

Seven Characteristics of Mystical Experiences

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Abstract: Drawing on classic studies by William James and F.C. Happold, as well as personal experience, this paper explores seven characteristics of mystical experiences: 1) ineffability (inability to capture the experience in ordinary language), 2) noetic quality (the notion that mystical experiences reveal an otherwise hidden or inaccessible knowledge), 3) transiency (the simple fact that mystical experiences last for a relatively brief period of time), 4) passivity (the sense that mystical experiences happen to someone; that they are somehow beyond the range of human volition and control), 5) unity of opposites (a sense of Oneness, Wholeness or Completeness), 6) timelessness (a sense that mystical experiences transcend time), and 7) a feeling that one has somehow encountered “the true self” (a sense that mystical experiences reveal the nature of our true, cosmic self: one that is beyond life and death, beyond difference and duality, and beyond ego and selfishness). To provide flesh to this skeletal structure, the paper: (i) explores connections between mysticism and meditation and (ii) presents a series of examples from secular poetry as well as Christianity, Islam, Daoism, Hinduism, and Tibetan Buddhism.

Personal Experience

It was the summer of '71. I graduated from high school and worked throughout the summer as a lifeguard at a country club. It was an excellent summer – the stuff of adolescent dreams and cheap B movies² – but now it was drawing to a close. I found myself walking slowly along a narrow dirt path in the densely wooded mountains of Eastern Kentucky, playing my well-worn 12-string guitar, and writing a song whose words and chords I have long since forgotten.

Suddenly, without warning, my life changed – the **world** changed – forever. In an unsolicited blinding flash – in a timeless, eternal moment that encompassed creation,

¹ © October, 2007 by Douglas W. Shrader. Presented at the Sixth Annual Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, January 2008, and published in the conference proceedings. Participation in the conference is supported in part by a Faculty Development Award. Sincere appreciation is extended to SUNY Oneonta, especially President Alan B. Donovan, Provost F. Daniel Larkin, and Dean Michael Merilan.

² My use of the term “excellent” in this sentence is intended to mirror the incessantly mindless but enthusiastic and sincere usage of the term by Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (Nelson Films, 1989).

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annihilation, and everything that falls between the two – I was stripped bare of all my preconceptions: preconceptions about myself, about the world, and about God.

As I write these words, thirty-six years later, that experience is as real, as vivid, and as unyielding as it was when I looked far more like the image on this page and far less like a middle-aged professor. It has shaped, informed, and provided both contours and color for every aspect of my life, every dimension of my being, every experience, every thought, every emotion, every moment of happiness, every hour of sorrow, every expectation, every hope, every doubt, and every disappointment: in short, every breath that I take.



Colleagues who have known me for a long time may be deeply and profoundly surprised by these opening remarks. That extraordinary experience on a late summer day in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky is always with me – closer, more reliable, and more important than the beating of my own heart – more essential to the person that I have become (and to the person that I am in the process of becoming) than my twenty-nine year career as a Professor of Philosophy, my relationships with students and friends, or even my marriage of thirty-two years to Barbara: the love of my life, my best friend, and soul mate. Yet it is not something of which I speak on a daily basis. In fact, it is something of which I almost never speak at all.

Ineffability and Noetic Quality

In his classic study of mysticism, published in 1902, William James identified two essential characteristics of a mystical experience:

1. **Ineffability** (inability to capture the experience in ordinary language).
2. **Noetic quality** (the notion that mystical experiences reveal an otherwise hidden or inaccessible knowledge).

To say that the experience is ineffable makes a two-fold claim: first, that it is in some sense beyond expression (that it is indescribable or unspeakable), and second, that expression is in some sense forbidden (that any attempt to do so would be unfaithful or untrue to the experience). In somewhat stronger terms, there are those who regard discussion of such an experience as not only unwise, but taboo; that these are things whereof one should not speak.

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Confronted with the task of speaking that which cannot be said, we will do well to remind ourselves of whatever meaning we can find. We begin with a fairly obvious source: *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

Mysticism *n.* **1.a.** A spiritual discipline aiming at union with the divine through deep meditation or trancelike contemplation. **b.** The expression of such communion, as described by mystics. **2.** Any belief in the existence of realities beyond perceptual or intellectual apprehension but central to being and directly accessible by intuition. **3.** Confused and groundless speculation; superstitious self-delusion.³

Mysticism is defined first and foremost as “a spiritual discipline aiming at union with the divine through deep meditation or trancelike contemplation.” Alternately, it is “the expression of such communion, as described by mystics.” An interesting alternate, is it not, given the supposed ineffability of such experiences?

Meaning #2 is less committal as regards experience, but more so as regards conceptual consent: “any belief in the existence of realities beyond perceptual or intellectual apprehension but central to being and directly accessible by intuition.”

And, lest we forget, the following usage is sufficiently widespread to warrant inclusion in the dictionary as meaning #3: “confused and groundless speculation; superstitious self-delusion.”

The etymology of the term “mysticism,” which parallels that of “mystery,” illustrates the historical centrality of James’ second characteristic: noetic quality. The term “mysticism” comes from the Latin *mysterium*, which in turn comes from a Greek term meaning “secret rites” (*musterion*). That term comes from *muein*, to initiate: to close the eyes or lips, hence to keep secret (as in religious initiation). Etymologically speaking, a mystic is a person who has been initiated into secret rites (Latin *mysticus*, from Greek *mustikos*, from *mustes*).

The root of terms like “mysticism” and “mystery” is *mu*, imitative of inarticulate sounds. Other familiar words derived from *mu* include *mumble*, *mutter*, *mum*, and *mute*.⁴ Those of you who have studied Zen Buddhism know that the Japanese term *mu* is a term of negation. It can mean “no,” but it can also mean: “Stop your jabbering; quiet your mind; unask the question.” As such, it has come to mean both “emptiness” (*śunyata*) and “enlightenment” (*nirvana*). Silence is golden; no matter what language you speak.

³ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (New College Edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980.

⁴ Cf. F.C. Hoppold, *Mysticism* (3rd edition). NY: Penguin Books, 1970: p. 18.

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Searching for Answers in a Sea of Doubt

To better understand the experience that I related in the opening section of this paper – including the manner in which it impacted my life and the sense I have tried to make of it over the years – it is important to know a few basics concerning my background. I was nurtured on the milk of Christianity. My parents took me to church and Sunday school on a weekly basis and I had genuinely tried, as best I could, to accept the teachings and doctrines I had learned in the process. I knew that religion was immensely important to my grandparents as well as my parents, but it never clicked on a personal level.

Searching for answers – as well as a deeper understanding of my family – I had read the Bible, cover to cover, not in isolated bits and pieces as is the case for most people. Despite a willing spirit and open mind, those answers were not forthcoming. The more I reflected on the matter, the more difficult it became to reconcile faith in God with the widespread, unwarranted, and undeserved suffering I found in the world. Like Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's novel, I was especially troubled by the suffering of innocent children.⁵ By the time I strolled along that narrow path in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, I had – in my adolescent rebellion – begun to identify more and more closely with Ivan Karamazov. Like Ivan, I was not entirely convinced that God did not exist, but I refused to accept the pain and suffering in the world that He had created. In short, not only was I not looking for a visit from God, I had taken in the welcome mat.

There are surely elements in my background that laid foundations for the experience. They may even have prepared me in some important sense. Even so, the experience itself was unsolicited, unexpected, and – in terms of occurrence, phenomenology, and content – intensely surprising.⁶ As odd as it may sound, the experience was both unsettling and reassuring.

Although I had never taken a class in Philosophy or Religious Studies, I had thought deeply about philosophical as well as religious topics. Even as it occurred, I tried desperately to make sense of the experience. Like a small boy trying on his father's clothes, nothing seemed to fit. I tried first one thing and then another. Many ideas and concepts that I expected to fit seemed totally inappropriate. Others fit in a loose, unmanageable manner (like a father's hat that sits on the child's head, but obscures his vision because it falls in front of his eyes). Eventually, having emptied my conceptual toolbox and exhausted my linguistic dictionary, I quit struggling. I surrendered to a

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880). See Douglas W. Shrader, *Philosophy and Religion*. NY: McGraw-Hill, 2003, pp. 126-134.

⁶ I deliberated for a half-hour before choosing the phrase “intensely surprising.” I hope this particular combination of words will sound as unfamiliar to you as it is to me. I hope it will also convey that the experience was intense, that it was surprising, that it caught me off guard, and that it was so beyond the range of the familiar that ordinary combinations of words cannot do justice to the occurrence or phenomenological aspects of the experience any more than they can capture the content. In fact, as I will explore in a subsequent section of this paper, even the simple claim that the experience had content (ineffable or otherwise) is problematic and potentially misleading.

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warm, loving presence which so totally engulfed me that the “me” that it engulfed was no longer separate from the experience.⁷

Any description that I could provide of the experience, once I surrendered, will be inadequate at best. Worse, my words are as likely to obscure and mislead as they are to inform and illuminate. Acutely aware of this problem of ineffability – long before I had learned the term or encountered James’ anatomy of a mystical experience – I made a silent promise to myself to keep the whole affair a closely guarded secret. The concern was not simply an intellectual one: I did not need a dictionary to tell me that my peers might regard the experience as “confused and groundless speculation” or “superstitious self-delusion.”⁸

That self-made promise notwithstanding, within hours of the experience I found myself talking with friends, employing every means that I could in a desperate attempt to convey that which I could not myself understand. They did not, as I had feared, question either my sanity or my sincerity. Rather, much to my amazement, the telling and retelling of the experience kindled a small spiritual revolution that began with the youth, and then spread to the adults as well.⁹

Whenever I spoke of the experience, I tried to be intellectually cautious and spiritually responsible. Whatever I offered with one hand, I took back with the other. I found myself incessantly repeating the following refrain: “It was like this, but not really. It was sort of like that, but not in the way that you might initially think.” Unfortunately, as I quickly learned, people heard what they wanted to hear and disregarded the rest. What I offered as fumbling, grossly inadequate descriptions became concretized in their minds as authoritative expressions of firsthand experience. Gradually I shied away from providing any description at all, drew nourishment from the experience that was – inexplicably and paradoxically – still with me, and began to explore the paths of contemplation and inward reflection.¹⁰

Vipassana

To illustrate the complex but crucial – and potentially instructive – connections between contemplation and mystical experience, we must pause for a meditative interlude. Our focus will be *vipassana*. *Vipassana* (literally “clear insight” meditation) is a common practice throughout the Buddhist world, occurring in many forms and variations. It is especially important to Tibetan Buddhism, a tradition to which I will return later in this

⁷ For this reason, I scrupulously avoid referring to the experience as “my experience.”

⁸ Meaning #3 of “mysticism” in the *The American Heritage Dictionary*, above.

⁹ See Thomas Allemang, “The Youth Movement” in *First United Methodist Church, Ashland, Kentucky: A Narrative of Growth, 1857-1973*. Huntington, WV: Commercial Printing Company, 1973: pp. 50-53.

¹⁰ Once again, word choice is problematic. To say that the experience was “still with me” implies an unwarranted exteriority. Saying that the experience was “still within” helps make my experiential link to inward contemplation transparent, but obscures the sense in which I remained engulfed by the experience.

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presentation. The basic premise underlying *vipassana* is simple: these minds are not our own. Oh, we may think they are: these are **my** thoughts, **my** ideas, **my** feelings, **my** hopes and aspirations. If so, Buddhism teaches, we are like the donkey who thinks it is his idea to carry the pack, the ox who believes he chooses to plough the field, or the rooster who believes he controls the rising of the sun. In truth, we are like children following sunbeams and shadows: first this way, then that. Over time, we come to regard them as *our* sunbeams and shadows. Even worse, we come to regard the sunbeams and shadows as ourselves: as who or what we are.

To loosen the grip of this illusion, to free our cognitive faculties so that we may engage in more advanced forms of meditation and contemplation, *vipassana* practice requires us to do but one simple thing: quiet the mind; do not chase the sunbeams and shadows, no matter how pretty or troubling they may be. Simply acknowledge and accept their presence; do not follow them.

Some forms of meditation require months, even years, of training. Some require a period of several hours, even days or longer, to achieve the effect. Not so with *vipassana*. I can teach students the basics in less time than it takes to change classes. In a brief, five-minute session, they experience the difficulty, the frightening underlying truth, and even some of the benefits of this practice. My instruction is as follows:

Sit up straight. Rest your hands lightly in your lap or on your knees. Do not close your eyes entirely, but let your lids relax so that the eyes become half-closed/half-open. Without moving your head, lower your gaze to approximately 30° below the horizon. Do not look at anything in particular. Do not think about anything in particular. Do not worry about anything in particular. As thoughts come to your mind, as they surely will, simply acknowledge them and let them pass. Do not follow them. Do not try to suppress them so as to have a blank mind. Simply observe and let them pass. So too with feelings or emotions. Acknowledge them for what they are. Accept their presence. Do not try to suppress them, but do not follow them. Let them pass.

We sit silently for five minutes. For some students, it seems like an eternity. They shift nervously in their seats, occasionally opening their eyes a bit wider or turning their head to see if anyone is looking at *them*. At the end of the allotted time, I instruct them to slowly open their eyes and gradually return to a consciousness of the room in which we sit. I ask:

So how do you feel? Rested? Relaxed? Calm? Energized? Centered? Focused? Do things look and feel a little differently than they did five minutes ago? Do you find yourself becoming acutely aware of details in this room that had heretofore escaped your attention? Are you perhaps more aware of – do you perhaps even feel more connected to – the people who occupy a space adjacent to your own? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you have caught a

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glimpse of the power of *vipassana*. In its simplest form, *vipassana* cries “timeout” to the stream of cognition and concern that constantly berates our being. In the quiet space that remains, one finds – not unconsciousness as some might suspect – but rather an inexplicably virginal – untapped, unused, unassuming, and unspoiled – abiding awareness.

“How can this be?” a student will sometimes ask. “I thought I knew my mind, but now I find the mind I thought I knew may not be mine at all. The self I thought I knew – the me identified with thoughts and feelings that float across a canvas of mind much like shadows across the wall of Plato’s cave – this self may not be real at all. More pointedly, this self (even if real) – which I took to be me – *is not me.*”

Given the cultural biases of Americans, one of the nice features of *vipassana* is that it is both unobtrusive and portable: it goes wherever you go. All you need is a reasonably quiet place: a tree, a bench, or a desk in a classroom before a test. With a little practice, even external noise will cease to be a barrier. In fact, with a bit more practice, you may find yourself going on *vipassana* walks (sometimes called “walking meditation”). It is an eminently practical practice. Students who engage in *vipassana* immediately before an exam find that their anxieties dissipate, their minds clear, their memories crystallize, and their ability to focus and concentrate on the task at hand improves their score far more than a last few minutes of desperate cramming.

Transiency and Passivity

Although there is much more to be said about insights available through meditation, it is time to return to the topic of mysticism.¹¹ At the beginning of this talk, I listed two characteristics of mystical experience: ineffability and noetic quality. We spoke briefly of ineffability: there is a sense in which mystical experience is beyond expression, and a second sense in which expression is in some sense forbidden (that any attempt to do so would be unfaithful or untrue). Were it not for a supposed noetic quality of the experience, the concept of ineffability – especially the second sense I have enumerated – would be nonsense. If mystical experiences had no content – or if all their content was inconsequential, ordinary, or otherwise accessible – ineffability would be, at most, a linguistic puzzle. As it is, however, many mystics agonize over the inability to conceptualize or express – even to themselves – what they regard as fundamental cosmic truths. William James wrote:

They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, full of significance and importance, all

¹¹ The inaugural issue of *Yoga and Meditation Now: An International Journal of Health and Wellness* (forthcoming) will include a summary of a paper that I presented to the Yoga and Meditation Society for the Scientific Study of Spirituality in September 2005: “Music, Mysticism, and Meditation.” In the current context, I can only hint at connections between two of the three.

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inarticulate though they may remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.¹²

These two characteristics (ineffability and noetic quality) he regarded as the principal, primary, perhaps even indispensable characteristics of the mystical. Even so, James identified two other qualities which are “less sharply marked, but ... usually found.”¹³

3. **Transiency** (the simple fact that mystical experiences last for a relatively brief period of time). James wrote:

Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.¹⁴

Although there is an important sense in which the encounter was timeless¹⁵ – and I was blissfully unaware of clock time – the experience that I related in the opening section of this paper transpired during a relatively brief period: perhaps a few minutes, an hour or two at most.

A far more striking example of transiency is provided by Werner Allen in his book *The Timeless Moment*:

It flashed up lightning-wise during a performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony at the Queen’s Hall, in the triumphant fast movement when ‘the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy’. The swiftly flowing continuity of the music was not interrupted, so that what T.S. Eliot calls ‘the intersection of the timeless moment’ must have slipped in between two demi-semi-quavers.¹⁶

4. **Passivity** (the sense that mystical experiences happen *to* someone; that they are somehow beyond the range of human volition and control). As James explained:

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic

¹² William James, “Mysticism” from Lectures XVI & XVII of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Reprinted, in part, in Douglas W. Shrader & Ashok K. Malhotra, *Pathways to Philosophy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996: p. 416.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Characteristic #6, below.

¹⁶ Happold, *op.cit.* p. 132.

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feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.¹⁷

I have already written about how the experience that engulfed me in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky was unsolicited and unexpected.¹⁸ In common parlance I might say “I had a mystical experience,” but phenomenologically speaking, it would be more accurate to say “A mystical experience had me” or – to extend the phrasing I have used earlier in this paper – “A mystical experience engulfed me.”

A British boy of fifteen recounted his experience¹⁹ as follows:

The thing happened one summer afternoon, on the school cricket field, while I was sitting on the grass, waiting my turn to bat. I was thinking about nothing in particular, merely enjoying the pleasures of midsummer idleness. Suddenly, and without warning, something invisible seemed to be drawn across the sky, transforming the world about me into a kind of tent of concentrated and enhanced significance. What had been merely an outside became an inside. The objective was somehow transformed into a completely subjective fact, which was experienced as ‘mine’, but on a level where the word had no meaning; for ‘I’ was no longer the familiar ego.²⁰

A Swiss writer, who was hiking with colleagues, began with a description of the circumstances, and then proceeded to recount an experience that clearly bears the marks of both transiency and passivity:

I was in perfect health: we were on our sixth day of tramping, and in good health. ... I felt neither hunger, nor thirst, and my state of mind was equally healthy. ...[A]ll at once I experienced a feeling, of being raised above myself, I felt the presence of God – I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it – as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. The throb of emotion was so violent that I could barely tell the boys to pass on and not wait for me. I then sat down on a stone, unable to stand any longer, and my eyes overflowed with tears. ... The state of ecstasy may have lasted four or five minutes, although it seemed at the time to last much longer. My comrades

¹⁷ James, *op. cit.* p. 416.

¹⁸ *Searching for Answers in a Sea of Doubt*, above.

¹⁹ Although I scrupulously avoid referring to the experience with which I began this paper as *my* experience, for the reasons given in note 7, finding parallel phrasing for other experiences would prove impractical, linguistically awkward, and intellectually presumptuous. Thus I will employ designations such as “his experience” or “her experience” as convenient, conventional, but non-prejudicial shorthand phrases; I do not know whether the British boy regarded the experience that he related as “his experience,” but the final two lines of the quote clearly establish an altered sense of ‘mine’ and ‘I’.

²⁰ Happold, *op. cit.* p. 130

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waited for me ten minutes at the cross of Barine, but I took about twenty-five or thirty minutes to join them.²¹

Unity of Opposites

In another classic study of mysticism, first published in 1963, F.C. Happold listed a total of seven characteristics of mystical experience. The first characteristic that he added to the four enumerated by James is:

5. **Unity of opposites** (a sense of Oneness, Wholeness or Completeness). As Happold expressed it:

A common characteristic of many mystical states is the presence of a *consciousness of the Oneness of everything*. ... In mystical experience the dilemma of duality is resolved. For to the mystic is given that unifying vision of the One in the All and the All in the One.²²

William Blake (1757-1827), the English mystic, poet, painter, and printmaker, captured this notion of “the One in the All and the All in the One” in four memorable lines:

To see the world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.²³

A few years later, Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) extended the reflection:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies;
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower – but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.²⁴

As clever as the lines composed by Blake and Tennyson may seem, neither the insight nor the example is new. Centuries before Blake and Tennyson, Meister Eckhart, a Dominican friar born in 1260 AD, mused:

²¹ William James, “Lecture III from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*” in Douglas W. Shrader, *Philosophy and Religion*. NY: McGraw-Hill, 2003: pp. 182-183.

²² Happold, *op. cit.* pp. 46-47.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 91.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

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The nearest thing one knows in God – for instance, if one could understand a flower as it has its being in God – this would be higher than the whole world.²⁵

Centuries before Meister Eckhart, the *Chhandogya Upanishad* taught that everything in the entire universe – heaven, earth, and beyond – is contained in a small space (*akasa*)²⁶ within the heart:

In this body, in this town of Spirit, there is a little house shaped like a lotus and in that house there is a little space... There is as much in that little space within the heart as there is in the whole world outside. Heaven, earth, fire, wind, sun, moon, lightning, stars; whatever is and whatever is not, everything is there. (8.1.1-3)²⁷

Earlier, in the section titled *Searching for Answers in a Sea of Doubt*, I wrote:

I surrendered to a warm, loving presence which so totally engulfed me that the “me” that it engulfed was no longer separate from the experience.

That simple one-sentence description employs two interrelated, but conceptually distinct, expressions of this fifth characteristic (unity of opposites). First, as long as I was trying to make sense of the experience through the concepts and vocabulary at my disposal, I was able to maintain the ordinary distinction between the experience and the subject. When I surrendered, and stopped trying to make sense of the experience, the distinction evaporated. Second, to be engulfed is not simply to be overwhelmed, overcome, or surrounded. It is to be swallowed up so completely as to obliterate any original lines of demarcation. That which had been an independently identifiable entity is absorbed into a larger whole. Its fate, its future – indeed, its very existence – is now inextricably intertwined with that of the whole.

Some of the most intransigent problems of ineffability are associated with this “unity of opposites.” Mystical experiences resist not only the language, but also the logic of ordinary experience. While it is important not to push the analogy too far, the problems are not altogether different from the ones we encounter when trying to describe – via ordinary language and logic – the nature of subatomic particles.

Although subatomic “particles” bear certain resemblances to macroscopic ones, there are marked differences as well. As demonstrated by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, a subatomic particle can have precise position (so long as it has indefinite momentum) – or it can have precise momentum (so long as it has indefinite position). Unlike a

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 93.

²⁶ For an exploration of the mystical dimensions of *akasa* in Indian thought, see S.G. Tulpule, “From Space to Spacelessness: Medieval Indian Mystics’ Concept of Akasa.” New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1995. Available online: <http://www.ignca.nic.in/ps_05013.htm>.

²⁷ Happold, *op. cit.* p. 106, cf. pp. 147-148.

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macroscopic particle, however, it cannot simultaneously have precise position and precise momentum. Even more mind-boggling, for many of my students, it does not have either in the absence of a measurement. By performing precise position measurements, we create precisely positioned subatomic particles. By performing precise momentum measurements, we create ones with precise momentum.

Because behavioral patterns of these enigmatic subatomic “particles” are orderly and predictable, philosophers and scientists accept – and to a certain extent even get used to – the mismatch between Quantum logic and the principles that govern macroscopic entities. In much the same way, although mystical experiences sound illogical and confusing when subjected to the standards of ordinary experience, there are patterns beneath the apparent chaos. Not only do individual experiences exhibit internal consistency, but there is a remarkable uniformity between experiences in terms of the challenges they present to the logic of non-mystical experience. Some of the most maddening ways in which many mystical experiences fail to play by the rules of normal logic revolve around questions of number.

The words in the passage quoted above (re surrendering to a warm, loving presence) were chosen with exceptional care, paying attention to subtle nuances as well as the more obvious meanings. Even so, I remain painfully aware of myriad ways in which those words are not only inadequate, but potentially misleading as well. I am reasonably satisfied with the way they express the two phenomena discussed in a previous paragraph, especially insofar as the phenomena relate to what Happold called “the dilemma of duality.”²⁸ Unfortunately, the words not only fail to illuminate, but actually conceal, a third example in this same category. The word that causes the most consternation is the smallest one in the entire sentence: “a.”

Because it speaks of “a” presence, the passage conveys a sense of singularity. Such is not entirely incorrect: I did, indeed, sense a singular, unitary presence and it was that to which I surrendered. The problem is that the overwhelming sense of presence²⁹ that dominated the experience was not simply that of “a” presence. There was also a clear experiential sense of a multitude, perhaps infinite in number. Ordinary dichotomous logic would reasonably ask an either/or question: “Well, which one was it: a singular presence or a multitude?” The logic of mystical experience answers in terms of both/and: “There was a sense of a singular, unitary presence and also a sense of a multitude.”³⁰ Then it gets

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 47.

²⁹ For additional examples of mystical experiences that were dominated by a sense of presence, see: (i) William James, “Lecture III from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*” (especially pp. 177-180 of Douglas W. Shrader, *Philosophy and Religion*) and (ii) F.C. Happold, *Mysticism*, p. 141.

³⁰ The logical turnaround is a nearly perfect 180° from the one involved in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Position and momentum are paired in a both/and relationship when it comes to macroscopic objects, but shift to either/or and neither/nor relationships for subatomic ones. Singular and plural are either/or relationships for ordinary experience, but frequently shift to both/and (or neither/nor) relationships in mystical experiences.

really weird, because the answer – which may have seemed reasonable to this point – continues: “It is also extremely important to note that, although there was a sense in which the multitude was distinct from the unity, there was also a sense of Wholeness in which the unity and multitude were One.”³¹

Timelessness

In a previous section titled *Transiency and Passivity*, I wrote: “there is an important sense in which the encounter was timeless – and I was blissfully unaware of clock time.” It is not uncommon to “lose track of time.” Such, by itself, does not constitute a mystical experience; nor does it challenge our conceptual understanding of space and time. For the mystic, however, the sense of timelessness is more radical and “illogical”³² than simply being “caught up in the moment.” This aspect of the experience is sufficiently common – and deviates from the framework of ordinary experience to a sufficient extent – to warrant enumeration as our sixth characteristic:

6. **Timelessness** (a sense that mystical experiences transcend time). Mystical experiences seem to occur beyond – in some sense: outside of – time (and, I would add, spatial limitation as well). They may even *reject* time and space as illusory. Happold wrote:

...the experiences of the mystics are not understandable unless one is prepared to accept that there may be an entirely different dimension from that of clock time or indeed of any other sort of time. For the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where “all is always now.”³³

Meister Eckhart spoke of three types of knowledge: sensible, rational, and a third kind that he described as:

...an exalted power of the soul, a power so high and noble it is able to see God face to face in his own self. This power ... knows no yesterday or day before, no morrow or day after (for in eternity there is no yesterday or tomorrow); there is only a present now; the happenings of a thousand years ago, a thousand years

³¹ It is interesting to note, in this context, that the opening chapter of the book of *Genesis* combines singular verbs with a plural noun: *Elohim* (the Creator(s) of the universe). Equally striking is the apparently intentional but, strictly speaking, illogical juxtaposition of plural and singular nouns and pronouns. Verse 26 begins: “Then Elohim said, ‘Let *us* make man in *our* own image, according to *our* likeness’” (Gen 1:26, italics added). The sentence that immediately follows this one states: “And Elohim created man in *His* own image, in the image of Elohim *He* created *him*; male and female *He* created *them*” (Gen 1:27, italics added).

³² See my reflections in *Unity of Opposites*, above, regarding the difficulties we encounter if we try to shoehorn mystical experiences into the same logical boxes and conceptual structures that we use for ordinary, everyday experiences.

³³ Happold, *op. cit.* p. 48.

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to come, are there in the present and the antipodes the same as here. (*Sermon XC*)³⁴

On another occasion he wrote:

The now wherein God made the world is as near this time as the now I am speaking in this moment, and the last day is as near this now as was yesterday. (*Sermon LXXXIV*)³⁵

Somewhat paradoxically, the mystical experience that I described earlier as timeless “in an important sense” can be separated into two discrete temporal segments. As I struggled to make sense of the experience, sorting through my conceptual toolbox and linguistic dictionary, there was an altered but nonetheless recognizable sense of duration and temporal succession (before/after). Upon surrender, those familiar temporal parameters dissolved so completely as to leave no trace.

I do not doubt that the two segments of the experience were temporally related just as I have described (first struggle, then surrender), but I have no basis to discern the duration of either. Even in the first segment, temporal sensation was unlike anything I had experienced previously. For want of a better description, time was simultaneously speeded up and slowed down. On the one hand, I seemed to have instantaneous access to every concept and term I had ever learned: there was no fumbling through my memory for a forgotten word or idea. On the other hand, this lightning-fast access was accompanied by a feeling that I could take as long as I wanted to examine every concept and term, to be sure it did not fit before I discarded it, or to set it aside to be reexamined whenever I so chose. There was no hurry: we had all the time in the world.

As noted above, ordinary perceptions of space – including size, distance, position, and separation – break down in similar fashion. Simone Weil (1909-1943) described the effect of saying the ‘Our Father’ in Greek while working in the vineyards:

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is a silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing the silence.³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 279.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 141-142.

The True Self

Having examined ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity, unity of opposites, and timelessness we come, at long last, to the seventh and final characteristic identified by James and Happold:

7. **A feeling that one has somehow encountered “the true self”** (a sense that mystical experiences reveal the nature of our true, cosmic self: one that is beyond life and death, beyond difference and duality, and beyond ego and selfishness). Consider, once again, my claims concerning *vipassana* meditation: by silently, dispassionately witnessing the flow of thoughts and emotions, you come to realize “I am not that.” Happold spoke of “the conviction that the phenomenal *ego* is not the real I.”³⁷ He wrote:

In man there is another self, the true Self, which is not affected by ordinary happenings and which gives him a sense of identity through numerous bodily and mental transformations. It does not change in the slow changes of the organism, in the flux of sensations, in the dissipation of ideas, or in the fading of memories.³⁸

In Hinduism, this feeling that one has encountered the true self is expressed in the idea that *ātman* (the individual self) and *Brahman* (the cosmic self: literally, the breath [*brah*] of the universe) are one and the same.

Christian mystics use somewhat different imagery. Some speak of the *spark of the soul* or the *ground of the spirit*. John Ruysbroeck, a Catholic mystic during the 13th and 14th centuries, explained:

...the spark of the soul ... is the inward and natural tendency of the soul towards its source. And here we receive the Holy Spirit, the Charity of God. By this inward tendency we are like the Holy Spirit; but in the act of receiving we become one spirit and one love with God.³⁹

Meister Eckhart put it this way:

For the power of the Holy Ghost seizes the very highest and purest, the spark of the soul, and carries it up in the flame of love... The soul-spark is conveyed aloft into its source and is absorbed into God and is identified with God and is the spiritual light of God.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 49.

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There is in the soul something which is above the soul, Divine, simple, a pure nothing; rather nameless than named, unknown than known... It is absolute and free from all names and all forms, just as God is free and absolute in Himself. It is higher than knowledge, higher than love, higher than grace. For in these there is still distinction. In this power God doth blossom and flourish with all his Godhead and the spirit flourisheth in God.⁴⁰

If you did not know better, you might have thought part of that quote came from the opening lines of the *Dao de Ching*, a short pithy text composed by an elusive sage known as *Laozi* nearly 2000 years before the birth of Meister Eckhart. Ashok K. Malhotra translates the opening lines as follows:

Words that describe Tao, do not capture the real Tao;
Names that represent Tao, do not express the eternal Tao.⁴¹

Like Eckhart's "rather nameless than named, unknown than known... absolute and free from all names and all forms," Laozi's lines are as succinct an expression of ineffability as you could ever wish. As concise and clear as Malhotra's lines may seem, the text he is translating is even terser and more abstruse. While Malhotra needs a total of thirteen different words to translate the two lines, the original packs its meaning into five pictographic characters, each of which can have multiple meanings. Whereas Malhotra utilizes ten words per line, Laozi economizes even further with six characters per line. To help the reader appreciate Laozi's compact, symmetrical structure, the lines that follow present first the pictographic characters, then the Chinese pronunciation (Pinyin), and finally a literal if overly simplistic translation that preserves a word-for-word relationship between Chinese and English terms.

道可道，非常道。
名可名，非常名。⁴²

Dào kě dào, fēi cháng dào.
Míng kě míng, fēi cháng míng.

Dao can dao, not true dao.
Name can name, not true name.⁴³

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Ashok K. Malhotra, *Wisdom of the Tao te Ching: The Code of a Spiritual Warrior*. Oneonta, NY: Oneonta Philosophy Studies, 2006: chapter 1.

⁴² Shuhai Wenyuan: *Classical Chinese Digital Database and Interactive Internet Worktable*, version 3.3. Brian Bruya (ed.). University of Hawai'i: January 2003. <<http://www.shuhai.hawaii.edu>> 22 October 2007.

⁴³ The character 可 (kě) conveys both possibility and suitability: both what can be done and what is appropriate or acceptable. More strongly, this second sense conveys an element of being worthy or fitting. We can approximate the weaker combination with the phrase "that will do" and the stronger one with "that

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Having denied the relationship between ordinary understanding and eternal reality, the opening chapter of the *Dao de Ching* continues:

The nameless is the source of heaven and earth;
The named is the source of all particular things.
Through desirelessness, the unnamed is experienced as oneness;
Through desire, the named is experienced as manifested things.
The nameless and the named are alike because they originate from the same source;
They are diverse because they are described differently;
Their ineffable source is a deep cosmic mystery;
One who comprehends this profound connection between the nameless and the named attains total wisdom.⁴⁴

The Mystic Copula – Part I: Union with God

Meister Eckhart wrote:

The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. God and I, we are one in knowledge. ... The eye with which I see God is the same as that with which he sees me.⁴⁵

John Ruysbroeck put it this way:

...all that is in God is God.

This eternal going out and this eternal life, which we have and are in God eternally, without ourselves, is the cause of our created being in time. And our created being abides in the Eternal Essence, and is one with it in its essential existence.⁴⁶

William Blake wrote:

To mount to God is to enter into one's self. For he who inwardly entereth and intimately penetrateth into himself gets above and beyond himself and truly mounts up to God.⁴⁷

One of the earliest Sufi poets, Baba Kuhi of Shiraz (d. 1050 AD), wrote:

will do quite nicely” or “that will do just fine.” In short, it is not simply a matter of what can be done, but what can be done well (in a fitting, appropriate, and worthy manner).

⁴⁴ Malhotra, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Happold, *op. cit.* p. 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 69.

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I oped mine eyes and by the light of His face around me
In all the eye discovered – only God I saw.
Like a candle I was melting in His fire:
Amidst the flames outflanking – only God I saw.
Myself with mine own eyes I saw most clearly,
But when I looked with God’s eyes – only God I saw.
I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,
And lo, I was the All-living – only God I saw.⁴⁸

A chronological contemporary of Baba Kuhi, albeit from a different religious tradition, spoke of a similar transformation. One of only three Eastern Orthodox saints to be accorded the title “Theologian,” Saint Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022) told the following story about a young man named George:

...a single divine ray shown right down on him and the room was full of light, and the young man ... stayed there in ecstasy, forgot his individual self, and found no walls or roof over his head, because he saw light on every side... He had no bodily cares or concerns of this world on his mind, but forgot the world and was wholly dissolved to become one with the divine light, so that it seemed to him that he was the light. ... And so it was in truth that love and the desire he had for God took him out of the world in the spirit, and he forgot the world and the flesh and all the vain business of this life and was translated wholly into God.⁴⁹

For Simeon, these words are not a simple poetic expression describing the experience of a single individual, but a vital truth that must be realized by all:

The soul cannot live unless it is ineffably and without confusion united to God, who is truly the life eternal.⁵⁰

The Mystic Copula – Part II: Purgation

The so-called *mystic copula* does not recognize geographic, cultural, or denominational boundaries. It occurs within all mystic traditions. If one is to take seriously the possibility of **union** with God, one must be prepared to affirm the possibility of attaining a spiritual state in which sentences such as “God and I are one” or even “I am God” are neither blasphemy nor metaphor. To achieve such a union, the mystic typically cultivates a path – not of exultation – but of purgation.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 251. Also see <<http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/K/KuhiofShiraz/Inmarketincl.htm>> accessed 28 October 2007.

⁴⁹ Happold, *op. cit.* pp. 226-227.

⁵⁰ *The Discourses*, pp. 182-184, Trans. C.J. de Catanzaro. Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980. Quoted from <<http://www.onelittleangel.com/wisdom/quotes/saint.asp?mc=300>> Accessed 29 October 2007.

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The Apostle Paul (1st century AD) wrote:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. (*Galatians 2:20*)

Saint Athanasius (c. 293-373), patriarch of Alexandria, summed up the matter in a truly memorable phrase:

God was made man in order that man might be made God.⁵¹

Saint John of the Cross (16th century) spoke of two nights of purgation: first of the senses, second of the spiritual part of the soul. Without these preliminary steps, he believed, it would be impossible to proceed to higher forms of contemplation. In a series of epigrams, reminiscent of the *Dao de Ching*, he wrote:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,
Desire to have pleasure in nothing.
In order to arrive at possessing everything,
Desire to possess nothing.
In order to arrive at being everywhere,
Desire to be nothing.
In order to arrive at knowing everything,
Desire to know nothing. ...
When the mind dwells upon anything,
Thou art ceasing to cast thyself upon the All.
For, in order to pass from the all to the All
Thou hast to deny thyself wholly in all.⁵²

Wm Blake posed the question:

“How can you take your soul to Him if you carry with you your soul [*i.e.* your consciousness of self]”?⁵³

I am reminded of a Sufi story about a religious devotee (described as a lover) who knocks at the door of the Divine Being (identified as ‘the Beloved’). The Beloved asks, ‘Who is there?’ ‘It is I’ replies the lover, only to be told ‘This house will not hold both Me and thee.’ So the lover goes away and weeps and prays in solitude. After a long time he

⁵¹ Happold, *op. cit.* p. 63.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 59.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 70.

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returns and knocks again. The Voice asks, 'Who is there?' This time the lover responds, 'It is Thou.' Immediately the door opens; lover and Beloved are united at last.⁵⁴

Inner Wisdom

Ironic as it may seem, mystics tell us that if we wish to find God, we must look within. The popular and enchanting Sufi poet, Mevlana Jala-e Din Rumi (1207-1273) wrote:

Your self is a copy made in the image of God. Seek in yourself all that you desire to know.⁵⁵

In the Gospel according to Luke, the Pharisees questioned Jesus as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered:

The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say 'Look, here *it is!*' or, 'There *it is!*' For behold, the kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17: 20-21)

The Eastern Orthodox Bishop of Nineveh, Saint Isaac the Syrian (7th century AD), painted a verbal portrait of the inner kingdom in terms that parallel those of the *Chhandogya Upanishad*:⁵⁶

The spiritual land of a man pure in soul is within him. The sun which shines in it is the light of the Holy Trinity. The air which its inhabitant breathes is the All-Holy Spirit. The life, joy, and gladness of that country is Christ, the Light of the Light – the Father. That is the Jerusalem or Kingdom of God hidden within us... Try to enter the cell within you, and you will see the heavenly cell. They are one and the same. By one entry you enter both. The ladder to the Heavenly Kingdom is within you. It is built mysteriously in your soul.⁵⁷

The English poet Robert Browning (1812-1899) put it this way:

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
There is an inmost center in us all,
Where truth abides in fullness; and around
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear perception – which is truth.

A baffling and perverting carnal mesh

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 97. cf. Sayings of Bayazid <www.naqshbandi.org/chain/6.htm>. Accessed 22 October 2007.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Quoted above, in the section titled *Unity of Opposites*.

⁵⁷ Happold, *op. cit.* pp. 223-224

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Blinds it and makes all error; and to *know*
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light,
Supposed to be without.⁵⁸

Rumi waxed poetic, but the meaning is unmistakable:

Ere there was a garden and vine and grape in the world
Our soul was intoxicated with immortal wine,
In the Baghdad of eternity we proudly were proclaiming, 'I am God.'⁵⁹

Deity Yoga

The brightly colored tapestries reproduced below, *tankas*, are some of the most readily identifiable, but least understood, symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. I acquired these from a monastery in China during the summer of 1999. Each *tanka*, I was assured, has been blessed by three lamas (Tibetan teachers or priests) to ensure auspicious results.



⁵⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 59-60.

⁵⁹ *Diwan, ibid.* p. 97.

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If the Tibetans are right, having been thrice blessed, these fabrics have been transformed into spiritual instruments uniquely suited to alleviate suffering and promote well-being among all sentient creatures. More importantly for our purposes here, tankas serve as meditative focal points for a practice known as “deity yoga.”

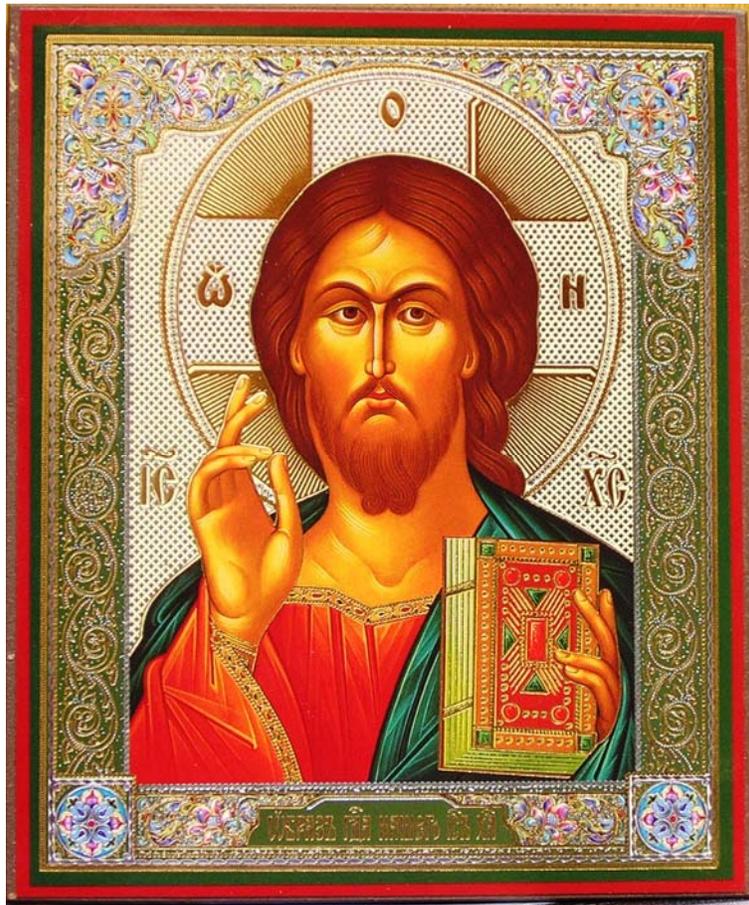
Because he was concerned far more with the alleviation of suffering than with worship or cultivation of intellectual belief, the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, ca. 563-483 BC) – represented in the tanka on the left – taught very little about gods or goddesses, neither denying their reality nor affirming their importance.⁶⁰ As a result, when Buddhism was transplanted – from the native soil of India to more distant lands – its proponents did not feel an overwhelming need to eradicate belief in whatever gods or goddesses the people might have. Some areas, such as Tibet, seemed populated with an especially large number of spiritual beings.

In deity yoga, the practitioner sits in a lotus position before a single tanka. He cleanses his mind with *vipassana* meditation, then begins to visualize himself as the physical incarnation of the divine being whose physical image hangs before him. To help maintain focus, he may chant a repetitive prayer. Much as Catholics do with a rosary, he may hold a *mala* (a string of beads) between his fingers to keep track of the prayer, including periodic variations. The initial goal of deity yoga is simply to become more like the divine being represented in the *tanka*. The ultimate goal, for the practitioner, is to bridge the gap between self and god. This may be expressed as becoming one with the divine being, becoming the divine being, or – perhaps most puzzling of all – recognizing that he already is, always has been and always will be, that being.

As one nurtured on the spiritual milk of the Christian tradition, it is hard for me not to hear an echo of the Apostle Paul’s voice: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (*Galatians* 2:20, above). I obtained the wooden image of Jesus reproduced on the following page from a cathedral in Russia, September 2003. A member of the Russian Orthodox Church who prays, “Dear God, let me be more like Jesus” – and who displays an icon such as this as a reminder of that ideal – already engages, I submit, in a form of worship not entirely dissimilar from the deity yoga of the Tibetan Buddhist.

⁶⁰ Although it is beyond the scope of this inquiry, I have examined the reasoning process by which the Buddha sidestepped issues such as this in three other venues: (i) Douglas W. Shrader, “The Logic of Negation in Early Greek and Buddhist Philosophy” in *Philosophies of Being and Mind: Ancient and Medieval*, James T. H. Martin (editor). Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1992: 87-102, (ii) Douglas W. Shrader, *The Logic Beneath the Caution: An Analysis of the Buddha's Responses to Questions about the Self*. Oneonta, NY: Oneonta Philosophy Studies, 1992, and (iii) Douglas W. Shrader, “Between Self and No-Self: Lessons from the *Majjhima Nikaya*,” Honolulu, HI: 41st Annual Conference of ASPAC (Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast), June 2007.

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Parting Thoughts

One of my favorite billboards stands at the intersection of two rural roads in North Carolina. Rising above the cornfields, the billboard is visible for several minutes before the motorist is able to make out the massive letters that dominate the white space:

Christ is the Answer.
You are the question.

A few minutes later, as the motorist closes the distance, somewhat smaller print explains:

Well, you asked for a sign!

An equally memorable billboard that I once spotted in Ohio featured a toll-free number to talk to the Virgin Mary.

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Because mystical experiences seem to bridge the distance from here to eternity, and because many are characterized by an apparent noetic quality (revelation of a secret or hidden knowledge), it may be tempting to regard them as cosmic billboards or phone calls from heaven. Having devoted thirty-six years to contemplation, meditation, reflection, and intensive study of metaphysics, epistemology, and religious traditions from every corner of the globe, past as well as present, I have learned a lot *about* mystical experiences. Even so, I am not sure that I actually understand the experience that engulfed me that late summer day any better than I did at age eighteen. It has shaped the person I have become, both personally and professionally, but intellectually speaking it remains an unfathomable mysterious experience.

The shared etymology of “mystical” and “mystery” is not a matter of simple linguistic coincidence, but a stark reminder that mystery is a core element of mystical experience. In fact, it is perhaps this irreducible mystery – more than any of the characteristics enumerated by James and Happold – that serves as the true mark of the mystical. Having been blessed with the experience I have described in this paper, I am more acutely aware of how very little we know about this vast universe in which we live. Perhaps, when all is said and done, that *is* the quintessential revelation of the mystics:

Whatever it is that you think you know, think again.

In the third section of this paper, *Searching for Answers in a Sea of Doubt*, I wrote about the intellectual struggles and rebellious attitude of a teenager who insisted, not only that the world should make sense, but also that it should conform to rational standards of distributive justice:

Searching for answers – as well as a deeper understanding of my family – I had read the Bible, cover to cover, not in isolated bits and pieces as is the case for most people. Despite a willing spirit and open mind, those answers were not forthcoming. The more I reflected on the matter, the more difficult it became to reconcile faith in God with the widespread, unwarranted, and undeserved suffering I found in the world. Like Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky’s novel, I was especially troubled by the suffering of innocent children.

As I grew into adulthood, I discovered the depths of my own ignorance: suffering is far deeper, far more widespread, and perhaps far more intractable than I could ever have imagined at eighteen. The *Book of Job* tells the story of a curious set of exchanges between God and Satan (the adversary).⁶¹ God describes Job as “a blameless and upright man, fearing God, and turning away from evil” (Job 1:7). Satan retorts that Job only fears God because God protects him and has granted him great wealth. Withdraw Job’s good

⁶¹ For an uncommonly insightful analysis of the story, along lines similar to the ones presented here, see John A. Houston, “The Trials of Job: A Personal Reflection on an Existential Problem” in *Self and Society*, edited by Douglas W. Shrader. NY: Global Scholarly Publications, 2004 (pp. 3-28).

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fortune, he challenges, and “he will surely curse Thee to Thy face” (Job 1:11). Incredibly, God agrees to the test. Within a matter of a few minutes, Job becomes destitute: he loses all his livestock, his servants, and even his children to two “natural” disasters as well as a pair of independent attacks by Sabeans and Chaldeans.

When Job fails to blame God, but continues to worship him instead, Satan taunts God: “Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. However, put forth Thy hand, now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse Thee to Thy face!” (Job 2:4-5). God then permits Satan to smite Job with “sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (Job 2:7). As he sits among the ashes, scraping the boils with a potsherd, his wife chastises him and even his friends are convinced that he must have sinned terribly to have been inflicted with so much suffering. They urge him to repent.

Job curses the day he was born and longs for death, but throughout the ordeal he maintains his righteousness. Because he does not understand the causes of his suffering, he portrays himself as having been wronged by God⁶² and wishes for an opportunity to plead his case:

Oh that I knew where I might find Him,
That I might come to His seat!
I would present my case before Him
And fill my mouth with arguments. (Job 23:3-4)

When God finally does answer Job “out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1), the exchange does not go as Job had planned. Confronted by divine power and majesty on the one hand, and the limitations of his own ability and understanding on the other, Job withdraws his complaint:

I have declared that which I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (Job 42:3)

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees You;
Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:5-6)

Answers provided by mystical experiences are not intellectual solutions, but existential dissolutions. God does not provide Job with a justification for his suffering, but what He does provide (a glimpse of His majesty and power) is enough. I am still troubled by the suffering of innocent children – so much so that I devote both time and energy to projects designed to reduce that suffering – but I no longer find that suffering to be a spiritual

⁶² See, for example, Job 19:6.

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barrier.⁶³ The more fully I surrender to the warm, loving presence that engulfed me along a mountain path thirty-six years ago, the more I find my intellectual angst giving way to peace, joy, and a far more practical question: How can I help?⁶⁴

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⁶³ Although there is not sufficient space to pursue the matter in this context, it is nonetheless worth noting that it was not a scientific discovery, but rather this problem of suffering that distanced Charles Darwin from the religious faith he held so dearly in his youth. See Douglas W. Shrader, “Religion in America: The Intelligent Design Controversy” in *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities*. Honolulu, HI: January 2007: pp. 4797-4834.

⁶⁴ After all, Job’s fortunes were not restored until he performed a selfless act: praying for his friends who had kindled God’s wrath by speaking falsely of Him as they tried to console Job. (Job 42:7-10)

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