

Mysticism – the forgotten path

“The Forgotten Path: Accessing the Mystical within our Religious Traditions”

Keynote Address

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Mysticism is not simply the path to the Ultimately Reality; it is reality as we should and can experience it. Yet it has been displaced and even denied by the modern intellect, buried under our quest for material gain, and obscured by our ever-deceptive ego. It has even been shunted from the mainstream of religious studies and practices, even though it is indeed the Source from which all teachings and enlightenment flows.

We cry out for peace, both peace of mind and peace in the world, yet the key lies hidden in plain view. The clues are clearly marked by our scriptures and demarcated by the lives of those who bring God’s message. Uncovering this forgotten path often takes a Guide who has trod it before and who will reconnect us to a reality of peace and justice.

Opening

Good morning, and please accept my a’salam. I am deeply humbled and honored to stand before such an august group here at Jamia Millia where my dear friend Dr. Asaf Ali first invited Babaji over 30 years ago. I want to thank my esteemed colleagues, my dear sisters Mary Pat Fisher and Dr. Surjit Kaur Jolly, Dr. Faruqi, and the honorable Vice Chancellor. It is a great pleasure and privilege to be in your company.

I wouldn’t be standing here without the continuous blessings of His Holiness Baba Virsa Singh ji, through whom and in whom I was fortunate enough to experience the Mystical Presence of the Divine.

I am living proof that the mystical exists. As a young boy growing up in the U.S. I had a yearning but no one to instruct me. I knew nothing of India. In the summer of 1970, I was sitting with a friend in New York, sharing a cup of tea, when in the blink of an eye, this remarkable spiritual being was standing in front of me. With a diamond-like light shining from his head, his eyes literally held the universe. He held up his hand and said, “Don’t be afraid,” and made me feel that he possessed all the knowledge I could ever attain and as a role model was everything I could ever aspire to be. Six months later, in February of 1971, after a classic quest that took me overland from Istanbul across the Bosphorus, across Iran, Afghanistan, across the Khyber, into Pakistan and finally India, I came face to face with the One who had appeared to me in New York, outside of the small village of Gadaipur. That is how I was brought into Baba Virsa Singh ji’s presence. He generously gave me his Nam and allowed me to serve him. For a 22-year-old, that was the end of my worldly search, and the beginning of a lifetime of practice.

Babaji’s greatness was that while he was a citizen of the mystical realm, he was always fully engaged in the world, working to end the scourges of poverty, religious conflict, corruption, and terrorism, to the extent that he himself would plow the fields and give endless time to teach us, resolve our conflicts, and heal us. For those of us fortunate enough to sit at his feet, even a little of the dust that would fall was enough to nourish us for lifetimes. I am happy to share some of the experiences learned at the feet of one who is, was, and will always be remembered as Holy – a spiritual being of the hidden realm.

Intro

Nine doors are visible, but the 10th has been kept hidden
Guru Granth Sahib

There's an old adage that the best place to hide something of great value is in plain view. That way, people will be walking all around it without the slightest notion that the greatest treasure is literally right in front of them.

Throughout our scriptures and lives of our Prophets and Saints, the clues to what some may call the mystical or the spiritual dimension are in fact right in front of our noses. According to some, it is right between our eyes. For that which is called the third eye – the doorway – and what is termed the tenth door - the portal – are indeed hidden in plain view.

We speak of exploring forgotten worlds, carefully paring away layer after layer of sand or ice, or delving beneath the ocean to find an Atlantis, hoping to discover treasures or secrets of ancient civilizations. But the most ancient, in fact the Kingdom of the Eternal, the realm of Enlightenment, lies within the easy reach of everyone.

Let us look to pare away the layers that conceal the hidden doorway to the mystical realm.

Once open, it becomes our reality. It is the realm of Truth, the very basis and standard for all being. It is the most powerful, the source of all knowledge. It is our ultimate home. BUT we have simply forgotten our way.

Contrary to popular belief, the mystical realm is not esoteric. It is practical and simple, accessible to all without a degree, which is perhaps why it is not recognized by many authorities, current and past. It does not fall under their purview. They cannot regulate it, cannot benefit from it, they certainly cannot confer it, and so therefore it falls into disrepute (knowingly or unknowingly). Yet its light is free to all who would seek it – and it empowers all regardless of religion; it knows no boundaries.

However it is described, or how varied the visions or experiences may be, the purpose is one – to allow human beings to rise above their baser tendencies, join in love, and work together to create a world at peace.

Just as we learn from the wonderful Jain story of the elephant and the blind friends, that none of us can/should declare a finality to the Infinite, mysticism allows the Truth to be dynamic, unfolding daily, even second-to-second, in more beautiful kaleidoscopic patterns – unlimited. Once we are attuned, our days are filled with fulfillment and joy despite the inevitable trials and tribulations. So let us not claim our experience as the absolute but celebrate it as another beautiful piece of Reality.

While each experience is “complete,” a complete experience of the Infinite, let us not declare it to be ours alone, lay exclusive claim to that which belongs to the whole creation, AND let us not suggest that ours is the only truth, or the last word: How can we limit God?

This is the primary source of the clash between the mystical experience and our finite minds, which can only look to reinforce their worldly power.

We are bound to the material world by our ego

What are often described as our human frailties, lust, anger, greed, attachment, and pride are the tentacles of our ego. Each one binds us to the world, tethers us like tent ropes driven deep into the ground to keep us firmly anchored. Left unchecked they become the building blocks of our identity. They become and define our reality. They are the filters through which all thought enters. How then can we possibly perceive Truth – or a world dictated by love? We crave more stimulation – not knowing that we are simply tightening the net around us, simply strengthening the bonds which bring us grief.

To uproot them we must trust the Guru. We must trust His Name more than our own.

We must be willing and able to let go, release ourselves from that identity we have depended on, which we have assumed IS our being. And we must turn ourselves over to the One who will free us of our bonds. Accepting His will, in Islam – submission, or the raza.

Let us explore the impact of the mystical on our theology; it is both the seminal and the clarifying event

I would submit that all of our sacred traditions emanate from a mystical event and series of experiences: An encounter with the Angel of God in a cave, scriptures revealed before the advent (as with the Vedas and the Ramayana), a virgin birth, in a burning bush on the mountain top of Sinai, an encounter with the “formless” through meditation under the tree in Bodhgaya, beneath the waters of the river Ravi, or on the banks of Rijubalaka.

BUT often we forget that the sacred and the knowledge thereof existed before the event and in fact those we revere were “marked” from birth, their coming foretold, simply waiting for the time to reveal themselves or be revealed. From that perspective all knowledge exists and is simply waiting to be revealed.

One might argue that even the beliefs of those who call themselves humanists or atheists stem from their experiences. I often ask, “what is the difference between inspiration and revelation?” The work of a scientist who does not acknowledge the work of God may seem empty to us – like boiled vegetables to an Indian palate. The substance is the same – but without the spice of love it seems empty. Sometimes these movements border on plagiarism, sharing the wisdom and compassion taught and experienced by the earliest mystics and documented in scripture, but do not acknowledge the Source.

From one perspective, everything depends on our ability to experience – and if we do not share the same experience, we would rather deny its validity, its very existence.

Mystical to myth

But at what point then does the seminal mystical experience become myth, dismissed by some as non-real, or relegated even by believers to a historical event that in their eyes can never be experienced again? At the same time, those who can perceive that power are shunted from the mainstream, as are those who would write about it, and so they tend to create their own secret orders to protect themselves, and in the process make the mystical reality more inaccessible to a parched world.

Perhaps it is because we feel we can no longer access it, or those in power do not want us to access it, for it expresses a Truth and Power they can't control.

In denying the mystical, we pervert a song of love into restrictive code – taking that which is universal Truth, inclusive of all and capable of binding humanity and nature together – and turn it into our doctrine to be recited by rote and practiced on cue. Instead of punctuating our lives with devotion and awe, we are made to bow once again to worldly idols that bring grief and conflict in their wake. This new reality of darkness has replaced the ultimate reality of light.

And if the seminal event can be experienced again – if a spiritual being again lives, then it must be rejected as an aberration, or the saint found guilty of one form of heresy or another, for it denies the worldly authority. This is our history: **Choosing again and again to glorify the human ego and reject the Divine.**

But He or She who comes in God's name calls to themselves those who would experience – those who cannot repress the experience – those who, like a seed planted long ago, before a hard winter, have been waiting for the sun to melt the snow so they may be nourished by the water and sprout and rise above the frozen earth.

This is the effect of our Prophets and Saints. Ironically, those who come later, even though they affirm all that the Prophets have said, are not welcomed by the very people who have

based their worldly positions on the fact that the mystical experience is real – that the Prophets are real. They try to limit them to a historical context where they can easily explain from a distance a world they cannot access or control.

What was shared--a proof of existence that we all can experience--becomes dismissed as myth: that which may have cultural significance but is not valid by modern standards.

Only our stories keep us connected to an eternal truth. But once again, these stories of faith are relegated to the fringes of our society, and certainly not central to our education. Hence, we suffer a disconnect in values and spiritual growth from our acquisition of knowledge, and the world suffers in its delusion.

So that which is reality is swept behind the curtains of our ivory towers and institutional fortresses, and under the carpeted patterns of our repressive behavior, dulling the sounds that arise ever so faintly from within, recalling our connection to the primordial mystic song.

While science has now shown that the light from the big bang exists in all of us – a light that may shine ever so dimly, we are all connected: We are all one - beyond time and space. Let us open ourselves to the mystical, and live again. This is the call of our times.

*Akha jiva
Visrai mar jao
We are alive reciting your Name,
Forgetting, we become the waking dead*

The paradox, of course, is that we are called to love and acknowledge the unseen more than the seen.

To feel the touch of the One who has no hands but holds the cosmos;
To feel the gaze of the One who has no eyes but is all seeing.
To know the One who is all knowing is to know love,
and so, unlocks the door, revealing the treasure, the path to reality.
And out of this reality of love, a new paradigm emerges, which one calls the Kingdom.
But on earth as it is in heaven,
The beauty of God's love reigning supreme,
The highest crown of the Zohar - the kabala,
The Ana l' Haqq - of Mansur (Al-Hallaj),
The love dance of Meera,
The Satori – Enlightenment of Lord Buddha.

And this is the dance and song we who were so privileged to sit at Babaji's feet witnessed. A rapt attention, an unswerving obedience, as he would say, “that you may deny but I am bound.”

The Guide - Guru

And so, uncovering this forgotten path often takes a Guide who has trod it before and who will reconnect us to a reality of peace and justice.

Reflecting on omi

While those of us gathered today pride ourselves in, or at least are known for, our intellectual prowess, often it is the intellect and the intellectual that get in the way of the mystical experience. Our minds and our egos become so dominant that they render us literally incapable of knowing that which we can't comprehend.

*Haumai navai nal varodh hai –doai na vasai ek thai
The ego is the enemy of Nam – they cannot co-exist in one place.
Or put another way, they are constantly in conflict; there is no peaceful coexistence.*

The more we put our faith in our intellect, the more difficult it is to accept even another's opinion, let alone an experience beyond our abilities to perceive. We put on blinders and presume we know reality.

The conundrum is that the mystic is often unlettered, the true divine wisdom in the guise of an illiterate servant. The Prophet, Peace be Upon Him, answered the Arch Angel, I am "omi." I remember someone asking Babaji, "Babaji you're so intelligent, why don't you learn to read?" He humbly answered, "I might get confused. Now I simply go to the Source from which all books have come, and ask Him. I put my total trust and faith in what He says. He has never been wrong."

To Babaji everything else seemed like child's play. Even advanced science, which denied God, seemed like children playing in a sand box or assembling wooden blocks.

An imperfect science without the awe of a Creator:

Science and indeed life without awe are empty;

Worship without love is empty;

Study without rapture is empty:

That is why Guru Gobind Singh ji in his *swayai* said –

sach kahon sunlayo subhai - jin prem kio tin hi prabh payo

Listen closely, for I speak the truth; it is only through love that we can attain God

The entire Siri Guru Granth Sahib ji is one great love song. All of our scriptures are testaments to the Greatness of the Eternal One and the Power of the Mystical Realm.

The Mentor or Guide

I sometimes wonder how, in a world beset with conflict, with darkness everywhere we look, people can believe in God. There is such a movement to deny God based on "facts" – the facts of a material reality. Even our academic disciplines have all but excised God and the mystical, relegating it to an ancillary course if at all. If we are not fortunate to meet and live in the presence of one who is with God, or fully awakened, then how can we recognize the treasure of enlightened wisdom?

It is fascinating to see that often those who are most vociferous in their opposition to living Saints enforce the strictest adherence to a religious law. They uphold the historical as the basis of their faith, despite a movement to deny the need for a spiritual guide, and even deny that such beings could exist today.

We see this reflected in the fundamentalist movements around the world. They are the antithesis of the mystical and have demonstrated again and again in varying circumstances that they breed hatred and distrust, both within their own traditions and with others.

While the mystic embraces everyone and connects them with God, those who rail against him turn people away from God while they themselves become demigods imposing their political will on an all too gullible public.

We humans have a proclivity to deny that which we don't experience – yet we don't even make the effort. We have the roadmap but we deny the route exists. If the route doesn't exist there can't be a map. There is an order – revealed by mystical experience and enshrined in scripture – which describes in great detail the landmarks and mileposts on the path – and yet we put blinders on and ignore them.

I ask you, "How can our human ignorance deny Divine knowledge?" This is the deception of the ego, which constantly pulls the wool over our eyes, and has us believing that we know the truth. Babaji always said: "Truth is never in the majority." But let us take the courage to at least represent it – to at least try to tread the path.

We are such stubborn children, so set in our ways that even when our Divine Parent – both Mother and Father – holds out a sweet so delicious, whose taste will imbue our entire being

with endless bliss, we make a face and turn away, preferring being drugged with sensual pleasures instead of inebriated with the love of God. It is only through the mystical experience, and only when we meet someone who can connect us and turn on that switch.

Koi an milavai mera pritam pyara

If only I could meet the one who will take me to my Beloved, I would sacrifice my entire life to Him (Guru Granth Sahib p. 757)

The Key as revealed by all the Masters

Meditation has always been the prescription--the medicine that cures our disease of separation, whether we use a molla, a rosary, a prayer wheel, or just sit in silence waiting for the Voice to awaken within; whether we call it Nam, the Jesus Prayer, the Kilam, Mahamantra, Samadhi, Unceasing prayer, or the endless praise of Jaap Sahib; or whether we focus on the primordial sound that attunes our minds to the voice of the Infinite; or on allowing the Light in whatever form of our beloved we chose to appear to us, to shower blessings upon us, clearing away the darkness.

Praising our beloved, constantly summoning that presence, opens the portal.

Connecting with the Spirit – ushering us into the mystical realm.

The path

Love is the key to the mystical world - spiritual dimension

Being in love with -

Completely focused on - enveloped by - immersed in

Love - praising - longing

It is THE manner of absorption - where the self is absorbed into the ONE we love.

That reunion more than any class or family reunion - to our greatest Friend -

Our beloved - to see the face

Our soul rises to meet and merge

With Truth - or Gyan - or enlightenment or God.

It doesn't matter what we call it – after all the names are names of adoration of the Nameless

It is the most profound experience any being, human or otherwise can have

light merging into The Light

That opens the door - the path spreads out across infinite heavens

Rising endlessly beyond where any eye

The third or otherwise can see

It is what some may call the mystical experience

But for me and for those who have been blessed with that vision - if only a glimpse,

It Is reality.

And while all things around us may demand our time, our love, our real love dominates and defines our reality. If that is grounded in a relationship with the material – a person – then everything revolves around them. It becomes our center: our core.

As St. Paul says: *I am just a noisy gong or clanging cymbal*

Without love I am nothing

To be in love - enveloped by an unseen force so powerful without limit that you throw yourself into it, longing for an all-consuming embrace beyond what any physical body could ever provide: an unending bliss.

Summary and Conclusion

Just as Revelation can never stop, neither will those who perceive that reality ever stop coming. No doubt there are cycles when the material forces seem dominant. But that which we call the miraculous – as Babaji would say – is simply God's nature and as Mary Pat and others from Gobind Sadan will attest, those continue to increase, despite the absence of a physical body of the one from whom those blessings flow.

So, to me the mystical has become simple logic: a voice which guides our every breath. It becomes our responsibility to take that leap of faith; rather than denying it exists, just follow the path laid out.

Science has shown that it is precisely at times when a species is threatened that we make that leap of consciousness. Let us all seek that growth of consciousness through the mystical paths – uncover the buried treasure and watch the path to peace emerge.

Perhaps the time is now.

We are a world in search of meaning, and conditions are such that we are being forced to search elsewhere for happiness.

Conclusion

I'd like to end with a few stories:

Some ten years ago, I was returning from India through Europe and found myself sitting next to a soldier returning from Iraq. As we talked, he became quite serious: "We all feel that we are fighting a battle on the birthplace of civilization. But we all worry that we are fighting the battle to end civilization."

Immediately Babaji told me, as he often does, "Remind him that God promised Noah that he would never again destroy all of humanity. So, civilization will never end. But, if this means the end to civilization as we know it, let it go. If it means the end to war, injustice, oppression, poverty, inequality and the degradation of nature, then let it go." The soldier thanked me greatly.

It is and will be the mystical that will reveal the path to peace and summon us to be more fully engaged citizens, committed to being the change we want to see.

Hendricks –

In the early 80's, we were gathered with some 250 people from different traditions for what we in America called an Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration. At the end, voices joined in singing God's praises. God was so happy that the vision was immediate and remarkable: "Tell all who have cursed their fate that they were born at this time, that they will live to thank God they were born at this time." And looking out across the room, I have no doubt that the time is drawing near.

We have a collective responsibility that the message of this conference not be limited to those gathered here – but we who by our presence bear witness to the mystical experience must carry this message of hope of a new reality into the halls of power, the halls of academia, and to the public. We who can speak and write must raise our voices –let this message spread virally throughout the world and the scourges will subside.

This is the promise of all our traditions and with Babaji's blessings and our efforts it will come to pass. I want to thank you and may God bless us all in our endeavor.

Ralph Singh
Gobind Sadan
17 February 2010

Demands

The world demands that you make a name for yourself - the path requires you to lose your self in Your name - herein lies the difference:

The tantric destroys his physical body and replaces it with a subtle body - the world wants you to build your body;

the female mystic sacrifices her most precious gift - her beauty - to become beautiful in celebration of her Lord.

You, my Lord, have shown us the way to live in the world and glorify your name - but keeping our balance is totally in your hands – no path is more slippery,

Thinner than a hair walking on the blade of a sword - You Yourself describe the discipline of living Truth - the ultimate reality in the world of maya.

Ralph Singh
18 Feb 2010

Regardless of our method, how can we doubt the experience is the same - how can we doubt the Light? But at the same time, we must respect the particularities of each other's practices - and rejoice in their descriptions - as we do the beauty of a fall foliage display or the diversity of nature.

Babaji taught us to affirm everyone's love and revere all prophets - this to me is the primary obligation of a Sikh.

Ralph Singh
18 Feb 2010