

**Religious Philosophy and Praxis:  
An Introspection**

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### **13. Studies of mystical experiences - An opportunity or challenge?**

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#### **Abstract**

Researchers from the fields of psychology and anthropology tend to be fascinated by the empirical truth of mysticism, which looks at experiences as long as they are an aspect of human nature. The issue with this approach is that mystic experiences can sometimes go beyond what one would ordinarily experience. So, revolving around experiences based on empirical truth would not give justifiable results. Further, the diversity in religious beliefs, faith and experiences would not lead humanity to follow conventional research methodology and theoretical explanations in mystical studies. Finding meaning in mystical experiences would give temporary relief because the experiences ought to depend on other external factors. The differences in spirituality and religion further disconnects us from the ultimate aim of empirical examination of mystical experiences. The other factors, such as hallucinations and paranormal events present difficulties for research into the nature of mystical experiences. The use of external substances like psychedelic drugs to induce mystical experiences raises more questions about the reality-based approach to mysticism. The cognitive, affective, paranormal and transcendental dimensions in mystical studies raises a concern for the future opportunities that mystical studies might bring to its practitioners. As a result, once we start neglecting the epistemic databases of mystical experiences and instead focus upon the ontological opportunities of its applications, then the real objectives of mystical studies would be reached. Diverting

our attention on experiences and achievements of mystical features will lead us nowhere. Thus, in this paper it will be revealed that the study of mystical experiences is not an opportunity for mystical practitioners but a challenge because of many reasons. One such reason is the standard approach that will limit the practitioner's freedom of choice in the practice of mysticism, spirituality or religion.

#### **Paper**

##### **Introduction**

The major points of discussion in this paper are -

1. Nature of Mystic Experiences- In this paper, I seek to discuss the nature of mystic experiences while looking into the perspectives of non-theistic traditions of mysticism. This is an analysis of the perspectives raised by various western philosophers on the concepts of mystical experiences. Some raised the challenges that comes with the empirical studies of mystical experiences, while some look for the opportunity to establish a common ground. The point of the study is to eliminate all the biased or unbiased perspectives and conduct a fair analysis of mystical experiences on the basis of phenomenological reduction (where we suspend all assumptions to get the truthful experiences).
2. Understanding the role of experiencer and experiences- Mysticism is a subjective experience and thus relying on the "one-way to mysticism" is a foolishness to pursue the course of mysticism. So there is the need to understand the role of experiencer and their personal experiences, to not limit ourselves to any fixed patterns and judgments. For example, the meditative sessions might push and make us to create preparedness, but that won't lead to establish an experience unless subject is completely involved in the process.
3. Critical evaluation of the processes that objectifies certain mystical experiences as truth value. In case, a mystical process is directly leading to the goal of mysticism that is divine revelation then there is the need to cross examine and critically evaluate the process because that could be attempt to devoid us of our natural instincts to mysticism.
4. Incompatibility between various mystical experiences - The

present study would lead to several incompatibilities in the mystical experiences that for sure lead us to mark a difference between the objective experiences and subjective experiences in mysticism.

Before we begin with the analysis of mystical experiences, let's have a look at the various classifications that notes the differences in mystic traditions. For instance, the intrinsic and extrinsic forms of mysticism, the introvert and extrovert form of mysticism, the individual and personal form of mysticism, evolutionary and transcendental form of mysticism. The difference in intrinsic and extrinsic forms of mysticism advocates the fact that mystical experiences could either be channelized from the inner divine (ascent) or could be left entirely on the glory of divine manifestations (descent). The classification of mystics into extroverted and introverted forms further differentiates the mystical process by the object of external perception and the subject of inner emotions. Now coming to the deeper understanding of the nature of the practitioner, we are assured that mystical experiences are personal and the cumulative knowledge beyond human experiences is impossible. The personal and introverted forms of mystics fail to achieve the unitive mysticism (that includes the general opinion in mysticism). Further, the unitive mysticism forgets the solidarity of the mystical path and prevents one from looking into the truest reality of mystical experiences (that is beyond the dimensions of human). Let's now systematically look at the challenges that the studies of mystical experiences bring.

### **Challenges to the studies of mystical experiences**

Some of the challenges that the studies of mystic experiences bring are- subject related challenges, object related challenges, evidential challenges, challenges related to the absorption of individuality (that raises doubts for rational enquiry) and the role of memory images or mental contents (that affects the concept of mind in the understanding of mysticism). When the experiences of the individual is highly subjective there could be the loss of belief in the ultimate. There could also be the possibility of conferring a whole new meaning to the 'ultimate absolute' that would be entirely incompatible with the present definition. The present observation in

this regard is that mystics might have experiences the path in an "unique way" but their experiences of truth has remained one i.e., absolute. The object related challenges that have been visible in the practice of mysticism is the debate between rigid setups of mystic practice or choosing the practice at the comfort of home. These arguments might be misleading, but the subjective choices of individual couldn't be neglected because the absorption of individuality directs towards mental absorption. A study conducted by Bronkhorst, J., (2022) has revealed that the deeper concentration reduces or eliminates the mental associations, that allows one to avoid irrelevant sense impressions and mental noise. The awareness towards higher forces leads an individual to lose connections and association to the lower being, that could be quite challenging because the elevation of individual occurs mentally but physically an individual has to rely on social strata prevailing in current scenarios.

Let's have a look at some of other major challenges in the studies of mystical experiences -

1. Professor Jack. C. Carloy (1980), in his work "The truth of Mysticism" mentions mystical experiences as subjective experiences. The subjectivity puts challenges on the epistemic development of mysticism. The problem in identity, interpretation and evidence becomes visible in the notion of subjective or personal mystic experiences. This results in lack of uniformity in mystic experiences that adds further arguments for the reliability in the acceptance of certain mystic experiences.
2. The mentioning of "incomprehensibility" to "silent" in mystic approach is also questionable as the "silent" couldn't be identified, interpreted and made evidential.
3. Mystical experiences project a sense of unity or totality, a sense of timelessness, a sense of encountered reality of absoluteness, a sense of sacredness and the sense of beyond words or descriptions.
4. The other aspects of mystical experiences is that it is different from daily experiences. According to the professor M. I. Afaqui , mystic experiences are paradoxical (indescribable & incomprehensible) because "it is outside the range of ordinary human

consciousness” (Ordinary consciousness comprises physical sensations, abstract thought and reasoning process). However, Prof. R. M. Bucke manages to bring the nature of “Ordinary” in mystic experiences. According to him, the experience is personal or individual, if it is solely “my own”. On the other hand, if it is experienced by many individuals, then it could no longer be termed “a secret revelation” but becomes a kind of noetic experience where the objectives are accepted by all. It will become a kind of daily experience as mentioned earlier.

5. The mystic experience is ineffable- it is kind of immediate contact (Haydon, A. E., 1922) with reality and not verifiable from all perspectives. There is no evidence that the immediate contact to reality reveals truth.

6. According to the perspective of Tillich, religion and mystical perception is a-priori. Tillich mentions in his work “Dynamics of faith” that the difference in subjectivity and objectivity is conquered by the revelations of God as absolute, ultimate, unconditional, and infinite.

#### **From Challenges to Opportunity in Mystical experiences**

The a-priori view opens an opportunity to look into reality from ontological approach and not epistemological basis. Epistemology adds on to the data and mostly neglects the views that are new and contradictory. The ontology and metaphysics give a scope to challenge the preexisting data and add the “newness” instinctive to the theory. In Tillich “Genuine pragmatism”, Tillich mentions that knowledge of the ultimate power comes not from the “cosmological approach” rather from the “ontological approach”.

James’ brought the solution for the epistemic disadvantages in religious experience as well as mystical experience, and termed mystical experiences as epistemologically a-posteriori. He is guided by “faith” and mentions it in his work “The will to believe” as the starting point of mystical experiences that is later convertible to belief. James has categorized the mystical experiences that are non-communicable and inexpressible into distinct categories based on the meaning and nature. So William James mystical experiences are ineffable, noetic, anti-naturalistic, transient, passive, pantheistic and

optimistic. Since James was concerned about epistemic a-posteriori, his division of mystical experiences is not an end in itself, but a guideline to develop mystical experiences into a meaningful approach. However, the classification of mystical experiences into categories could fail to bring similarity or consensus to religion and mystical studies because classified mystical studies become authoritative.

However, James defended this fact by talking about the commonality and consensus views on mystical approach that ascertain the fact that mystical experiences reveal truth and it mostly follows the perspectival subjectivity. It means the individual thinking and conscience are not rejected in the course of accumulating mystical experiences into categories.

In the course of reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of the mystical experiences, it is important to highlight the theories that fails to give importance to mystical experiences.

1. The theory of naturalism rejects supernatural sources.
2. Psychological explanation, in terms of Sigmund Freud, tries to analyse experiences empirically that seems impossible for the experiences of dreams, hallucination and supernatural revelations.
3. Sociological explanation, in the sense of Emil Durkheim, focuses on two aspects- “how society is united?” and “what ties an individual to society?”. Based on the differences in mystical experiences, the common identity is not established and secondly, the solidarity in mystical experiences often disconnects an individual from society. Therefore, sociological explanations also tend to fail in gathering explanations for mystical experiences.
4. The mystic experience, in American Psychoanalyst Freud, is often mixed with other elements like sexual emotion or imagery or idolatry, and therefore, purely defining a mystic experience is a problem. It’s a challenge to distinguish between the mystic experiences and religious experiences. Religious experiences, according to C.D. Broad are inadequate to the facts, confusing, often filled with errors and nonsense terms, and subject to change in time. Mystical experiences deriving from religious terms are also filled with errors and based on the constraints of time.

So here we come to the conclusion that the classification of experiences (either mystic or spiritual) is stupidity. Because that classification is not static but varies with the passage of time. So focusing on the limitations of mystic experiences should not be our concern, but reaching out to a point of settlement should be our main objective. Gary Gutting, in mentioning experiences, points out that experience is not just individual occurring but universal occurring phenomenon. In order to study the experiences, we should identify with all perspectives and just relying on a single perspective is not enough. Experience is based on cultures, and so experience should produce a major transformation. A detailed speculation is must on the experiences that could aim at objective or opportunity for its studies and considerations. This detailed approach seems difficult on claiming the mystical truths. So instead of identifying the static aspects, the dynamic mysticism must be taken into consideration.

### **Conclusion**

The definition, nature, features, criteria, unique characteristics of mystical experiences have surfaced in both personal observations and other scientific discoveries. The applications of which have appeared in settings like meditation centers, rehabilitation units, hospitals, corporate policies, and personal lives. The compiling of mystical knowledge is of course giving us mystical dictionaries and latest trends to adopt the features of mystics for one's cause. However, the pressure of achieving certain mystical qualities in a certain way could deprive an individual of the freedom of gaining unique mystical experiences. This could force a person to undergo intensive and rigorous routines of meditation, yoga and prayer, that takes away the opportunities to discover pattern-free mystic knowledge. Positive mysticism allows a person to adopt mystic habits simultaneously with the general pattern of life. The ability that doesn't require extensive thought and consideration but is a natural inclination for the right pattern of life - the exercise of diaphragmatic breathing, regulating overthinking, controlling anger, and drawing inspiration from within. According to Bucke (1905), the evolution of the human mind from individual consciousness towards cosmic consciousness requires

intentional self-effort and conscious thought reflections. Adopting mystical experiences of others or following the prescribed mystical trends is challenging to achieve the customized path toward the development of higher self. Therefore, effort must be made to reach the individual calibrations and developments of intrinsically derived methods. However, this doesn't mean removal of the prescribed mystical approach. The prescriptions, in a way, could help to achieve the altered state of consciousness in a temporary way (sometimes drugs also work to achieve the temporary happiness in a higher state of consciousness). For a longer happiness in the elevated consciousness, a person must find the opportunity within. The external methods could be challenging to achieve the results in mystical path, and therefore only the intrinsically derived methods must be justifiably relied on. This results in mystic experiences that don't need any external justification by the means of empirical data. For instance, the destruction of ego for achieving the full awareness of truth is possible by the willful acceptance of the limitations of self. This is the process of self-actualization that seems to be truthful only by a consistent deliberate effort and skimming through multiple mystical opportunities.

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## **14. SHAD-DARSHANAS (SIX ORTHODOX INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS) AND GOD**

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### **Abstract**

Three important but related issues are discussed in the present research article. First, are the expressions 'Dharma' in Sanskrit and Marathi and 'Religion' in English, synonymous and thereby interchangeably substitutable for each other or do they have differential connotations? It is stated that they are not synonymous concepts. For English words 'Religion', derives its root from Latin 'religio', Greek word 'theos' and Latin word 'Deos' all refer to the concept of God. Whereas an expression 'Dharma' has different connotations in different contexts.

Second, I attempt to discuss another important question: whether the concept of God is an inevitable or indispensable concept in religion. Could religion be conceived without God? If not, why not? And if yes, how? In this context, it is stated that God is not an inevitable or indispensable concepts in it. For, although two important universal religions viz. Christianity, Islam and in many other existing religions, it seems to be so, there are at least three religions, two of them Buddhism and Jainism given by India to the world and Confucianism, a humanistic religion of China are the religions without God. Moreover, Hinduism, with its important concepts and doctrines, cannot be understood properly and independently of Indian