

Saturday, 11 December 2021

## Why mystical experience may be misinterpreted as evidence of oneness

According to most definitions, the mystical vision and experience is about the mystic attaining first a vision of the oneness of everything - that all divisions and distinctions, *including time*, are illusory; and then attaining a personal unity with that oneness.

The idea that time is illusory, and that reality is *not-time*, outside of time, time-less; has no past nor future but Just Is... This idea is, I believe, the crux of the mystical experience.

And the belief that one has *experienced* not-time, an 'eternal present', is the root of the mystical interpretation of oneness. It is the basis for the inferences drawn from it.

My interpretation is that mystics have experienced... *something* in relation to time; but they have never experienced not-time; because **time Just Is**, it is a basic metaphysical reality.

At a more 'common sense' level - I find it rather convincing to argue that not-time could not be experienced, because there can be no experience without time, and no memory of that which is not in time without duration.

But if the mystic did not really experience not-time - what then did he experience? What was the experience that the mystic interpreted as not-time?

My understanding is that **the truth of 'not-time' is a very short period of time, averaged.**

When a sufficiently short period of time is experienced, then essentially 'nothing' happens during this time - and this is particularly the case when what-does-happen is averaged into a single 'value'. *Then* the person feels *as if* time has ceased; and from this (apparent) stillness he can view every-thing that he *can* view in a still panorama - all as one picture of 'all' reality.

Of course he does not actually perceive everything! But the point is that all which he does perceive from his small-and-averaged time-slice is a part of the one still image.

From this experience, the oneness mystic has an *apparent* confirmation of the oneness of all things and all times.

But in fact, the experience itself is merely an *artefact* of the process of *deciding* that the shortest possible time-slice, from-which all change has been averaged-out - is 'true' knowledge of reality.

Analogy: A photograph is not an instant *outside* of time, it is a **slice of time**: an *average* picture of what happened in in the field of vision during a particular time slice (defined by the shutter speed). The real world was moving, but not much over the time-slice.

Because it was a relatively-small time slice (compared with normal human experience), and provided nothing depicted was moving too fast; the averaged picture on the image is not very blurred, and may appear as if time had been frozen.

And even when something is moving fast enough to blur (as in almost photographs of a waterfall) what results is a still and sharp picture *of a blur*.

A camera has a partial and perspectival view of reality - as does the human mind - neither can perceive everything in existence at once (nothing like!). But if it is *assumed* that everything-being-seen is every-thing - then the field of view is everything (by definition).

Then the deletion of time (by averaging of the time slice) apparently makes *every-thing-one*.

In conclusion; my understanding of the common mystical experiences of oneness, are that they are attained by those who believe in the truth - or at least the coherent possibility\* - of oneness - and who are 'looking-for' oneness; and that they are actually a memory of a small slice of time which is being *interpreted* as a time-less instance; and that the attribution of oneness to every-thing in existence is an artefact of the 'field of vision'.

\*Oneness is Not a coherent belief, because the fact that it is a *belief* entails that there is Not oneness: we can only 'believe' from a prior position of separateness - which ought not to be possible if

everything is one. The common notions of 'ultimate' oneness being concealed by 'illusion' / *maya* does not make sense either - because if all is one, illusion should not be possible in the first place. And, anyway, how could we *know of* oneness if illusion prevailed? It seems to me that although the belief-in ultimate oneness has been common in humanity (e.g. modern Hindus, Buddhists and many New Agers); like many common beliefs it does not cohere, even superficially... **unless** *further* assumptions are being smuggled-in unacknowledged, which is, in fact, *exactly* what happens.

NOTE: The above is an example of that type of philosophy called metaphysics. My assumption is that fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of reality are what shape evidence - not the other way around. Thus the 'evidence' of 'oneness' in mystical experience is understood in terms of prior assumptions. If the prior assumption is of oneness, then this type of experience is regarded as evidence of oneness. But if one is a pluralist, like myself - who believes that time is a fundamental; the mystical experience of oneness is interpreted in light of those qualitatively-different assumptions.

This 'un-disprovability-by-evidence *might* be assumed to imply that metaphysics is arbitrary, and one set of assumptions is just as good as another; but this is not the case - because different metaphysical assumptions can be examined in terms of their *coherence*. Thus I have tried to argue above that the experience of oneness is - in the first place - not a proof of oneness; and in the second place that oneness is an incoherent belief. The incoherence of oneness can be, and is, explained on the basis of further assumptions being introduced - but all of these contradict the prima assumption of oneness - therefore I argue that oneness is incoherent and disproves-itself.

The same also applies to mainstream/ orthodox/ Athanasian Trinitarian Christianity; which tries to argue simultaneous oneness and plurality. Insofar as the Trinity is taken to be one and every-thing, it is also incoherent and self-refuting; and attempts to cover this by asserting simultaneous plurality are also covert introduction of further unacknowledged assumptions.

Posted by [Bruce Charlton](#) at [Saturday, December 11, 2021](#)



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## 9 comments:

### **Jack said...**

I used to think Buddhism was a very nihilistic religion, until I read some classic Buddhist scriptures and found that they explicitly exclude two positions as 'heresies' (heresy and heretic are the exact words in the text; though I don't know the original Sanskrit term), and these two heretical positions are: 'Eternalism' and 'Nihilism'.

By Eternalism, I understand the Buddhists to mean that this present awareness, this soul consciousness that's present right now, is in fact the One and Eternal subsisting Mind. This they emphatically say is heretical.

By Nihilism, I understand the Buddhists to mean that this present awareness and soul consciousness, together with everything it perceives, simply does not exist, is pure void or non-being. They call this heretical also and, from what I've read, denounce this heresy even more frequently than the latter one.

The Lankavatara Sutra describes the first as 'clinging to Being' and the second as 'clinging to Non-Being'. All the sutras are unanimous in saying that the Buddha's enlightenment is 'beyond' the 'dualistic discrimination' of Being and Non-Being.

It's funny because I always thought that these two opposite views were exactly what Buddhism (and Eastern mysticism in general) was: either this personality of mine is simply eternal or simply nothing. Learning that these are the two most explicitly condemned ideas in Buddhist scriptures humbled me and forced me to admit I knew nothing about Buddhism after all. Sadly, I think most Westerners have these 'heretical' notions of Buddhism.

11 December 2021 at 10:50

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### **William Wildblood said...**

I think you have articulated something very important. Oneness is often assumed to be the highest truth partly because it is deemed to be the simplest/most profound even most logical, and partly because of mystical experience. But mystical experience is a very limited way of understanding truth as it always needs to be interpreted.

11 December 2021 at 11:33

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### **Bruce Charlton said...**

@Jack - I know a fair bit about Zen Buddhism - which is a very pure, elite and monastic practice; but not the kind of syncretic religions practiced by millions as the various kinds of Buddhism - which have all kinds of (often local) practices and doctrines.

To make a metaphysical critique of a theology, one can't rely on the assurances of practitioners that such and such a problem has been solved by such and such a doctrine - because as often as not, the 'patch' put on to cover an inconsistency will lack a rationale (i.e. will be arbitrary or unprincipled) and will therefore create other inconsistencies; and so the problem of incoherence remains.

The other thing is that my understanding of philosophy generally is to clarify a situation until it becomes comprehensible in a single mental act of grasping. When the terminus of philosophy is itself incomprehensible - or too complex to grasp whole - then I would say that philosophy has failed, and needs to try again!

11 December 2021 at 13:36

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### **Bruce Charlton said...**

@William - Thanks.

Your insights have helped here.

I think oneness spirituality needs to be confronted and analysed because it is appealing to the modern mind for mostly-wrong reasons. In a sense, it seems better than no spirituality at all; but in a deeper sense oneness-meditation is used in a therapeutic way that actually supports the agenda of evil.

Because if all is truly one, there can be no \*real\* evil (except to deny that all is one) - and then the discernment and detection and opposing of evil is regarded as a this-worldly error. Thus, exactly what is Most needed (from a Christian understanding) is relabeled as unenlightened.

Small wonder that the Global Establishment is happy to tolerate, and even encourage, oneness spirituality.

11 December 2021 at 15:34

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### **Jack said...**

We live in narrowness and injustice. We are obliged to press close to each other and, in order to suffer the least possible, we try to maintain a certain order. But why attribute to God, the God whom neither time nor space limits, the same respect and love for order? Why forever speak of "total

unity"? If God loves men, what need has He to subordinate men to His divine will and to deprive them of their own will, the most precious of the things He has bestowed upon them? There is no need at all. Consequently the idea of total unity is an absolutely false idea. And as philosophy cannot ordinarily do without this idea, it follows therefrom, as a second consequence, that our thought is stricken with a terrible malady of which we must rid ourselves, no matter how difficult it may be.

We are all endlessly concerned with the hygiene of our soul; as far as our reason is concerned, we are persuaded that it is perfectly healthy. But we must begin with reason. Reason must impose upon itself a whole series of vows, and the first of these is to renounce overly great pretensions. It is not forbidden for reason to speak of unity and even of unities, but it must renounce *total* unity - and other things besides.

And what a sigh of relief men will breathe when they suddenly discover that the living God, the true God, in no way resembles Him whom reason has shown them until now!

From "Athens and Jerusalem" by Lev Shestov

11 December 2021 at 23:16

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### **Skarphedin said...**

Thought you might find some of Guenon's thoughts on mysticism interesting. The larger topic is magicians. Apologies for the long quote:

After applying themselves for a considerable time to the search for extraordinary phenomena, or what passes for such, some people [me: failed magicians] for various reasons eventually tire of it all or become disappointed by insignificant results that fall short of their hopes. It is worth noting that often these same people then turn to mysticism,<sup>2</sup> for astonishing as it may seem at first glance, this latter still satisfies similar needs and aspirations, although under another form. Certainly, we are far from denying that mysticism in itself may have a character much more elevated than magic; nonetheless, if we look more deeply, we soon realize that at least from a certain point of view the difference is not as great as one might imagine, for here again it is in fact only a matter of 'phenomena', visions, or the other tangible and sentimental manifestations that characterize the domain of individual possibilities alone.<sup>3</sup> In mysticism, then, illusion and disequilibrium are far from being left behind, and although they may manifest themselves here in unaccustomed forms they are no less dangerous and are even aggravated in a sense by the passive attitude of the mystic who, as stated before, leaves the door open to every influence that may present itself, whereas the magician is granted at least a measure of protection by

the active attitude he attempts to maintain with respect to these same influences, which certainly does not mean, however, that in the end he is not often overwhelmed by them. Moreover, it is also true that the mystic is almost always too easily the dupe of his own imagination, the productions of which, without his suspecting it, become almost inextricably mixed with his genuine 'experiences'. For this reason we must not exaggerate the importance of the 'revelations' of the mystics, or at least we should never accept them without verification.<sup>4</sup>

12 December 2021 at 02:35

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### **Nicholas Fulford said...**

I think that you need to look at the neurochemical basis for the subject experience of mystical states. That the classical psychedelics elicit states that are descriptively extremely similar to those reported by mystics is indicative of a probable neurochemical commonality.

Also, the experience of ecstasy is one which people who have experienced it report as being extraordinary in its vitality, beauty and potency such that the word ineffable is often applied. This is not to suggest that the state is real in the sense of mapping to the external - non-neurochemical - world, but that people find it to be very meaningful when reflected upon from a normal state of mind via memory.

Personally, I think that the ecstatic states are delightful subjectively. Walking in nature or hearing Lark Ascending or Barber's Violin Concerto played by a master violinist and orchestra play upon and through me, and such experiences are magnificent. However, we have to be careful to not project the subjective and also to not become ecstasy junkies. If the experience of these states is to be valuable in a wider sense than their immediate experience, then they should inform our behaviours in ways that promote betterment of the human condition (i.e. greater involvement in protection of common goods for all, and connection to others such that love of one's fellows is less conditional upon preferences and biases that favour some over others.)

As for the separated self, the idea that my actions can occur independently without the influence of what is "outside" of me shaping me in ways subtle or gross is not something that is supported. From an empirical frame I have not seen evidence supporting the idea that life or intelligent life or human life is separate from the universe in any way despite the persistence of a subjective frame and sense of having agency.



13 December 2021 at 13:27

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### **ES said...**

I wrote a response to this post here:

<https://auhrs.wordpress.com/2021/12/15/response-to-charlton-on-oneness-spirituality/>

16 December 2021 at 03:13

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### **Jack said...**

*In distinction from all the mystics of the one (India, Plotinus, Eckhardt) I confess a monopluralism, i.e. I accept both metaphysically and mystically not only the One, but a substantial plurality, the revelation in One God of a permanent cosmic plurality, a multitude of eternal individualities. The cosmic plurality is an enriching revelation of God, God's development. This consciousness leads to a metaphysical and mystical personalism, to the revelation of the "ego."*

Nicholas Berdyaev, "The Meaning of the Creative Act."

16 December 2021 at 22:18

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