasting message of mysticism that to know the Ultimate Reality, man must come to know his own self. To know himself, man must remain conscious of the divine imprint upon his soul. The New Testament also guides to the same while focusing on “Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or lo there! For, behold the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). In a world menaced by religious

wars, depleting natural resources, a crumbling ecosystem, alienation and isolation, and where one is bamboozled what our humanity is doomed for. Who are we and what are we doing here? are the questions with big question marks. We have forgotten as a result of the Fall from our original and primordial state and the subsequent decay in the human condition that who we are and what our purpose is in this life. The mystic path offers a journey toward truth, to a knowledge that transcends our mundane occupations, selfish desires, and fears. In mystical poetry we find a wisdom that brings peace and a relationship with the Ultimate that nurtures the best in us, and we discover our purpose, fall in love with the Divine, experience peace, and find our true, best self. In her

book *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* Evelyn Underhill makes the point that the mystics have succeeded where all:

Others have failed, in establishing immediate communication between the spirit of man, entangled as they declare amongst material things, and that "only Reality," that immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute and most theologians, call God. This, they say—and here many who are not mystics [also] agree with them—is the hidden Truth which is the object of man's craving; the only satisfying goal of his quest. (Underhill 2003: p 8)

Mysticism is a quest which leads to knowledge that removes forgetfulness of that Divine Reality - the source of all things as well as residing at the centre of our being, the Self of our self. And to understand fully the Truth is to 'become' that Truth. It is to cease to be what we are, and become what we have always been, and shall be in the Divine Reality. Mysticism is the science of the Ultimate and the union with the Absolute. Through it, the human spirit journeys towards complete harmony with the transcendental order. However, there are multiple routes that one can take to reach out to the Ultimate. Christ is averring the same in one of his sayings, "*In my Father's house are many mansions*" (John 14:2). It has several meanings and one of them is that there are many types of spiritual paths, some based on sacrifice and selfless action, some on faith and devotion, some on love, and some on knowledge. One is wonder-struck at the diverse approaches leading to the same destination and taken by different seekers:

"There are," says Plotinus "different roads by which this end [apprehension of the Infinite] may be reached. The love of beauty, which exalts the poet; the devotion to the One and that ascent of science which makes the ambition of the philosopher; and that love and those prayers by which some devout and ardent soul in its moral purity [moves] towards perfection. These are the great highways conducting to that height above the actual and the particular, where we

stand in the immediate presence of the Infinite, who shines out as from the depths of the soul". (Spurgeon, 1913 p. 33)

This is not to deny that when a person (mystic) having access to Divine manifestation and desiring to remember the Creator or Maker alone, he comes to know that the only path of perfect guidance is that of knowing his **own self**. The Quran also authenticates it as:

O you who believe, you have charge of your own souls. He who errs cannot injure you if you are rightly guided. (al-Ma'idah, 5:105)

Islamic Mysticism is referred to as Sufism also and every mystic or Sufi considers it as an all-time engagement with the worship of Almighty. Sufis exist throughout the Islamic world and represent the mystical dimension of Islam. Sufism is the way of the heart, and it is the path that takes the seeker to Divine presence. According to Arberry, "Sufism is the name given to the mystical movement within Islam; a Sufi is a muslim who dedicates himself to the quest after mystical union (or, better said, reunion) with his creator" (p.vii). A mystic understands that his true guide is Creator alone who enjoins upon him to know his self and to seek the path of self-knowing, leaving all other paths. There is a very famous tradition of the Prophet of Islam(SAW), taken very seriously in Islamic mysticism or Sufism, "*Whoever knows his self, knows his Lord*" which means, self-knowledge leads to knowledge of the Divine (Nasr, p.5).The Sufis quest is to experience God within oneself. What is most essential to Sufism cannot be learnt but only be reached by personal experience and inward transformation. Therefore a Sufi must see the Ultimate through the window of his own soul and thus achieve his real objective. This kind of faith in the doctrines of unity with the Ultimate forms a bulwark against the alienation and fragmentation of the soul, the characteristic feature of contemporary advanced societies. It is an ascetic, contemplative way of life as a means of attaining the ultimate truth that transforms the mystic's entire being and elevates him/her to a point where he/she becomes cognizant of the Truth or the Reality, which is the source of all reality. The veils of ignorance are removed and a unique path of knowledge is opened

up, knowledge that is both illuminative and unitive, knowledge whose highest object is the Truth that is, God, and subsequently the knowledge of all the things in relation to God. Although all phenomena are veils between God and Man, but at the same time they are signs and symbols. At all the levels of Being, they point- for those endowed with a mystic insight- towards the One True Reality. Same is reflected in Quran as well, "And whoever is granted wisdom is granted much goodness" (*al-Bakarah*, 2:269). This is such a kind of awakening that makes every mystic poet ever like Wordsworth that:

... [T]he breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (*Tintern Abbey*)

In Buddhism, though, the main goal is not some sort of 'union' with the real, but insight into reality, the cessation by suffering and reaching *Nirvana*. Translating the terms and concepts used in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese and Japanese version of Buddhism such as *bodhi*, *Prajna*, *kensho*, *satori* and *buddahood*, the English term "enlightenment" has commonly been used. And "enlightenment" becomes the central term and essence of Buddhist mysticism, which is the attainment of 'full awakening' guiding the mystic towards infinite compassion, wisdom and harmony. This particular enlightenment does such an illumination of the soul that a mystic in the words of Chuang- Tzu, "can see where all is dark. He can hear where all is still." And, "In the darkness he alone can see light." Further, "In the stillness he alone can detect harmony" (Giles, 1961, p. 119).

Cutting across the time and space bindings, the mystics have always a special yearning for the state where they perceive the Divine not with their five senses but with some supra-sensical faculty where all the senses are intermingled and stripped off of their respective power. In one of his couplets, Shamas Faqir a Kashmiri mystic poet hints towards such a state where senses receive message from the external world in an unconventional way. The couplet reads:

*Achh chem. boozan, kan wuchenay,
Ba kyah waney, yeeiy gauw zahoor.
My eyes do hear, the ears do see,
Would that I decipher what this Illumination
is!*

This is the mystical consciousness procured by enlightening the soul that changes the ordinary consciousness, where a mystic unconventionally listens through eyes and sees through ears. The shallow or superficial knowledge which has trained man to adjust himself to the immediate surroundings should not be muddled with 'mysterious something'. Hunger for 'that something', is never satiated by naturalism or intellectualism regardless of its claim being objective in its treatment of the given world. That is why mystics have also spoken of 'unknowing' and more specifically have stated explicitly that in order to reach the Truth one has to 'tear the veil of thinking'. In mysticism, that love of Truth which is the beginning of all philosophy leaves the merely intellectual sphere and takes on the assured aspects of a personal devotion. According to Evelyn Underhill:

Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. (Underhill 1961:24)

In this odyssey on spiritual path, the mystic realizes, in the words of W B Yeats, "Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show." However this union does not mean the union of the creature and the Creator or the servant and the Lord. Union means our becoming aware of our nothingness before God, becoming perfectly polished mirror that has nothing of its own but reflects what is put before it.

Myriad of ages have rolled by but the yearning for the Ultimate has remained the perennial '*Trishna*' for mystics. And in Indian Psychology other than the three parts of human ordinary consciousness viz., *Tamasic ego*, *Rajasic ego* and the *Satvic ego* which roughly correspond with *Id*, *Ego* and *Super Ego* as posited by Freud, it has a firm belief in the existence of *Prajna Chetana* or *Super Consciousness*. And in reality it is the Supreme Consciousness and can be attained only

through enlightenment. The highest aim of Indian wisdom is to attain that state of consciousness which is the most sublime spiritual experience and where even the presence of mind is lost in the soul, as salt is lost in water. The contemplation in this stage is no longer consciousness of effort and no longer awareness of the mind as an instrument, but simply awareness of the object of thought. In this state the empirical self realizes its real identity with the pure Universal Self (Rediscovering India vol.26). To name a few from both East and West, mystics like Farid-ud-din-Attar, Ibn-Arabi, Hafiz, Jami, Rumi, Ghalib, Iqbal, Plotinus, St. John of Cross, Goethe, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Emerson, Yeats, Eliot etc., have immortalized it in various shades of the mystical poetry. Mysticism is essentially a quest for Eternity- an endeavour of breaking free the shackles of finitude and reaching out to the Infinite. To transgress the ambits of the finite and to touch the hem of the Infinite is to usher in the realm of the indescribable, the unsayable and the ineffable, but this is, on the dot, the miracle of mystical journey. And the true mystics, leaving behind the ceremonialism, attain this power by the realization of the Supreme through individual and personal experience. An intense attachment to God or the blistering pain of separation from God is the sign of devotion, which delivers this kind of poetry. To express the inexpressible and to describe the indescribable is the real outcome of this unflinching devotion, which is born out of the thirst or longing for God. One of the famous mystics Farid-ud-din-Attar of Persia versifies it:

Man na khaham mal-o-jah-o-tamtaraq

Sooz khaham dard khaham ishtiyaaq

I don't desire wealth, status, grandeur

Burning in the divine love and pain is my desire

And Plotinus, the spiritual master of Greeks, once said that the soul does strive after beauty and that beauty is a manifestation of that spiritual power that animates all levels of reality. They are always longing for union with the Absolute in order to drink from the waters of eternity, as Rumi says:

All day I think about it, and then at night I say it.

Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?

I have no idea.

My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that, and I intend to end up there.

(Barks, p.2)

The most famous mystic in early American history is Anne Hutchinson, whose mysticism evolved from the puritan emphasis on the Holy Spirit as a means of grace. But Ralph Waldo Emerson is perhaps the most prominent proponent of nineteenth-century Romantic mysticism in the United States. His mysticism is also unique which stresses the unity of humans with all nature. Emerson believes and insists on that his inspiration is dependent on mystical insight. He believes in creative intuition and illumination which he characterized as "trance", "ecstasy" and "enthusiasm". He continues to long for the direct contact with the ultimate reality. The famous "transparent eye-ball" passage presents the account of revelatory or mystical experience in nature in which Emerson loses the sense of distinction between his own identity and that of the natural world:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. [...] Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

(Collected Works, vol 1, p. 10)

The 'I' opens itself to the world until it coincides with cosmic unity. It penetrates into the divine mystery of life. The self is elevated to infinite space. The identity as an "eye-ball" suggests an insight operating both as integration and extension, a feeling of oneness with the divine. After this kind of illumination the mystic achieves a kind of divine vision and his poetic utterances are charged with transformative power, as Emerson in one of his poems says:

Barefooted Dervish is not

poor,

If Fate unlock his bosom's

door.

So that what his eye hath seen
His tongue can paint, as bright, as keen,
And what his tender heart hath felt,
With equal fire thy heart shall melt.
For, whom the muses shine upon,
And touch with soft persuasion,
His words like a storm-wind can bring
Terror and beauty on their wing;
(Emerson, line. 117-126)

Let me conclude my discussion with the verses of Rumi, which answers the whole conundrum of mystic journey from immediate (one's self) to the Ultimate:

Look within yourself a moment and ask
who art thou?
From where dost thou comest, from which
place,
What art thou?
(Barks, p:43)

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