



MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Reading has always been a big part of my process. I read constantly and widely and am always exploring some avenue of my curiosity or seeing what I can learn from a particular author. In fact, if I'm not reading something I don't feel quite right inside!

Several years ago, my intellectual wanderings led me to an unexpected place: the mystics. Somehow, I came across a book called *Passage Meditation* by Eaknath Easwaran and discovered there some ideas that have absolutely captivated me. I have been stuck, as it were, in mystical thought for two or three years now. While I have always been spiritually inclined, I never felt quite comfortable with the modern manifestations of religion. With the mystics, I found that there was another way.

You see, the mystics universally report something incredible: that there is a type of conscious experience available to all of us that is not only completely different than our usual ego-driven mode, which is based on a sense of separateness, but also something spiritually sacred. This state goes by such names as "Nirvana," the "Kingdom of Heaven," "the Unitive state" and "Cosmic Consciousness." What's fascinating is

that there is this remarkable consistency in the way in which mystical writers describe this experience. It doesn't matter what culture or when in history or from what religious tradition; the description is the same. In the early 20th century, Dr. Richard Bucke noticed this and wrote an amazing book called *Cosmic Consciousness* that traces mystical experience across multiple religious traditions all over the world. Here's how he describes cosmic consciousness:

"Like a flash there is presented to his consciousness a clear conception (a vision) of the meaning and drift of the universe. He does not come to believe merely; but he sees and knows that the cosmos, which to the self-conscious mind seems made up of dead matter, is in fact far otherwise—is in very truth a living presence. He sees that instead of men being, as it were, patches of life scattered through an infinite sea of non-living substance, they are in reality specks of relative death in an infinite ocean of life. He sees that the life which is in man is eternal, as all life is eternal; that the soul of man is as immortal as God is; that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love, and that the happiness of every individual is in the long run absolutely certain."

Apparently, when you are in this state you experience reality as an interconnected network of mutuality and love. You see clearly that we are not separate as our ego's like to make us believe. You feel no anxiety nor fear. Instead, you feel content, calm and peaceful. It sounds incredible, right?

Since discovering this idea, I've been working to try to reach this state. I think maybe I've gotten close once or twice while meditating, working out or writing but I've never quite made it. Occasionally, I think about trying what's all the rage today: inducing mystical experience via psychedelics. Although the studies show pretty convincingly that these compounds can produce, physiologically at least, the same types of experience that the mystics report, something about that doesn't feel quite right. I'm content for now to keep working on it through more traditional spiritual practices.

The whole notion that there are other (higher) states of accessible consciousness is gaining credibility even in the scientific community. In fact, it's fast on its way to becoming big business. The authors of *Stealing Fire*, a work that explores this topic from a rational and scientific point of view, estimate that the "altered states economy" is already a \$4T a year industry. To be clear, they include things like alcohol, caffeine, and drugs in their calculation. Not exactly the stuff of mysticism. But isn't altered consciousness exactly what we are chasing when we use these things?

While *Stealing Fire* doesn't use spiritual vocabulary to describe altered states of consciousness, opting for the more scientific-sounding "non-ordinary states of consciousness," they acknowledge explicitly the immense contributions that spiritual seekers have brought to the field. The authors chose to ignore spirituality because they believe that they have found a neurobiological basis for everything that is happening. They argue that what happens in these moments of mystical experience is simply a matter of the pre-frontal cortex turning off, brain wave patterns changing and your system releasing powerful chemicals like dopamine, endorphins, serotonin and oxytocin. It's all a matter of cause and effect. If these certain neurobiological things happen, then necessarily you will experience what the mystics worked so hard to experience—"selflessness, timelessness, effortlessness and richness."

Is it really that simple though? I think not.

While, thus far, I haven't been able to directly experience cosmic consciousness, I have been making progress in my intellectual understanding of mystical wisdom. The best resource I've found is Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*. The book is a staggeringly genius work and one that I highly recommend. In it, Huxley systematically goes through all of

spiritual and religious thought in an attempt to offer a unified intellectual explanation for all mystical experience. Huxley, by the way, is someone who experimented regularly with psychedelics and reportedly asked for a dose of mescaline while on his death bed. Anyway, here's what he has to say about what he called the "unitive state":

"The divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual Absolute, ineffable in terms of discursive thought, but (in certain circumstances) susceptible of being directly experienced and realized by the human being.... The last end of man, the ultimate reason for human existence, is unitive knowledge of the divine Ground—the knowledge that can only come to those who are prepared to 'die to self' and so make room, as it were, for God."

Basically, he goes so far as to argue basically that whole point of life is to figure out how to experience the unitive state.

Huxley spends a long time in the book trying to explain why our language is essentially inadequate for describing mystical consciousness. For example, one of the things that is commonly reported by those who have had mystical experience is that the sense of duality, which dominates our normal subjective experience, disappears completely. So, concepts like hot and cold, pleasure and pain, good and evil don't appear to have relevance in this extra state of consciousness. That's why Huxley used the phrase "unitive state" in the first place.

For me, duality has always been a particularly troubling idea, mainly because I couldn't get past the problem of evil. I get that you need to have hot to have cold and sad to have happy but I've always wondered why the universe is structured such that something like evil is even possible? Why does that make any sense? What I'm learning from the mystics is that evil only manifests in the ego-dominated differentiated world of subjective experience as the necessary dualistic antipode to the good. It's essentially a function of our collective delusion and something that can be solved or overcome simply by elevating our consciousness to this higher level. While evil is something that cannot be destroyed really—as long as there is ego-sense in the world, there will be evil—it can be overcome. I've found the intellectual framework for duality not only helpful to my understanding but something to be hopeful and optimistic about.

The other morning I was reading a war memoir called *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo—I know, this is a big divergence from Meister Eckhart and Sri Ramakrishna but my reading takes me to all sorts of interesting places. Anyway, I came across some stunning language about the dualistic relationship between fear and courage that I think basically proves the existence of the unitive state. Philip Caputo writes

about what it feels like to sit inside a helicopter headed to a battle zone in Vietnam:

“Claustrophobia plagues him in the small space: the sense of being trapped and powerless in a machine is unbearable, and yet he has to bear it. Bearing it, he begins to feel a blind fury toward the forces that have made him powerless, but he has to control his fury until he is out of the helicopter and on the ground again. He yearns to be on the ground, but the desire is countered by the danger he knows is there. Yet, he is also attracted by the danger, for he knows he can overcome his fear only by facing it. His blind rage then begins to focus on the men who are the source of the danger—and of his fear. It concentrates inside him, and through some chemistry is transformed into a fierce resolve to fight until the danger ceases to exist. But this resolve, which is sometimes called courage, cannot be separated from the fear that has aroused it. Its very measure is the measure of that fear. It is, in fact, a powerful urge not to be afraid anymore,

to rid himself of fear by eliminating the source of it. This inner, emotional war produces a tension almost sexual in its intensity. It is too painful to endure for long. All a soldier can think about is the moment when he can escape his impotent confinement and release this tension. All other considerations, the rights and wrongs of what he is doing, the chances for victory or defeat in the battle, the battle’s purpose or lack of it, become so absurd as to be less than irrelevant. Nothing matters except the final, critical instant when he leaps out into the violent catharsis he both seeks and dreads.”

Caputo captures something here with this poetic description that is rather profound. It is fear itself that creates courage and what happens in the end is that the two come together in human action and basically cancel each other out. So emotionally, what the soldier is after here, without even really consciously knowing or intending it, is a kind of unitive consciousness. Powerful stuff. □

