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By

SWAMI PARAMANANDA

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YOGA AND THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICS

by *Swami Paramananda*

The origin of mysticism is to be found in the human heart, for it is the natural tendency of every living creature to try to unravel whatever is hidden from him. Being impelled by this tendency, some, braver than others, have been able to penetrate the depths of the Unseen, and such people are called Mystics. They use a language with which the world is not acquainted, they perceive truths which to them are more real than what we see in the external universe, but because these do not coincide with the experiences of everyday life, the common mind cannot comprehend their visions or understand their words, and therefore it looks upon them as mysterious. Anything that is out of the ordinary course of events is always so regarded, and it is for this reason that the things of the spiritual realm are believed to be so full of mystery. As it is said in the Bhagavad-Gita: "That which is night to all beings, therein the self-subjugated remains awake; and there where all beings are awake, that is night for the knower of Truth."

This shows the two poles of existence. The

spiritual plane, which to the wordly-minded is darkness, seems like bright daylight to the wise; while the sense plane, where ordinary mortals are awake and active, appears as dark night to the wise man who has realized the unreality and fleeting character of the sense world. If we recognize this and try to grasp the true meaning of what the highly evolved ones bring to us, we shall find that they are talking of another sphere of existence as yet unexplored by us. Each one of us possesses a certain understanding, but it is at present very limited; as our knowledge grows, however, perhaps the very things which now we cannot accept, because they seem unreal and impossible, will become realities to us.

Regarding the rise of mysticism, we cannot say it began at any particular period of history. Nor can we claim that it is the exclusive property of any one race or creed, for it is to be found everywhere, among all religions and nations; and if we could destroy the whole of existing knowledge and leave mankind stranded without the help of any past records, very soon we should see the struggle for Vision beginning afresh and man would again discover the same hidden truths. It is the inherent tendency of the human heart, which naturally seeks to penetrate and reveal what is obscure. We find Mystics among the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Hindus, the Sufis, the Neo-Platonists, as well as among the Christians.

Everywhere has been the same hunger for knowledge of the Final Reality towards which all life converges. As Prof. Royce says in his "Studies of Good and Evil"; "If you pass backwards from Eckhart, past Dionysius, past Plotinus, far beyond and before the Christian era, you find, as I have already said, in the very dawn of Hindoo thought, in the Upanishads, the same problem, with the same elements . . . already one conceives the world as the world of the Absolute Self." The Vedic sages define the Absolute as "the One God, hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the Absolute Self within all beings, watching over all our works, the Witness, the Perceiver, the Only One." (Svetasvatara-Upanishad.) "It is wise to confess that all things are one," the Greek Heraclitus declares; and Plotinus, the Neo-Platonist, writes: "Good is not external to anyone, but He is present with all things, though they are ignorant that He is so"; while a Sufi poet sings:

"I have put Duality away. I have seen the two
 worlds as one;
 One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call;
 He is the first, He is the last, He is the outward,
 He is the inward."

The effort to pierce the veil and come face to face with this One, has led men everywhere to evolve practical methods of spiritual development. In India these methods were systematized into a science known as *Yoga*, a Sanskrit term which means literally "union"

—union between the Absolute and the individual, between God and the worshipper, between man's higher and lower self: what is called by the Christian mystics the *Unio Mystica*, or the mystic union. "Now what is this union?" we read in the "Theologica Germanica." "It is that we should be of a truth purely, simply and wholly at one with the One Eternal will of God, or altogether without will, so that the created will should flow out into the Eternal Will, and be swallowed up and lost therein, so that the Eternal Will alone should do and leave undone in us." Or as it is said in the Mundaka-Upanishad: "The wise having reached Him, Who is omnipresent, devoted to Him, enter into Him wholly . . . The knower of the Highest Absolute becomes like Him and one with Him."

That there is no fundamental difference between the Mystics of the Occident and the Mystics of the Orient becomes more and more apparent as we study without bias; for in both we find the same intense yearning to reach the Ultimate, to solve the problem of the Invisible. All alike in their strivings are led to the same practice of discrimination, renunciation, concentration and contemplation, which constitute the basic principles of Yoga. The first step in the spiritual journey must always be to distinguish between the Real and the apparent; the second, to choose the Real and break away from the unreal; the result of this will be single-heartedness or

concentration on the Real, which inevitably leads to the habit of contemplation.

“When the interior and contemplative man has followed after his own eternal image,” the Flemish priest, John Ruysbroeck, writes, “he is illumined by divine truth and partakes anew every instant of the eternal birth; and by means of the light he enters into divine contemplation. And from this comes to pass a loving union, wherein above all else our eternal beatitude resides.” And Meister Eckhart declares: “When jointly are the faculties withdrawn from all their business, their objects all, then will this word be spoken. Hence it is said: ‘In the midst of silence was the secret word spoken unto me.’ The more thou art in trim all faculties to indraw and forget all things and all their forms that ever were received into thyself, the more thou dost forget the creature thus, so much the nearer art thou unto this, so much the readier for it.” For “Ignorance is destroyed by the unbroken practice of discrimination,” we read in Patanjali’s “Yoga Aphorisms.” “*Samadhi*, or God-Union, comes through concentration and the discrimination of the Real; while through meditation the Yogi’s vision becomes unobstructed from the atom to the Infinite.”

Thus we see that wherever a desire for spiritual vision arises, there is a natural impulse to indraw and concentrate the mind on things not visible to the senses. As the physical eyes close to external objects, the inner spiritual

eye opens—the eye which all the Mystics call the third eye—“that eye whose vision is clarified by Divine grace and by a holy life,” so we learn from Richard of St. Victor. “This eye enjoys the immediate discernment of unseen Truth, as the eye of the body sees sensible objects.” Or as Lord Krishna declares to Arjuna in the Bhagavad-Gita: “But with these eyes of thine thou canst not see Me. Behold I give thee Divine sight.”

The ideas of renunciation and contemplation are little in accord with our present over-active, acquisitive life; but if we value the effect as we find it in the Saints and great Seers, then we should not reject the cause. How, indeed, can we really honor and admire the result, if we are unwilling to accept the methods which the Yogis and Saints have employed to attain their sainthood? And there can be no doubt that they all practised rigid self-denial, as well as constant meditation, in order to subdue their lower nature and purify their vision. Everywhere, too, the methods employed are strikingly similar in nature. The idea of renunciation, so marked in the life of St. Francis, is not peculiarly Christian. Indian history is full of like examples of Yogis or men who renounced wealth, comfort, even throne, in order to gain God-union. To my mind, all Saints, whether Christian or non-Christian, are alike in their saintliness; there is no difference when the Absolute Union is reached. A saintly character is like a flower; wherever

he may be, he has the same fragrance, the same quality of radiating light and loveliness. Mysticism, it is true, has more often been identified with the East; but if we mean by mysticism spiritual vision transcending the limitation of the senses, it is not confined to the Eastern world, but is to be found wherever there is spiritual illumination.

That the East, however, and especially India, had a strong influence on the early Christian Mystics cannot be denied; for it is generally admitted that the so-called Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the most eminent of early Christian Mystics, and St. Augustine imbibed their "passion for the Absolute" as well as their methods from Plotinus, the great Neo-Platonist, who was an avowed student of Eastern thought. It is even recorded that he joined an expedition to Persia in order to study the philosophy of Persia and India. On his return he settled in Rome, where he preached asceticism and the joy of the contemplative life with such impressive eloquence that many among the hundreds of leading Romans, both men and women, who flocked daily to hear him, gave all their fortunes to the poor, set their slaves free and took up the life of renunciation, much as did later the followers of St. Francis.

It is only through one-pointedness of devotion and singleness of purpose that we are able to penetrate the mysteries of the unseen universe; and many of the Saints and Sages,

in attempting to do this, transcend the sense plane altogether and become so focused and united with the Spirit that the things of the material world cannot disturb them. "As happened to St. Paul," Meister Eckhart writes, "what time he said, 'Whether in the body I cannot tell; or whether out of the body I cannot tell. God knoweth.' Then had the spirit all the powers of the soul so altogether drawn into itself, that from him had the body disappeared. Then was the memory no more at work, nor reason, nor the senses; neither the faculty whose care it is to tend and guide the body; upgathered were life-fire and heat of life; hence did the body not decline away, though for three days he neither ate nor drank."

It is also told of Brother Bernard, in "The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi," that on one occasion, while he was assisting at Mass "with his whole mind uplifted unto God, he became so rapt and absorbed in God that when the Body of Christ was elevated, he saw nothing at all, nor kneeled him down, nor drew back his hood, as the others did; but without movement of his eyes, with gaze fast fixed, he stood from morning until Nones, not heeding aught; and after Nones returning to himself again, he went through the House crying with a voice of glad surprise." This shows that the state of *Samadhi* or super-consciousness, described in the Vedic Scriptures, is not peculiar to the Indo-Aryans, but

that wherever intensity of spiritual yearning lifts man above the limitations of the senses, he enjoys the ecstasy of a new consciousness, which is, as the Upanishads declare, "beyond mind and speech."

The Blessed Angela of Foligno dwells on the wonders of this state. Threefold is the transformation of the soul, she declares. The first is "when the soul uses all its endeavor to imitate the life of Christ, the second is when the soul is united to God and loves God, the which, however, it is able to explain and set forth in words. The third is when the soul is so entirely made one with God and God with it, that it knoweth and enjoyeth with God the most high things, the which cannot possibly be set forth in words nor imagined save by him who feeleth them."

The whole science of Yoga is directed towards the attainment of this state of super-consciousness or *Samadhi*, and it offers various methods by which it may be accomplished. Recognizing the great diversity in human nature, it lays down different paths for the varying constitutions of mankind. To the active it points the way through *Karma-Yoga* or realization by means of selfless performance of duty; *Raja-Yoga* shows how the same end may be gained through the subjugation of bodily passions and the practice of concentration and meditation; those of strongly intellectual and philosophic tendencies are led by *Jnana-Yoga* or the path of right

discrimination; while *Bhakti-Yoga* teaches how through whole-hearted devotion one may attain God-Union. Whichever of these methods a man chooses, however, he must in some measure practise all, if he would attain the state of beatitude enjoyed by the Mystics.

But, we may ask, why should we not be satisfied with our present state of consciousness; why should we care to develop any other? The Yogis reply that until man has gone beyond the three ordinary states of consciousness,—sleeping, dreaming and waking—and reached the fourth state, he cannot be free from error; and so long as he blunders, he must suffer. In the state of superconsciousness he has all the strength of the other three states and something more; for he transcends the limits of the body, mind and senses and finds that which satisfies his soul. In order to taste this superconscious joy, however, we must as St. Paul says, “look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” And the Unseen can only be perceived through the power of meditation. “That supreme happiness, which belongs to a mind which by deep meditation has been washed clean from all impurity and has entered within its Divine nature,” we are told in the Maitrayana-Brahmana-Upanishad, “cannot be described here by words, it can be felt by the inward power only.”

In the same Upanishad we read: "Water in water, fire in fire, ether in ether, no one can distinguish them; likewise a man, whose mind has entered into such union with the Supreme that it cannot be distinguished from Him, attains freedom"; a verse which finds its echo centuries later in these words of St. Bernard: "As a drop of water poured into wine loses itself and takes the color and flavor of wine; or as a bar of iron heated red-hot becomes like fire itself, forgetting its own nature; so in the Saints all human affections melt away, by some unspeakable transmutation, into the Will of God."

Thus it is obvious that this higher state of consciousness has been known in all ages. Vedic Seers, Greek Philosophers, Mohammedan Saints and Christian Mystics have all alike experienced its transcendental, beatific joys. The reality of this consciousness was most forcibly illustrated in our own time by the great Seer and Mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, who lived in India during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It is known that he attained the highest state of *Samadhi* or God-consciousness, in which he forgot his bodily existence altogether and remained absolutely united with his Ideal, Whom he called the Divine Mother. As he communed with his Mother in the hours of superconscious illumination, he came to realize that the Infinite Spirit, Whom he worshipped as the Mother of the universe, was no other than the One

Whom the Christians invoke as Father in Heaven, the Mohammedans as Allah, the Jews as Jehovah, the Zoroastrians as Ahura-Mazda. And he declared: "Many are the names of God, and infinite the forms that lead us to know Him. Common man in ignorance says: 'My religion is the only one, my religion is the best'; but when his heart is illumined by true knowledge, he realizes that above all these wars of creeds and sects presides the One, Invisible, Eternal Deity."

Although practically without education, knowing little of history or geography, yet by finding within himself that Truth which is the common birthright of all mankind, he gained a universal understanding and a catholicity of vision which has rarely been equalled. Having himself attained union with the Supreme Spirit, he realized his union with every human heart and the union of all human hearts with the Absolute.

When spirituality becomes vital, then the world produces Saints and Sages, who make God a reality to us. But when material advancement is the aim of existence, men are swept by desire for things of this life only. Then the lives of the Saints grow more mysterious and their words lose all weight. Let us hope and pray that we may again revive the visions of these Mystics and experience for ourselves the joys of the contemplative life and of God-Union.

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