

WHAT IS
MYSTICISM?

by

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What is mysticism? If this were one of the questions asked at a Gallup Poll, the answers would, I should imagine, be easily predictable. To the average person's mind there instantly arise such associations with the word as "misty," "irrational," together with some identification with superstition and "the occult." It is, then, the purpose of this small book to examine, as far as is possible within this very limited space, what the term does mean and its possible real significance for us here and now. The author is neither a scholar nor a theologian and the ideas expressed and examined are the result of his experience of life and thought thereon, combined with a certain amount of the reading of comparative religion, philosophy and present-day psychology. I do not claim to say anything that is original, and if, as may well be the case, there are other very short introductions to the subject, then I can only say that I have not come across them, and so without further waste of space I will go ahead.

It would seem to me that the first thing to ask is: why do we wish to know "What is mysticism." The reasons for wishing to know this might be purely intellectual and academic, or emotional. In either case the motive for seeking information could be based on a dissatisfaction with the prevailing attitude to life, which is, generally speaking, really no attitude in the real sense at all. In the case of the

latter of the two attitudes we have suggested we can assume that this person, from his experience of life, has arrived, perhaps quite suddenly, and probably through suffering, at the conclusion that he, or she, simply must attempt to find out something as to the ultimate reasons for human existence, if any; or in other words either the whole business is a strange joke in strange taste or else there is a reason indicating a purpose and design. The former of the two people, whose predominating characteristic is intellectual, is also interested in finding an answer, if there is one, but since his motive power is more akin to curiosity his quest is not likely to have the same urgency as is the case with the latter person and he is more likely to get bogged down with a mass of "information about" and is often seemingly unaware that "knowledge of" is ultimately the only thing that is going to be of any real value. In real life, of course, the attitudes of the two people we have imagined are seldom so one-sided, but there is, generally speaking, a definite tendency one way or the other.

Well, so far we have examined the reasons for wanting to know what mysticism is and this is a matter that is rather more important than might at first appear to be the case, since one's motive conditions the approach to the subject and very often, though not necessarily, one's whole future attitude and course of development. Only too often it is unfortunately the case that what might seem to the indi-

vidual concerned to be the most excellent motives, can, on examination, be shown to be merely an easily assumed mask to enable him to continue life with the added boost of a feeling of superiority over the unenlightened. In this case he is usually able to successfully project his own shortcomings onto his friends and acquaintances, and thus happily unaware of the beam projecting from his own eye, go about extolling the virtues of an attitude of humility. Much of this gives rise to the accusation of escapism applied to the mystical attitude to life and to this degree it is well founded. It is, however, not necessarily true that the genuinely mystical or religious attitude to life makes life any easier. By one of those paradoxes so common in this field it does and does not. By giving a purpose and direction to life it makes it easier; by making the old patterns of thought and behaviour more difficult for one to accept, it makes it harder. Briefly, what the question of motive in the approach to this matter adds up to is that anything less than complete sincerity is of no value.

Now that we have dealt in a general way with the question of motive, we can examine the question of what we might expect or hope to get out of an enquiry into mysticism; and to this question an excellent approach is to ask oneself, "At this moment what do I expect to get from life and what does it mean to me? Am I here to grow up, gradually and painfully, acquiring some sort of knowledge of life,

ties off affection and loyalty and, having reached maturity, embark on a slow and implacable progress towards decay and oblivion?" The fact that this is not a satisfying prospect is, I am well aware, no argument to the effect that there must be "something else." To arrive at any conclusion as to whether there is, or is not, "something else" we must look elsewhere and at the best it must be said at the outset that it can only be a personal solution. A man can say "Yes, this is true. I have found it true in my own experience," but to convey this to another person is almost as difficult as to convey the idea off colour to a blind man. One can describe every conceivable property, attribute and association off, let us say, the colour red to him, but after all this he is unfortunately no nearer grasping the concept off the colour red and the only way in which it could be possible for him to do so would be for him to gain his sight. This in fact is very much what is necessary in the matter we are discussing. That one should be satisfied that the religious attitude to life is neither outraging one's intellect nor pandering to one's emotional need is, however, I consider, the fundamental first step. When, and if, this has been accomplished, or in the process, it is often found that many hitherto unexplained facets off life seem to fit in and, as it were, round out the picture. Often the individual has experienced, at some time or other, momentary flashes off insight or intimations off future events which give

rise to the conception that, perhaps, at least there is some pattern in our lives. If, as I say, one has proceeded thus far, one then has to make the discovery that the mystical attitude is not just an attitude but a way off life, saturating everything with a new significance, not just a comforting theory to be remembered at difficult times. If on the other hand one's investigations lead one to the conclusion that this is not an acceptable attitude to life, then one can get off the train anywhere at any time.

Supposing then that one comes to the conclusion that one is sufficiently interested to make a positive move; there are several courses open to one, depending on the temperament and intellectual interests off the individual. One can embark on some course off reading, thought and meditation; join some group interested in the study off such matters, orthodox church, Christian sect or society, or possibly an esoteric circle devoted to the study off one or more off the Eastern religions. Theoretically all these methods could have the same result; as an Eastern sage has put it, "One can drink water from any side off a full tank." Though this is true, there are definite advantages and disadvantages in following any off these courses. As to the first course off private study: there is a wealth off books off all sorts which can easily be obtained from libraries, but, on the whole, for any long period, this is not a course to be recommended. The student is apt to rove and browse in a random

fashion through volume after volume without any plan or charted course and sustained only by a rather vague and rapidly shifting stimulus from a variety of sources. There is also the disadvantage of forgoing the association with others travelling the same way.

As to the group, this could be an excellent course of action provided a suitable one could be found to attend, one perhaps combining a certain latitude and elasticity with a definite aim and object, to avoid mere aimless discussion.

The esoteric circle is a natural choice for those temperamentally inclined to this path, usually those with previous knowledge or experience. The term "esoteric" is often taken to mean something mysterious and occult; my own definition would be that it applies to something that cannot be conveyed or explained except to the initiate or experienced person. Any dabbling in the occult or evoking of powers one is in no position to control is a travesty of mysticism and a dangerous one. To many Westerners the Eastern terminology and procedure is somewhat hard to assimilate, which is very understandable, also, as is the case with all religions, unless one is able to penetrate through the words, formulations and crystallizations which enclose the kernel of truth within, one is apt to become confused and the foreign idiom can accentuate this.

All the world religions, at the outset, carry a burning message and dynamic vigour, which generally

calls up in the individual who comes in close contact either devoted adherence or implacable and deadly opposition—the latter merely being the reverse manifestation of devotion; in either one or the other the individual is just as bound. As this religion develops, the original energy and impetus become dispersed and gradually, over the generations, there develops the crystallizations and incrustation of dogma, ritual and all forms of insistence on the outward aspect or shell. It is for this reason that from time to time there rise the iconoclastic prophets, the breakers of images and the instigators of the new religions, whose words in their due time, are destined to become in their turn formalized and depleted in content.

There are two Eastern religions of most interest to the West — Buddhism, and Vedanta — which includes the main stream of religion from the time of Zoroaster. Buddhism has been defined as more a philosophy than a religion, particularly since it does not even postulate the existence of a God. The philosophy of Buddhism is extremely subtle. Like Vedanta, Buddhism subscribes to the teaching of Karma, and the transmigration of souls, and its avowed aim and object is to seek release from the round of re-birth. According to the theory of Karma, each of us, over innumerable lives, works out our destiny, which consists of gradually disentangling ourselves from the binding and embarrassing consequences of any action that is not intelligently designed and free from the

motive of personal interest. This latter sort of action is in fact the "inaction" which is discussed in "The Gita," a very short, highly condensed and important part of the Hindu scriptures. "Nirvana," as the Buddhists define it, or the final stage of this disentanglement from life, is not, as the term is often understood in the West, oblivion, but, from the avowed experience of some, a state of undiluted bliss. Buddhism also maintains that all life is suffering and if a cross-section of life were taken, including prisons, hospitals, asylums and the like, the findings would show much to substantiate this view; however, any assumption that this constitutes a denial of life by no means follows. It is no new thought that happiness has been most perfectly realized by those who have abandoned the quest for personal happiness.

The concept of "Maya" or the really illusory nature of the material universe is another cardinal point in Vedanta and Buddhism. It has been suggested that this belief in the East has a good deal of bearing on their technical backwardness. Aside from the treatment of this theory in Western philosophy by the "idealist" philosophers it has never received very serious consideration or had any real effect. It is, however, a curious fact that it is much easier for a scientist in our present day to subscribe to mysticism than it would have been, let us say, fifty years ago. It is thought by some people that modern science, in its theories of the final constituents of matter, goes ever

nearer to the ancient teachings in this respect and indeed in some cases the terms used. As to the advantages, if any, to be gained from a study of the Eastern religions other than Christianity, I would say that there is much to be gained by regarding a problem from different angles. A shaft of light falling upon a prism is, in its way a revelation, though the light remains the same. The philosophically minded find a very rich content in Vedanta, Buddhism, or, for that matter, Taoism.

Concerning the remaining method we have not examined—that of the orthodox church, Christian sect or ~~society~~ there is not any necessity for me to expand. Christianity, when it can be found and experienced as a living force, has, even today, a particular appeal for the Western mind. The Testaments, translated at a time when the English language was in its fullest and richest flower, are of great beauty and the parables and discourses of Jesus reveal, on examination, generally unrecognized levels of truth and significance. The unique personality of Jesus the man has an extraordinary attraction still. The pitfalls attending on an acceptance of Christianity apply equally to all religions and could all fall under the heading of blind acceptance, instead of a sincere seeking for personal knowledge and attainment.

If we shift our ground we can consider this question from another angle. Ever since the theories of Dr. Sigmund Freud burst upon a startled world,

emptying gigantic garbage cans to right and left and rattling skeletons in innumerable cupboards, psychology has been "the thing." Among intellectuals, to be familiar with the terminology of Freudian psychology has been a "must." Of late years, however, the pendulum appears to be swinging back; so that while no intelligent person would deny the fact of Freud's undoubted genius, I feel that it was mainly for the benefit of the Western world that he opened a door. The fact that our minds and our actions are to a much greater extent than we care to admit, bound and conditioned by their unconscious contents is most certainly the case, but, interestingly, a study of Eastern religion and philosophy gives rise to the suspicion that perhaps modern theories of the unconscious are not so very new and now that the excitement has had time to subside and the skeletons in cupboards do not rattle quite as attractively as they used to, it is interesting to speculate on just what sort of progress we are making. Does the human race, and can it, in a real sense, progress corporately, or is it, and has it always been, an individual matter; for each of us in fact to work out our own salvation? Is it perhaps after all possible that innumerable sages and saints grasped the fundamentals of this business and described the experience and the goal. Many people who have undergone successful analysis, which process by the way has much in common with the process of conversion, being in its dynamic effect

an emotional and not an intellectual phenomenon, find themselves in middle life still faced with the tremendous problem, "Why? To what purpose do I live?" Their suffering has been alleviated, the energy released, but still "Why?" As far as psychology is concerned we have the findings and deductions of research instituted by Dr. Carl Jung notably, and according to which it is quite credibly argued that the unconscious mind of man contains all knowledge of the past history and struggles of the race, or even further back, and that in fact, instinct "wants" to transform itself to some higher form of energy, to release itself from its own binding thought patterns and compulsions. Our common unconscious heritage seems to indicate that we are all on a journey, over which there appears to be no great hurry and available time to take wrong turnings and blind alleys. It seems that this is a matter that can only be approached individually. Try and project it on to improving other people and the results range from the Spanish Inquisition to a propensity for offending one's friends. Only by example and selfless conduct to others can this be achieved. Only in fact by "love;" or if you prefer it, the highest or most developed form of energy. "How then" one might well ask, "does this change come about" and is it gradually or suddenly? I think the answer is "a bit of both." Just as the kettle comes suddenly to the boil after a gradual accumulation of heat. There are enough

references to conversion in religious history. An analogy to this could be the kettle, I think, provided one bears in mind that this particular kettle is somewhat different, since it has various ascending boiling points, and it is generally agreed that it goes off the boil not infrequently. In fact, after taking a few steps one is liable to go flat on one's face; but this is not of any consequence, provided one does not decide to give it best and stay at home. Generally speaking, however, after making a sincere start one is never quite comfortable about giving the whole thing away.

Now that we have examined the reasons for one's enquiry into mysticism and the methods, I shall attempt to define what mysticism is. Referring to several dictionaries I get the following composite definition, by discarding repetition of terms, under both "Mystic" and "Mysticism."

"Spiritually allegorical, esoteric; of hidden meaning, sacredly obscure or secret, involving a sacred or a secret meaning hidden from the eyes of the ordinary reader, only revealed to a spiritually enlightened mind. One who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding; reliance on spiritual intuition or exalted feeling as a means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to intellectual apprehension. The doctrine of belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality, etc., is attainable through immediate in-

tuition, insight or illumination and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination. Doctrine that knowledge of the ultimate reality and the Divine can be gained only by immediate intuition; especially by concentration of the mind on, and absorption in, the Divine Essence, which leads through ecstasy to the Divine Vision. One who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity. One who seeks for direct intercourse with God in elevated religious feeling or ecstasy."

Starting at the beginning we will begin with spiritually allegorical, and the dictionary gives us for "allegory," narrative description of a subject under guise of another suggestively similar. I think I would take this to refer to the symbolism, parable and myth surrounding and interpenetrating religion and mysticism. The reason for this is not, as some people might suppose, to cloud the issue, but for the simple reason that abstract ideas can best be expressed by symbols. These can be derived from ancient sources, in which case they have a more or less universal meaning and a remarkable similarity all over the world, or they can be mathematical. The ones we have to deal with are, of course, the former. Symbolism is, of course, an important vehicle for the expression of ideas in art. The religious poetry of the East abounds with the most highly erotic and sensuous imagery, with a perpetual echo of longing for

union with "the beloved," and the recurring symbol of "the cup" is not as has been widely supposed a recommendation to alcoholism but refers to spiritual nourishment. It should be realized that the one symbol can have many shades of meaning just as the parable, by leaving room for the imagination and for the projection of one's own life-problems, can mean a great deal more than a bare statement of fact. Also by the use of some homely illustration a universal meaning can be conveyed and the confusion and distortion attendant upon all words and formulations reduced to a minimum. To take up the subject of the myth here in the space available is quite impossible, but broadly speaking one could say it is a universal sort of parable growing up with the race and representing the drama of psychological forces.

To continue with our dictionary definition we come to *esoteric*, which we have dealt with. Of hidden meaning could also be explained in the same way, referring in my opinion, to a meaning that is not readily apparent unless preceded by some study and experience. *Sacredly obscure or secret*, involving a sacred or a secret meaning hidden from the eyes of the ordinary reader, only revealed to a spiritually enlightened mind could I think be explained in the same terms. One who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding. Reliance on spiritual intuition or exalted feeling as a means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to in-

tellectual apprehension. The doctrine of belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality, etc., is attainable through immediate intuition, insight or illumination and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination. I think the last word of the first sentence here could imply intellect. From our own experience many of us are familiar with the fact that it is, on occasions, possible to have knowledge of some event or state of affairs, removed either in time or space, independently of the use of our senses. If one could imagine this faculty developed to a very much greater extent, then one could, I should think, apprehend a good deal that the intellect might boggle at. "The truth," as a Zen Buddhist Master said, "is seen not by thinking about it but by looking directly into it."

Regarding the last part of the definition: *Doctrine that knowledge of the ultimate reality and the Divine can be gained only by immediate intuition; especially by concentration of the mind on, and absorption in, the Divine Essence, which leads through ecstasy to the Divine Vision.* One who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity. One who seeks for direct intercourse with God in elevated religious feeling or ecstasy. The belief that union with the Divine is possible is fundamental in Vedanta and could be said to be so in Buddhism, except that the Divine is here considered as the principle of the Self (which will be

enlarged upon later). It also plays a vital part in the writings of the Western Christian mystics who describe very vividly their experiences. In order to understand this most important concept, let us for the moment suspend any disbelief to the extent of following a sort of word-picture. In the beginning we have God. Not the Christian God nor any of the Eastern incarnations of God, but the very first principle, without any manifestation, qualities or attributes. And God was not known to Himself. Then there started a movement, a vibration, say some of the old scriptures; a sound. "In the beginning was the Word." And so we have the beginning of the evolution of the universe, or many universes, "The breath of Brahma"; and all the multiple forms of life follow on, groping up towards eventual evolution as man, the apex of creation and the highest biological form necessary for the realization of the final aim of life, which is, just this self-surrender, union with, or absorption into the Deity. But this, I might add, is an extremely advanced course. Probably the most any of us can hope for at present is some measure of self-knowledge and since the whole process consists of more and more self-knowledge, this means very real progress. Eventually, if this process is continued long enough and thoroughly enough, the real ultimate Self is found, or God; and all the pageant of suffering and aspiring humanity with its jealousy clung to illusion of separate personalities, though

entirely real to us, is "Brahma's play;" and while it is only too true that the play is at times exceedingly rough, it can be pointed out that Brahmavivists it all upon Himself.

Concerning ecstasy, elevated religious feeling, exalted feeling and illumination; it has never been possible to describe, except in symbolical terms, the highest flights of consciousness; concentration of the mind, however, meaning an intense gathering in of mental and psychic energy to the exclusion of all extraneous thoughts and impressions, is the recognized means of attaining to this state, except for those instances where some form of illumination, usually of a fleeting nature and impossible of recapture, visits a man unawares.

As is generally known, the mystical and religious attitude in the proper sense of the word, as distinct from the sort of religiosity which safely projects the whole business away from oneself, is chiefly concerned with the "inner life." Many people, however, are puzzled as to precisely what is meant by this term and it is not at all easy to define, but it is certainly not synonymous with introversion. In essence it is a journey into oneself but, paradoxically, this can lead to a recognition of one's own relation to a significant pattern of reality and open doors leading to infinitely wider fulfillment to the individual who is no longer satisfied by merely reacting to life as he finds it. This it seems to me is the real adventure and the real

Journey.

Finally, I would say this, that whatever his belief and attitude to life may be, every man wants freedom and happiness. Happiness, it seems, constantly eludes the outstretched hand, and freedom is hard to define and harder to come by. Money, possessions and all the tokens of our search for security are the overt expression of these innate desires. It is, however, my deep conviction that only the truth can, in a real sense, make us free. The truth, in fact, about ourselves. Only by this inner strength that is stronger than any external fate can man attain to peace, within himself and with his environment.

This brings us to the end of our elementary approach to, or examination of, mysticism, which is something like the trick of trying to write the Bible on a postage stamp; however, if anyone is helped by this booklet to obtain some glimmering of the mystical attitude to life and encouraged to pursue their investigations, I shall consider I have been fortunate. Anyone desiring further information or wishing to contact others of like mind is invited to contact the author, c/o The Publisher.

Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness for any virtues this booklet may have to my good friend Stanley Adams, whose help and encouragement sustained my embarkation on the Journey. The shortcomings of the booklet I must claim as my own.

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