

Mysticism in the Indian Tradition of Yoga

Through intense, deep meditation you reach a state that is beyond thought, beyond change, beyond imagination, beyond differences and duality. Once you can stay in that state for a while and come out of it without losing any of it, then the inner divine love will begin to pour through you. You will not see people as different, separate individuals. You will see your own Self in everyone around you. Then the flow of love from within you will be constant and unbroken.

❧ Swami Mukṭānanda

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In my previous paper on mysticism, the term was defined as ‘an individual’s direct experience of communion with a perceived transcendent principle (“MORE”), the methods used to reach that experience, and the knowledge such an experience brings’. Given this definition, the Indian religious tradition claims for itself an ancient and rich mystical tradition. In its Hindu aspect, the name this tradition gives to the transcendent principle in question is usually *Brahman*. In the earliest, Vedic strata of Hindu religion, this term meant ‘the power of sound inherent in the mantras of the *yajña* (sacrifice)’. (Hopkins) The *yajña* was a rite that was believed to nourish and maintain the universal forces represented by the gods (*devas*) and thereby continually recreate and hold the universe together. Hence, in the Upanishadic period of philosophical speculation (700-100 BCE) *Brahman* came to be seen as the substratum of the universe itself, an omnipresent ground of all being. *Brahman* might be conceptualised as the screen upon which the movie of the world plays out. Just as we do not notice the screen *per se* when we watch a movie—though our experience would be impossible without it—in the same way *Brahman* is so all-pervasive we are not generally conscious of its existence.

Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.12 says:

It is like this. When a chunk of salt is thrown in water, it dissolves into that very water, and it cannot be picked up in any way. Yet, from whichever place one may take a sip, the salt is there! In the same way this Immense Being has no limit or boundary, and is a single mass of perception. (Olivelle 30)

As can be seen from this passage, *Brahman* is ascribed characteristics of being and consciousness (the latter implied by ‘perception’). The texts specify that all things have their root in *Brahman*, the supreme cause (Olivelle 152). Therefore, while it is not a

deity in any traditional sense, *Brahman* is attributed consciousness—though of a pure, undifferentiated, objectless kind—in order to explain human consciousness. Later Vedāntin schools also ascribed the characteristic of bliss (*ānanda*) to the essential nature of Brahman. Thus, Brahman may be seen as a conscious force, a blissful wellspring of being to which all things have a contingent relationship.

The real revolution of the Upaniṣadic era, however, was the revelation that the self (*ātman*) of man was in some sense united with Brahman, that divine, all-powerful force.

If a man knows ‘I am *Brahman*’ in this way, he becomes this whole world. Not even the gods are able to prevent it, for he becomes their very self. So when a man venerates another deity, thinking, ‘He is one, I am another’, he does not understand. (Bṛhad. Up. 1.4.10, Olivelle 15)

This development of thought can be charted in the textual tradition, particularly because Upaniṣadic texts were compiled over the course of several generations. We see the same passage that is quoted at the top of this page repeated later in the Upaniṣad, but with ‘Immense Being’ replaced by ‘the Self’. Clearly, if *ātman* is identified with *Brahman*, then the logical conclusion is that the Self is in all things, and all things in the Self (Olivelle 70). The capital ‘S’ here is meant to indicate that the ‘Self’ that is assimilated to Brahman is not the everyday phenomenal self (i.e. the mind/body), but rather that aspect of the human being that is qualitatively similar to the transcendent principle of Brahman—that is, the undifferentiated conscious awareness, the inner sense of pure being which humans are capable of experiencing in the primary Hindu mystical practice: meditative absorption, or *samādhi*.

A related but philosophically distinct school of Indian thought also has its roots in the Upaniṣads. In Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad we read:

Two birds, companions and friends, nestle on the very same tree. One of them eats a tasty fig; the other, not eating, looks on. (3.1.1, Olivelle 274)

Here we see a very early expression of the dualist school that sees man as a dual entity of mind-stuff (*prakṛti*) and pure spirit (*puruṣa*). The tree is the body; the first bird, the enjoyer of sense pleasures, i.e. the phenomenal self; the second bird, the eternal

witness (*sākṣin*), the pure conscious knower of all cognition and experience.¹ In this school of thought, the goal is not union with the Absolute or God, but realisation of our true nature as *puruṣa*, and isolation or separation of that spirit from the mind/body field. Here the transcendent principle with which one communes is not an external reality in any way, but rather the highest rarefied essence of our own being—of which many live unaware, but which is, nevertheless, the *source* of our self-awareness, unbounded and free.

Each of the two mystical philosophies outlined above proposes different means to reach their goals, such as devotion or knowledge, but both share at least one method in common: the practice of *yoga*.

Yoga probably has its earliest roots in the indigenous shamanic practices of South Asia, but it acquired the form with which we are familiar in the textual tradition through the great Aryan/Dravidian cultural synthesis.² Yoga enters the textual tradition in the later part of the Upaniṣadic era (c. 200 BCE). The word *yoga* comes from the verbal root *√yuj*, to yoke or join, and we can see the connection, and hence the derivation, clearly in Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 2.9:

A wise man should keep his mind vigilantly under control, just as he would that wagon yoked to unruly horses. (Olivelle 256)

I follow van Buitenen in taking the word ‘yoga’ to mean ‘discipline’, or more accurately ‘a disciplined spiritual practice with specific means and a specific goal’. (van Buitenen 18) Yoga implies the joining of one’s mind to such an effort. The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad gives an early description of a rudimentary yogic practice, consisting of proper posture (‘he keeps the body straight, with the three sections erect’), breathing (‘compressing his breaths in here and curbing his movements’), and withdrawal of the senses from the sense-objects (‘[he] draws the senses together with the mind into his heart’). (Olivelle 255-6) This kind of disciplined practice, of which the full details are not yet elaborated or not revealed in the text, is said to lead to the ultimate goal of ‘full

¹ Paul Muller-Ortega, *Classical Yoga Traditions of India* classroom lectures, Spring 1999.

² This is the complex cultural assimilation of autochthonous peoples and migrating Indo-European tribes that produced the category we call ‘Hinduism’ and Hindu culture generally of the last two to three millennia.

manifestation in Brahman'. A man who has attained this goal 'is freed from all fetters, because he has known God'. (Olivelle 256) The Kaṭha Upaniṣad, from the same period, also recommends control of the mind through discipline of the senses (Olivelle 239). It would seem that the practice being described here results in a kind of deautomatization, as suggested by Arthur Deikman. By controlling the mind, and turning its attention within through one-pointed focus (*ekāgratā*), 'the active intellectual style is replaced by a receptive perceptual mode'. (Deikman 248) This understanding is confirmed by the texts, which characterise Brahman as 'this self here which perceives everything' (Olivelle 33) and 'a single mass of perception' (Olivelle 30).

As we have seen, the Upaniṣadic era of Indian spirituality was not characterised by a monolithic philosophical tradition. The texts show several different incipient philosophies from different Vedic *śākhās* or schools. One such difference has already been noted above, between the viewpoint that the goal is realisation of the union of the Self and *Brahman*, and the viewpoint that the goal is realisation of one's true nature as *puruṣa* (spirit) and total separation of *puruṣa* from the material world (*prakṛti*). It is the latter perspective that informs the yoga philosophy of the classical era.

By the time of the classical period in India (c. 100-500 CE), there were six dominant schools of philosophy (*śaḍ-darśanas*). These were Logic & Atomism, Vedic Exegesis & Upaniṣadic Non-dualism, and Enumeration & Yoga. The school of Yoga was a refinement and systematic elaboration, both in philosophy and practice, of the earliest forms appearing in the Upaniṣads. The exponent of classical Yoga, who influenced almost all the later diverse forms to some degree, was Patañjali, author of the *Yoga-Sūtra* (lit., 'Aphorisms on Yoga', c. 250 CE). The Yogasūtra text delineated both the philosophical backdrop of classical yoga and gave specific practical details on the nature of yogic praxis. Patañjali's brand of yoga, as elaborated in the text, came to be known as Rāja-yoga ('kingly yoga') or Aṣṭāṅga-yoga, 'the eight-limbed yoga', on account of its eight stages. Patañjali was a dualist in the sense that he proposed a duality between spirit and matter. Interestingly, all psychological aspects of man (mind, intellect, ego) are categorised as matter. Only the pure contentless consciousness of the

witness (*sākṣin*), the knower—the true essence of our very own being—belongs on the side of spirit. The locus of human consciousness is situated here; it cannot be in the mind, or we would not be able to observe the mind.³ We are the one who knows the mind, and perceives its motions. ‘By what means can one perceive the perceiver?’ ask the texts (Olivelle 30). It cannot be perceived, but only *felt* through direct (deautomatized) experience.

Patañjali’s meditation is an introvertive or ‘trophotropic’ kind of mysticism. Through successive stages of *samādhi*, or ‘absorption’, the subject moves deeper through the layers of his own consciousness, in a kind of ‘involution’ process. The first stage is *savitarka samādhi*, which is the simple contemplation of a physical object and all the words, ideas, and knowledge associated with it. Then one moves on to *nirvitarka samādhi*, in which the same object is contemplated in a non-discursive mode, as the ‘thing-in-itself’. In this state, it is said that ‘the object alone shines forth’; all thoughts *about* the object fall away (Yogasūtra 1.43). The third and fourth stages mirror the first and second, but with a non-physical object of contemplation (*savicāra* and *nirvicāra samādhis*). Ultimately, through a prolonged practice, one reaches a state of continuous and absolute mental focus on the object, and one forgets even oneself. The object alone exists. This is meditation (*dhyāna*—Yogasūtra 3.3). When this stage is achieved, the aspirant is ready to move on to the final stage: that of seedless concentration (*asamprajñāta samādhi*). In this state, meditation has no object at all. It is the highest state because it is absolutely pure, contentless consciousness: the state of spirit (*puruṣa*) itself.

Thus we see in Patañjali a process which Robert Forman describes as ‘forgetting’. The term is drawn from the medieval Christian text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which advises the practitioner to ‘forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them, so that thy thought or thy desire be not directed or stretched to any of them’. (Deikman 240) While I am not arguing that Patañjali and the *Cloud* are describing the same thing, they both assert that by focusing thought inward, and ‘suppressing the

³ Paul Muller-Ortega, op. cit.

modifications of the mind’ (Yogasūtra 1.2), a radically different form of consciousness occurs, one independent of sensual stimuli.

The Upaniṣads describe this state of being ‘embraced by the Self’:

Here a father is not a father...gods are not gods...Here an outcaste is not an outcaste...and an ascetic is not an ascetic. Neither the good nor the bad follow him, for he has now passed beyond all sorrows of the heart. Now, he does not see anything here; but...he is quite capable of seeing, for it is impossible for the seer to lose his capacity to see, for it is indestructible. But **there isn’t a second reality here that he could see as something distinct and separate from himself**. Clearly, this is the aspect of his...which is free from desires and far from sorrows. (Bṛhad. Up. 4.3.22, 23, 21)

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MUKTĀNANDA: NEO-HINDU FUSION IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

Thus we reach a point at which we can discuss the quote at the beginning of the paper. Swami Mukṭānanda (c.1905—1982) was a popular Indian guru and a prolific author, writing primarily about the mystical experiences attained through meditation and other Hindu religious practices. In his youth, he studied at a traditional south Indian *āśrama*, a school of a guru, where he learned the principles of Vedānta and yoga practice. By travelling the sub-continent, he later became thoroughly acquainted with devotional literature and practice, the alchemical Haṭhayoga tradition, and finally with Tantric philosophy, primarily through study of the non-dual Śaivism of Kashmir. His philosophical writings may be understood as a fusion of these various strands of Indian religion. Mukṭānanda attempts to reconcile the different schools of thought discussed above, often by combining the practice of one with the philosophy of another. For example, he combines the yogic practice prescribed by Patañjali with the philosophical ideas of the ‘union-with-God’ devotionalists. In this he is not diverging from his tradition; earlier, the great philosopher of the 9th century, Śaṅkara, attempted to weld the diverse speculations of the Upaniṣads into a single coherent theology.

Clearly, the introvertive mystical forms which have been discussed are in evidence in the Mukṭānanda’s quotation presented at the top of page one. Meditation is said to engender a state ‘beyond thought, beyond change, beyond imagination, beyond differences and duality’. By examining Mukṭānanda’s religio-cultural context in some detail, we are now in a position to realise that these are characteristics *only* of Brahman,

the transcendent principle which for us defines an experience as mystical. Mukṭānanda prefers the term ‘Self’, which is of course equivalent, due to the ātman=Brahman equation which has been the dominant leitmotif of Indian mystical thought for 2600 years. Note also the remarkable similarity between the state Mukṭānanda’s words identify (through *via negativa*) and that which is described by the quote on page 6, written millennia earlier. An additional element has been added by Mukṭānanda, that of ‘inner divine love’. Here we see the surfacing of the devotional tradition’s persistent assertion that the nature of the absolute (i.e. *Brahman*) is supreme bliss (*paramānanda*), in the face of the philosophical schools’ trepidation about applying any predicates whatever to the absolute.

Mysticism appears as the core of Mukṭānanda’s philosophy. The goal of the spiritual practice advocated by him is ‘to unfold fully the God-consciousness which lies hidden in all human beings’. (Mukṭānanda, *Secret*, 2) The flowering of the Indian mystical tradition took place in the medieval era, and went by the name of *Tantra* (lit., ‘loom’, i.e. that on which the fabric of reality is woven). Here we see one of the most complex, systematic, and elaborately articulated mystical philosophy of the world’s religions—one that presupposes knowledge of over a hundred technical terms unique to it. The central tenets of Tantra include the ideas of *kuṇḍalinī*, the divine energy within man, identified with the Goddess; *śaktipāta*, the awakening and unfolding of that energy through a series of spiritual centres called *cakras* (part of a complex subtle physiology); and *mokṣa*, the final release from conditioned reality through the merging of *kuṇḍalinī* into the highest spiritual centre, the *sahasrāra* (the location of the ātman in the crown of the head). The tantric philosophy of ‘Kashmir’ (i.e. Trika) Śaivism had a deep impact on Mukṭānanda, and the experiential model just outlined is presupposed in his spiritual discourse.

(Mukṭānanda, *Secret*, 9-17)

Tantric philosophy is non-dualist, meaning in this sense that it postulates an essential unity between human and God, and by extension between the souls of all humans. Hence, Mukṭānanda can say that as a result of mystical (meditative) experience, ‘you will not see people as different, separate individuals... You will see your own Self in

everyone around you.’ Here we also see a correspondence with the earlier Upaniṣads, which assert ‘when one has reflected and concentrated on one’s Self, one knows this whole world’. (Olivelle 70)

Even in the modern syncretistic era, the Hindu religious tradition is absolutely primary for virtually any Indian spiritual preceptor. In fact, a Hindu guru like Mukṭānanda specifically does *not* seek to create new teachings. Such an undertaking would be regarded suspiciously by most Hindus, who are convinced that all truth was expounded in the Vedas at the beginning of time. Hence, Mukṭānanda states: ‘...Yoga is the same as it was thousands of years ago at the creation of the universe.’ (Mukṭānanda, *Secret*, 2) For the Indian religious tradition, ‘creativity’ in teaching consists in innovation over the familiar, of re-presenting the eternal truths in a fresh and contemporary way.

Three means of knowledge are given virtually equal weight in Indian epistemology: direct perception (*pratyakṣa*), logical inference (*anumāna*), and the words of the scriptures and of the guru (*āgama*).⁴ The latter demonstrates the importance of tradition to the Indian religious practitioner. The importance of religious tradition to mysticism in India is immense largely *because* mysticism constitutes the experiential core of Indian religion. My definition of Hinduism itself is as follows: ‘a confederation of allied paths in the South Asian religious tradition that draw on a common body of Sanskrit texts for their beliefs and rites (beginning with the Vedas), and that believe in the possibility of human perfection in this world through direct experience of spiritual truths.’ The mystical overtones in the latter part of this definition should be clear.

We have had a glimpse of both the origins and growth of mystical yoga in the Hindu religious tradition, and of one example of its contemporary expression in a teacher primarily concerned the fusion of multiple mystical elements into a single cohesive system of thought and practice. These examples serve to shed light on the role of mysticism within the Indian religious and cultural contexts, specifically in the instantiation of Swami Mukṭānanda’s *Kuṇḍalinī Mahāyoga*.

⁴ Douglas Brooks, *Medieval Hindu Philosophy* classroom lectures, Spring 1999.

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