

## Practical Mysticism

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In spite of the growing interest in mysticism around the world genuine mystical awareness continues to elude the many that seem to be interested in the subject. There are those who seem always ready to believe anything they are told by the latest 'corporate' mystic. The word 'corporate' is here used purposefully as the subject of mysticism has now become a multi-million dollar industry. Others attempt a premature beginning in the inner life only to become convinced that they *did* have an authentic mystical experience and that such an event has 'empowered' them to teach others. In many cases, what passes by 'teaching' is basically an exercise in unadulterated self-promotion and hedonism.

A look at the etymology of the word may help us to understand the depth and rigour intrinsic in true mysticism. The word 'mystic' is derived from the Greek verb *muein*, 'close the eyes or lips'. The genuine mystics in many ages and cultures testify to the truth of the above definition. At the very heart of real mysticism is an untranslatable experience, so deep and powerful in its profound meaning that it completely silences and ends the chattering, inner and outer, which constitutes the cherished self-importance of the personal mind. From the life-altering testimonies handed down to us from earlier ages, the mystics affirm, in a melody of meaning which is almost like a sung offering, that their experience has come from outside the confines of the everyday mind, from a source in which wholeness and meaning are like two intertwined perennial flames. It is something that has come to them, not a thing which was sought by an ignorant mind.

The teachings of the great mystics also show that their mysticism was always a practical experience, not a conceptual creation fanned by imagination, illusion or desire. Real mysticism is experience, an immediate, complete and irreversible awareness of a life which has no beginning and no end, which blesses all, unreservedly, and which is the only reality hidden behind every appearance. When the mind, heart and soul are truly open then they can be flooded by the Other, the birthless and deathless Spirit into which a new birth can take place. The selected passages below may perhaps help in showing how direct and practical mysticism is.

I took the lamp and, leaving the zone of everyday occupations and relationships where everything seemed clear, I went down into my inmost self, to the deep abyss whence I feel dimly that my power of action emanates. But as I moved further and further away from conventional certainties by which social life is superficially illuminated, I became aware that I was losing contact with myself. At each step of the descent a new person was disclosed within me of whose name I was no longer sure, and who no longer obeyed me. And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps, I found a bottomless abyss at my feet... (*The Divine Milieu* by Teilhard de Chardin)

Our image of ourselves is essentially superficial. It includes a cluster of memories to which we are attached to and that, we think, define us. It also involves the amount of knowledge we have gathered in this life. The more one reads the greater is the tendency to unquestioningly believe that such acquired knowledge is self-sufficient. However, in moments of great loss or inward darkness the accumulated knowledge proves unhelpful. Without self-knowledge every other form of knowledge is an impediment to spiritual growth. As T. S. Eliot wrote, 'Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' Chardin's passage mentioned above also shows that our own conditioning is very deep, has many layers to it, and that the source of consciousness is beyond the grasp of the personal self. One must be prepared to meet the unexpected on the mystical path.

Much has been written about Krishnamurti's life and the experiences he went through. His was a genuine case of someone who did not seek any transcendental experience at all, but to whom life-changing experiences did come which helped him to understand life at a very deep level. Reports about his life show that what was called a 'vacant' mind was in reality an extraordinary state of availability and receptivity to that Otherness that is the very source of the sacred. Below is his own record of one of such transformative experiences which came to him in Ojai, California, in 1922:

There was a man mending the road; that man was myself; the pickaxe he held was myself; the very stone which he was breaking up was part of me; the tender blade of grass was my very being, and the tree beside the man was myself. I almost could feel and think like the roadmender, I could feel the wind passing through the tree, and the little ant on the blade of grass I could feel. The birds, the dust, and the very noise were a part of me. Just then a car was passing by at some distance; I was the driver, the engines and the tyres; as the car went further away from me, I was going away from myself. I was in everything, or rather everything was in me, inanimate and animate, the mountain, the worm, and all breathing things. (*Krishnamurti: Years of Awakening* by Mary Lutyens)

Mystics have pointed out that one of the very first expressions of a mystical state of consciousness is the dissolution of the 'I'-sense, the prison-house that shuts out consciousness from the abiding truth of the undivided wholeness of existence. Liberated from the illusion of separateness the feeling aspect of consciousness expands to embrace every manifestation of life and unfolds into forms of sympathy, appreciation and understanding that know no limits. Krishnaji's experience in Ojai shows that what we consider to be one's self is indeed the self of all. The immediacy described in Krishnaji's experience clearly show that it is an illusion to believe that only certain special or secluded places or conditions could yield it. The present moment is the door through which it comes when the heart is free from every longing and all expectations.

Religion has had a bad press for a number of centuries now. It is undeniably true that serious perversions have crept in into many religions' traditions, perhaps the most serious of all being the notion that the Divine inhabits a totally inaccessible dimension separated from our daily experience and living. Many have benefited from this supposed impassable gulf: preachers, gurus, 'spiritual' organizations, as well as our very sense of self. As long as the Divine is 'out there', in a dimension beyond our experience, the status quo can be maintained. No real change can take place when religion or spirituality consists in the perpetuation of empty formulas and beliefs. One of the important aspects of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's utterances below is the compelling realization that the Divine, the uncreated Intelligence, pervades every aspect of life with its irresistible energy:

I the oblation; I the sacrifice; I the ancestral offering; I the (fire-giving) herb; the mantra I; also the butter; I the fire; the burnt-offering I; I the Father of this universe, the Mother, the Supporter, the Grandsire, the Holy One to be known, the Word of Power, and also the Rk, Sāman, and Yajus [Veda-s], the Path, Husband, Lord, Witness, Abode, Shelter, Lover, Origin, Dissolution, Foundation, Treasure-house, Seed imperishable.  
(*Bhagavadgītā*, IX:16-19)

This celebrated passage of one of the most cherished spiritual texts of all time indicates that, at a very deep level, there is no distinction between knowing, devotion and faith. The realization that every aspect of life is a manifestation of the Divine causes a veritable fusion between mind and heart, resulting in a perception that rises beyond the realm of differences to the Ground of reality and truth, the very cornerstone of existence. One of the many expressions of such experience is a deep and abiding reverence for all life.

The practical nature of an 'unveiled spiritual perception' has been affirmed by one of the Elder Brethren who inspired the formation of the Theosophical Society. His statement below, contained in a letter to A. P. Sinnett, shows how immediacy of understanding is a natural result of true spiritual progress:

Believe me, there comes a moment in the life of an adept, when the hardships he has passed through are a thousandfold rewarded. In order to acquire further knowledge, he has no more to go through a minute and slow process of investigation and comparison of various objects, but is accorded an instantaneous, implicit insight into every first truth.  
(*Mahatma Letters* no. 17, chronological edition)

The expression 'is accorded an instantaneous, implicit insight into every first truth' is worth considering carefully. First, such experience is 'accorded', that means, not taken but given to an extraordinarily receptive consciousness. The insight which is mentioned is 'instantaneous' and 'implicit', that is, not mediated by brain processes or conceptualizations, but direct, timeless, coming from the very depths of consciousness. Such insight penetrates 'into every first truth', those fundamental principles which lie at the core of manifestation. The Adept, in order to know, does not need to gather data or

information as we do. His direct perception goes at the very essence of any subject he needs to know. As the *Chandogya Upanishad* stated so poignantly, he ‘knows That which, once known, everything else is known.’

Perhaps the most important aspect of practical mysticism is compassion. The notion entertained by us that such a thing as ‘my life’ is real may be based on a terribly wrong assumption. When one looks carefully at life there is pretty little that we can call ‘mine’. Life is interaction and relationship at every level. What happens when you see someone with sadness written large on his or her face? Does not it become, at least momentarily, a part of your life? You may brush it aside and say that is not your business. But the truth of the experience is that for a fleeting moment the life of a fellow human being has entered yours. We probably respond to such moments with callousness or indifference, and usually explain them away in the hope that such explanation will cause that truth to go away. However, not all respond in that fashion:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Mark, 25:35-40)

What is the nature of a consciousness that is one with those who suffer, who are in need, who are sick, or in prison, or who have nothing? The same question could be asked about those who are experiencing oppression, torture, loneliness, which may include thousands of animals around the world, locked up in laboratories. Is there any difference between such consciousness and compassion? It may be easy to talk about compassion but to truly experience it is an altogether different reality. The teaching by Jesus to his disciples mentioned above dramatically shows the fundamental identity between oneness and compassion. They are one and the same.

The teachings of the mystics are essentially practical and of great relevance to the transformation of the human consciousness. Perhaps their most directly practical teaching is that what we consider to be our selfhood is indeed just an appearance, ‘a passing guest’, a mirage in the desert. They maintain that to live within this prison-house is not the real life and that when the heart and the mind are purged of all self-seeking and self-importance the ground becomes ready and right for the Divine to dwell therein. They say that without seeking anything they gained all and that the Divine gave of itself unreservedly in the depth of their mystical experiences. Some of them have said that the Divine is just boundless giving and that life, in each of its forms, is such giving.