

## The Way of the Mystic in the Christian Tradition

The term 'Mysticism' is often misunderstood even nowadays when there are so many studies on the subject, the classical one being Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*.<sup>1</sup> Nor is mysticism the same as occultism; these terms must be clearly distinguished and understood before we can get a proper grasp of our subject.

Mysticism concerns a particular kind of approach to that divine reality which is beyond our cognitive consciousness, which the mystic intuitively recognizes and longs for, and which is the be-all and end-all of his life.

F.C. Happold gives us an excellent introduction to the subject in his anthology, *Mysticism*. He says it is a 'particular and distinct sort of "spirituality" ' which can be viewed from three aspects —'a type of experience', 'a way of knowledge' and 'a state of consciousness'. The term refers to the mystical path, the experience itself, and that kind of consciousness which is capable of apprehending the hidden divine reality—a consciousness which is totally different from our rational, cognitive consciousness, marked by subject, object and their relationship, and is, so to speak, hidden behind our ordinary awareness.

C. Jinarajadasa, a former President of the Theosophical Society, noted a further important point in his little book, *The Nature of Mysticism*: 'Mysticism is a life of the spirit which cannot be held within the boundaries of the religions.'

One might say that mysticism, in one sense, is the core of religion in as much as religion strives to give an idea of, and to lead us to the heart of life, the 'spirit', or Deity, the undifferentiated unity (as the mystic calls the Source of our spiritual aspirations and inspirations) and the goal of every true religious endeavour. But mysticism cannot be bound by religious creeds, rules or taboos appropriate for another age or race; for the mystic, all these are subordinate to his quest, for his goal is to attain to that state of supra-consciousness which is beyond the conceptual mind. That is why mystics have been, from time to time, at odds with limiting orthodoxies and their rigid custodians, whether in the Christian or the Muslim world. In this respect, Hinduism and Buddhism are far more open; there is little conflict since the essence of their teaching is mysticism.

Another point of importance is that the pure mystical experience of *oneness*, which is beyond all sensory and

intellectual grasp, is fundamentally the same everywhere, but its interpretation or description — a purely intellectual activity — is coloured according to the religious, social and educational conditioning of the experiencer. It therefore appears somewhat different to the superficial gaze as it is painted with the different colours of the various creeds. For example, Christians speak of unity with the Deity, or with Christ, while it is thought of in abstract terms in Buddhism, or as the Krishna consciousness among some Hindus.<sup>2</sup>

Occultism, on the other hand, is concerned with the study of that side of life and of man which normally remains concealed from our senses, our intellectual perception and understanding. It thus involves the hidden aspect of phenomena which Kant recognized as of the utmost importance and which he called 'noumena'; it also involves the study of the hidden springs of our nature, our states of consciousness and motivation — in fact, our inner life. The average person in his ignorance equates occultism with black magic and witchcraft. This is equivalent to sweeping away the whole of the hidden side of Reality and lumping it all together with spooks and vampires! The vast ocean of life that is hidden from our senses is quite innocent of our selfish motives, distorted outlook and perversions. He who studies the occult side of life is not *de facto* a black magician except in the twisted mind of ignorant people.

Psychic phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance and clairaudience, precognition and psychometry belong to the world of phenomena and their noumena and therefore fall within the domain of

occultism; they are not part of the mystical way and the mystical experience as such. The latter is non-sensuous, non-conceptual, ineffable, and concerns itself solely with 'at-one-ment' with the Heart of Life; its essence is therefore beyond any phenomenal or noumenal expression such as one meets in paranormal psychology. Such experiences, however, may be encountered on the mystic path; and visions or dreams, or the 'still small voice' may be expressions of guidance given to us from deep within ourselves, and which must manifest to us in some way or other so as to attract the attention of the waking consciousness; but these do not by themselves make one a mystic. They are psychic phenomena — manifestations of the hidden side of the life of the soul — and it is the task of occultism to study, evaluate, classify and make them understandable to the rational mind. Psychism, then, is a branch of occultism, not of mysticism.

Furthermore, one can by study *become* an occultist but one is *born* a mystic. One cannot train oneself for the 'types of experience', the 'way of knowledge' and the 'state of consciousness' that are peculiar to mysticism. One can, however, pave the way to the mystical experience of unity through recollection, meditation and the active recognition of the One Life. These three factors — the type of experience, the way of knowledge, and the state of consciousness — are expressive of an unpredictable source that wells up from unplumbed depths as a divine grace that descends upon the human being and enwraps him in ecstasy, exaltation or bewilderment. This is peculiar to the mystical path and characterizes the mystic.<sup>3</sup>

The occult path, on the other hand, is directed by the mind, hence it is the way of the trained will. It accepts no unpredictability for it does not rely upon the grace of God and knows that everything in the universe works according to law. It pertains to occultism to examine Reality in all its aspects, the outer and the inner, as against being content to experience it in its depth, which is the mystic's way. Occultism seeks to map out every step upon the path, every aspect of nature, the cosmos and man, and draw conclusions therefrom; it sets out to master and use man's hidden powers in order that he may understand his self and his environment better. Herein lies the danger, for since the occultist relies upon himself and on his own trained will, power may breed ambition and desire for more power. The mystic, on the other hand, surrenders his will to the Divine Will and relies on the Divine Grace, living a life of inner acquiescence to the still small voice within, constantly clearing his consciousness from the clamours of physical, emotional and mental desires, demands and dissatisfactions, so that the divine hint may be caught and acted upon. Hence the necessity for purity of motive and selflessness. Unlike the occultist, the mystic is not concerned with finding out the how and why of everything. He is well aware that no amount of mapping out the way or theoretical understanding of each step will get him to his goal. It is enough that he reaches it.

In a certain parable, the occultist and the mystic are climbing up a ladder. The occultist mounts laboriously, examining carefully every rung, measuring its length and breadth and at last finally reaches the

top. There, to his astonishment, he finds that the mystic has already arrived. 'How did you get here?' he asks. 'I don't know,' replies the mystic, 'Somehow I got here by the grace of God.'

Three types of people —the ordinary person, the artist or scientist, and the mystic —enter a forest, or sit on a mountain top or by the seashore. The ordinary man looks around, sun-bathes and swims, and indulges in some kind of physical activity. The scientist or artist concentrates his attention on particular things in order either to study them or to reproduce them artistically in some medium or other, for it is the form and the activity of the form that engage his attention. But the mystic is not really interested in these outer pursuits. In silence, he tunes in to the inner rhythm of nature and takes in the colours, sounds and forms of life as a whole; he discovers that nature's pulse and his own are one. In this contemplative gazing there comes a moment when all merge in the glorious fusing of energies —a shimmering magic of which he seems to be the centre and through which he feels himself slowly dissolving as he becomes one with the very heart of life itself. For at the heart of all things is an ever flowing spring of joy, of sheer well-being and harmony, whence issue our inspirations and to which gravitate our aspirations. It is indeed the Heart of hearts of which our little hearts are microscopic mirrors. To touch that Heart in one moment of ecstasy is, for the mystic, worth all the other activities which men relentlessly pursue. Here we have a way of knowledge, a type of experience and a state of consciousness which transcend all known states, types and knowledge.

'Oneness' is the criterion of all mystical experience and the end of the mystic way. The great mystics of all times such as (to name but a few of the Christian tradition) St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila, Jacob Boehm, Jan Ruysbroeck, Meister Eckhart, have outlined the mystic path or given hints as to its several steps.

The path is generally divided into the three stages of purification, contemplation or illumination, and union.

### **Purification**

The way of purification is the first step in the spiritual life and it applies to the mystic as well as to anyone who wants to acquire a measure of spiritual understanding; hence to every one of us. The outer purifications of the body are, of course, of importance but in fact they are only a fragment of the requirements. We cannot, for example, eat our way to heaven or to perfection, and he who thinks that for his spiritual progress he should become a vegetarian is greatly deluded. As Jesus Christ said (Matthew 15:11, 18-20):

Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.

... those things which proceed out of the mouth comes forth from the heart; and they defile the man.

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries ...

These are the things that defile a man ...

It is the gradual elimination or control of the little ego, or self, which is implied and has to be achieved. As Jesus Christ said, you cannot worship God and Mammon. The way to the innermost shrine of the soul is barred by the I-making faculty—the self which thinks itself the

master and drags us down again and again, the 'I' which Nicholas of Cusa described as 'the most proud spirit of Reason'.

Purification implies not only renunciation in every walk of life — of worldly pursuits for their own sake or for one's self-aggrandizement, detachment from the fruit of work, the sweeping away of prejudices which prevent clear vision —but also the constant endeavour to understand and accept others, to help them in their need and in their failings and yet know when to allow them to stand on their own feet in order to grow. It is the practice of patience, tolerance, the clearing of the mirror of the mind, the turning away from the multiplicity of phenomenal appearances to the single-seeing of the One Life as the divine Presence which abides at the core of all beings. In purifying our hearts and realizing more and more the unity of life, the needs of all creatures for light, for care, for love, one automatically refrains from hurting others or from taking life uselessly. John Tauler tells us that 'in the measure that a man comes out of himself, in that measure does God enter in with His divine grace.'<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that to achieve any kind of spiritual realization, the grosser forms of human weaknesses must have been dropped long before. For the true mystic, outer purifications have long since become second nature and they no longer engage his attention; his mind is open to the inner disciplines which give entrance to the innermost. The focus of the attention is centred on the Highest —on God, the Higher Self, or Christ. As one earnestly searches for truth, the veils of desire and illusion naturally and

effortlessly drop away through sheer attrition. On the mystic path, it is the more subtle sacrifices of the pygmy self that count.

'Have in mind', says Richard Rolle, the hermit of Hampole, 'that God proves his own as gold is proved by fire.' '... the heart that truly receives the fire of the Holy Ghost is burned all wholly and turns as it were into fire; and it leads it into that form that is likest to God.'<sup>5</sup>

Like the gold in the crucible,' says St John of the Cross who summed up the whole process thus: 'In order to arrive at that which you are not, you must go by a way in which *you* are not.'<sup>6</sup> On the mystic path, we die to the self and to the world for the sake of a greater Self.<sup>7</sup>

This life I live in vital strength is loss of life unless I win YOU; and thus to die I shall continue until in YOU I live at length. Listen (my God!) my life is in YOU. This life I do not want, for I am dying that I do not die.<sup>8</sup>

The *Theologia Germanica* sternly says:

A man should stand and be so free of himself, that is from self-hood, I-hood, me, mine and the like, that in all things he should no more regard himself and his own than if he did not exist.<sup>9</sup>

This, of course, applies to the last stages of the path of purification.

What is the motive power behind this constant purification; what drives the mystic on and on? It is the one supreme power of our universe which flows through every one of us although, because of the psychological barriers we are constantly putting up, we may be unaware of it. It is the power that manifests as cohesion, harmony, wisdom and compassion. It is the power of love

which St Paul described superbly in 1 Corinthians 13:

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

St John of the Cross writes unequivocally: 'For it is love alone that unites and joins the soul with God.' The 'ladder of contemplation', which he minutely describes, he calls 'a science of love, that is, an infused and loving knowledge of God which at one and the same time illumines the soul and enkindles it with love to the end that it may be raised step by step to God its Creator'.<sup>10</sup>

We emphasize this aspect of the mystic path for it is of supreme importance, far more so than on any other path, and it accounts for the mystic getting to his goal more quickly than could be achieved by any other way. St John of the Cross says:

Love unites the soul with God and the greater its love the deeper does it enter into God and the more is it centred in Him.<sup>11</sup>

John of Ruysbroeck has the same teaching:

Whenever the soul's highest powers are turned inward with active love, they are united with God without means in a simple knowledge of all truth and in essential feeling and tasting of all good. This simple knowing and feeling of God is possessed in essential love and is practised and preserved through active love. ...He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him.<sup>12</sup>

It may seem strange to some to hear that Love has a cognitive quality which transcends our normal faculty of

knowing, understanding and reasoning. At the lower level, this knowing manifests as a kind of sympathetic response such as is found in the mother and her babe and in the lover and his beloved. This is but the reflection on the earthly level of that state of supreme awareness hidden in our innermost core by means of which we are in tune with all, and which, when allowed to radiate unimpeded through the personality, becomes the source of dynamic knowing and understanding that embraces all in love. For love brings together, is all inclusive, harmonizes, unites and transforms everything it touches and lifts it up to a higher dimension. Heart calls to heart, self to Higher Self, soul to Spirit, Spirit to God. Longing aspires and the lightning flash of insight, of inspiration, of *gnosis*, is the unfailing response. Then there can be no

more doubt, no more seeing through a glass darkly.

On the mystic path the divine power of love is quadrupled. Love is the guide, the beacon and the supreme end. It is love for the highest that motivates the mystic, that makes him sacrifice self again and again. Hence the love language of so many mystics which raises the eyebrows of purely rational people who have no inkling of such love and do not understand it. Mystics have resorted to the most outrageous language —passionate and paradoxical, or of startling metaphors of contradictions such as 'dazzling darkness'<sup>13</sup> — knowing well that the platitudes of the rational brain can never impart the quality of that exalted consciousness, that 'living flame of love' with which they are kindled during their moments of ecstasy.

(to be concluded)

1. *Mysticism: a Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. E. Underhill, Methuen, 1911.

Other books:

Cox, M. *Mysticism: The Direct Experience of God*. Aquarian Press, 1983. (A historical survey of the nature and development of the Christian mystical tradition.) Happold, F.C. *Mysticism, A study and an anthology*.

Penguin, 1963. Merton, Thomas. *The Ascent to Truth*.

Burns Oates,

1951. Rufus M. Jones. *Studies in Mystical Religion*.

Macmillan, 1909. Spencer, S. *Mysticism in world Religion*. Penguin,

1963. Stace, W.T. *The Teachings of the Mystics*. Mentor, 1960. Underhill, E. *The Mystic Way*, Dent,

1913.

2. Compare the exclamation of Crashaw, quoted on p. 180, note 1 of E.A. Peers' *Studies in the Spanish Mystics* (vol. 1, 1951): 'O 'tis not Spanish, but 'tis Heaven she speaks! What soul so e'er in any language can speak heaven like hers is my soul's countryman.'

3. Compare J. van Ruysbroecks: 'And to it none can attain through knowledge and subtlety, neither through any exercise whatsoever. Only he with whom it pleases

God to be united in His Spirit, and whom it pleases Him to enlighten by Himself, can see God, and no one else.' (*The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*) And the Katha Upanishad: 'Not through much learning is the atman reached, not through the intellect and sacred teaching. It is reached by the chosen of him —because they choose him. To his chosen the atman reveals his glory' (1:2.23)

4. *In Twenty-Five Sermons* trans, by S. Winkworth, New edn. 1906

5. *The Fire of Love* ed. F.M.M. Comper. 2nd ed. 1920, ch. 27 & 17

6. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel: The Complete Works of St John of the Cross*, vol. 1, 1934. bk. 1, ch.xiii, p.63

7. Compare Jesus Christ: 'He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it' (Matt. 10:39).

8. St John of the Cross. Poems trans, by R. Campbell, 1947. Compare St Teresa: 'It dies to itself wholly, daughter, in order that it may fix itself more and more upon Me; it is no longer itself that lives, but I.' (Teresa of Avila. vol.1, ch.18. Quoted in Stace, *Teachings of the Mystics*) p. 180.

9. *Theologia Germanica* trans, by S. Winkworth. Golden Treasury-series. 1874, reprinted 1913; new edn. 1937.

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10. *The Dark Night of the Soul*

11. *Living Flame of Love* trans, by David Lewis, 1912, p. 12, para 15. Compare Letter XI, p.280, vol.3 of Complete Works, 1935. Compare Julian of Norwich: 'Wouldst thou learn thy Lord's meaning in this thing? [this revelation] Learn it well: Love was His meaning. Who shewed it thee? Love. What shewed He thee? Love. Wherefore shewed it He? For Love.' *From Revelations of Divine Love* ed. G. Warrack. 1901.

12. *The Book of Supreme Truth* (part of the *Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, etc.) 1916. ch.8 p.237. Compare Brother Lawrence *The Practice of the*

*Presence of God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1985

13. Compare John of Ruysbroeck:

'Now this active meeting and this loving embrace are in their ground fruitive and wayless; for the abysmal Waylessness of God is so dark and so unconditioned that it swallows up in itself every Divine way and activity and all the attributes of the Persons, within the rich compass of the essential Unity; and it brings about a Divine fruition in the abyss of the Ineffable.' (From *Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage* 1916. trans. C.A. Wynschenck. Dom.)

**The essential truth of every religion is that there is a way out, a way into the light. Religion is not simply ethics. Nor is it a mixture of ethics and dogma, or of ethics and emotion. There is a third something, totally different from either, which is its essence. The essence of religion is not morality but mysticism. The moral way alone will never lead to bliss.**

*Religion and the Modern, Mind, W.T. Stace*