

KNOWING THE UNKNOWNABLE: AN ANALYSIS OF MYSTICISM FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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This paper is an attempt to analyze mystical experience from a Buddhist philosophical perspective. What is mysticism and what is its function in the larger undertaking of spiritual transformation?

To begin, we might ask: Is mysticism an appropriate topic for analysis? Since it is purely subjective, can anything meaningful be said about it?

Most western philosophical traditions define mysticism as an experience of unifying with some higher reality, but that doesn't work for Buddhists, who do not ordinarily speak in terms of a higher reality, and for whom "reality" is a debatable concept. If mystical experience is synonymous with awakening, then only a perfectly awakened Buddha could have it. But apparently there are mystics of various different traditions who are not yet fully awakened Buddhas. Awakening is only realized by a Buddha, but transformation – mental, psychological, spiritual – is possible for all living beings. Again, what is the nature and role of mystical experience?

Awakening seems to be the closest thing to ultimate mystical experience, but then where does that leave other kinds of mystical experience that may be accessed by other (ordinary) beings? All traditions would probably agree that these experiences are in the domain of direct experience. But, yes: I would submit that these experiences are not necessarily ultimate. If they're not perfect enlightenment, they're not ultimate. Still, there may be other mystical experiences that, although they are not ultimate, may be ephemeral and, in any case, are valid experiences. Again, we come back to what qualifies as mystical. Does spacing out count as valid mystical experience?

In their quest for enlightenment, Buddhists are intimately concerned with the concepts of knowing and awareness. Since actions lead either to enlightenment or further rebirth and all actions proceed from the mind, an understanding of the mental processes associated with knowing and the development of moment-to-moment awareness are vital to improving the quality of our actions. But how do Buddhists understand those experiences that are beyond ordinary categories of knowing and awareness?

Defining Mystical Experience

- * beyond categories - but mysticism is a category
- * beyond ordinary experience - but what is ordinary and extra-ordinary? Who decides?
 - * perhaps mystical experience is something very ordinary,
 - * but we just miss it because we're not paying attention
 - * How can we describe it in words? Like trying to label or define God
 - * can only point toward it, like pointing at the moon
- * what mystical experience is not or should not be
 - * not union with God
 - * not a journey to another place

- * not a quest for new experiences - seeking spiritual experiences or attainments can lead to grasping at experiences and attachment to achievements

- *4 *jhanas*

- * not a feel-good experience
- * The ultimate experience of awakening
 - * originally defined as the absence of greed, hatred, and ignorance
 - * a lack, an absence – not nothingness
 - * eventually, in Mahayana, absence + attainment of many qualities
 - * omniscience, perfect wisdom & compassion, power

Verifying Mystical Experience

- * A knowing, not knowing *per se* or simply knowing stuff, but a particular kind of knowing
- * For this reason, Dharmakirti and so many Buddhist philosophers have been focused on (obsessed with?) questions of epistemology: What is the nature of knowing? How do we know? And how can we know something that is absent?
 - * The knowing that accompanies full awakening is not primarily a sensory awareness, though it may be accompanied by sensory awareness, but is primarily a mental awareness, at least insofar as we can discuss it at all
 - * Imagine - if awakening is a knowing or state of awareness of an absence, then how can we verify it? We are not concerned here with merely verifying our awakening to others; that sort of verification--some sort of enlightenment certificate--is irrelevant to most sages. What is at issue is: How do we verify our awakening, our mystical attainment to ourselves?
 - * How do we verify that we don't have greed, hatred, and ignorance?
 - * Let's try it – after all, mystical experience is experiential, not intellectual
 - * great difference between talking about chocolate and tasting chocolate
 - * Let's take a moment to verify that we do not have hatred in our mind.
 - * We may be able to verify that we don't have hatred, at this moment at least
 - * But how can we know that it will never occur in our mind again?
 - * For Buddhists, anger is a low-grade hatred. How can we know that, if we walk out onto the street and get cheated by a taxi driver, anger will not spark – even a little bit – in our mind?
 - * The Buddha did not discuss mystical experience, but also did not deny the possibility
 - * we are left with the problem of how to verify mystical experience, even to ourselves.

If spiritual practice is verified through direct sense perception, then the sense perceptions of ordinary individuals are flawed and subject to error, so the data collected through our sense faculties is not reliable. Mystical experience requires a different kind of perception. For the Buddhists, this is called direct yogic perception. This refers to the direct perception of a skilled yogi or adept. From a Buddhist perspective, direct yogic perception is the closest thing to mystical experience. The problem of verification remains. Typically, students would go to their teacher to validate their experiences to make sure they were going the right direction.

We have an example in the story of Milarepa, the yogi who spent years practicing Buddhist tantric meditation in a cave in the snow mountains of Tibet. He first studied black magic and became so good at it that he was able to unleash a terrible hailstorm as revenge against his aunt and uncle who have stolen his inheritance and mistreated him and his mother and

sister. After the hailstorm killed many people and animals, he immediately generated remorse and decided to devote his life to the true Dharma. He was initially refused teachings from the great tantric adept Marpa, because of his non-virtuous actions in the past. Frustrated, he went off to seek instruction from another teacher. Milarepa did not have his guru's permission to study with his other teacher, so he forged a letter from Marpa, but was unable to achieve any realizations, even after many months of intensive practice. Since Milarepa was not able to achieve any results from the practice, the other teacher began to have doubts about him. Eventually he exposed Milarepa's deceit and sent him back to his guru Marpa. Marpa then puts Milarepa through a long series of tribulations, apparently designed to expiate his sins or counteract all the non-virtuous karma he had accumulated through his practice of black magic – the hailstorm that killed so many people and animals. After enduring many hardships and practicing for many years in a solitary cave in the snow mountains, Milarepa was able to achieve the goal of the practice – enlightenment – and recorded his experiences in 100,000 verses of realization, which have inspired Tibetans to practice for hundreds of years.

Enlightenment vs. Mystical Experience

- * Enlightened awareness is free of desire, anger, ignorance, etc.
 - * and it is possible to know that one is free of desire, anger, and ignorance (defilements)
- * But ordinarily, perception is momentary knowing – moment to moment awareness.
 - * if so, how can we know that we are free of defilements completely, for all time?
- * A Buddha is perfectly awakened – free of all defilements
 - * *dharmakaya*, the enlightened awareness of a Buddha, knows all things at all times
 - * enlightened awareness undoubtedly qualifies as the ultimate mystical experience
- * But what about unenlightened beings who are still on the path, not yet enlightened?
 - * Are ordinary, unenlightened beings capable of mystical experience?
- * This is not to deny the possibility of mystical experience in everyday ordinary experiences
 - * the scent of freshly fallen rain, the disembodied sensation of floating up a mountain path, a transcendental experience during a chance meeting with a stranger....
 - * but these experiences are transitory – once in a blue moon
 - * to replicate them requires intensive discipline in meditation and other practice
- * Whatever mystical experience may be, it is definitely associated with inner experience, rather than outer experience
 - * So this brings us to the question: If the Ultimate is unknowable, how do we know it? How can we verify it? If it is unknowable, at least in the ordinary sense of “to know,” how can we be sure that we’ve “got it.” If the ultimate stage of awareness – God awareness, enlightened awareness, or whatever we may deem it – is beyond ordinary awareness, how can it be known by the ordinary mind?
 - * Of course, the discussion of the nature of an ultimate stage of awareness – whether we call it God, Christ consciousness, Brahman, enlightened awareness, or something else – rests on the assumption that such an extra-ordinary, enlightened, transcendental awareness exists. If such an ultimate awareness does not exist, how can we know its nature? If our finite human capacity to know is incapable of knowing something that is beyond its capacity – out of our league, so to speak – we cannot determine its nature with any degree of certainty.

* So the experience of ultimate, transcendent knowledge – transcendent not in the sense of something literally located above in the sky somewhere, but transcendent in the sense of a knowing that transcends our ordinary, day-to-day knowing and awareness – transcends what most of us are capable of knowing at present. We are left to speculate, assume, or imagine that it exists, without any means of ascertaining that it exists: that is, without any certainty that it exists. In other words, we take it on faith.

* And this raises the question of how we can determine that such an extra-ordinary, enlightened, transcendental awareness exists if such an awareness is beyond our ordinary capacity to perceive. If such an awareness is indeed extra-ordinary, and enlightened awareness is beyond our ordinary capacity to perceive, then it follows that we are incapable of perceiving it and--to my mind at least--it follows that we are incapable of knowing whether such an extra-ordinary, enlightened, transcendental awareness indeed exists at all.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to raise questions for further inquiry and speculate about the end goal of mystical experience. Is it appropriate for mystical experience to have an end goal? If we are meditating or chanting or praying toward a goal, doesn't that contradict the purpose and nature of mystical experience?

1. Who needs to validate mystical experience anyway?

2. If it is not possible to validate, then how can mystical experience be distinguished from insanity? Does mystical experience differ from psychic experience and, if so, in what ways? Many claims to divinity.

3. Many paths up the mountain. Another view is that the practitioners of the world's various faiths are not necessarily all climbing the same mountain, are not traveling what is ultimately the same path. If that were the case, the study of comparative religion would be a rather short story and fairly boring as well. Another prominent theory is that religious practitioners are climbing different, but equally beautiful mountains. Heaven with God, paradise, nirvana, perfect peace, perfect enlightenment are *not* the same and to confuse them is to call the whole religious or spiritual pursuit into question. In this view, the practitioners of various religions are traveling different paths toward equally valuable goals.

4. It remains to be seen whether the goal that they reach is the same or different.