

# Characteristics of Mystical Experiences and Impact of Meditation

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## Abstract

Mystical experiences have always been studied with a sense of awe and mystery both by the laypersons as well as the scientists. Today due to advancements in Spiritual Psychology, Consciousness studies and Meditation studies, they are being explored from a scientific perspective. As a result several features, identifying criteria, and unique characteristic of these experiences have surfaced in scientific research works. The applications of spirituality have spread into such hitherto new settings like workplaces, hospitals, and educational institutions with many studies on the impact of spiritual/mystical experiences on several important variables. However, many researchers are not aware of the research studies in this emerging area. This paper attempts to present the definition, nature, characteristics, classification, effects of mystical experiences and the impact of meditation.

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## Introduction

Mystical experiences are recorded to having occurred in many parts of the world even during ancient times and in all major religions of the world. Mysticism seems to be a manifestation of something that is at the root of all religions (Happold, 1990) and is found in almost an identical form in all of them be it in India, or china, or in Persia or in Germany (Smith, 1977). The mystical experience is experienced not only by the practitioners of certain religious techniques, but also in well-known and highly educated Scientists (e.g., Ramanujam, Einstein). In India, these experiences are a normal occurrence especially in middle and lower middle class devotees of the Goddesses. According to Dasgupta (1959), the Vedic mysticism prepared the way for the rise of the other forms of mysticism that sprang in India. The mystical literature that spans thousands of years and in widely disparate cultures exhibit a remarkable consistency in its description of mystical experience and its instructions for obtaining access to mystical knowledge (Deikman, 2000). William James (1902) commented that, there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think.

The word “Mysticism” comes from the Greek language and is derived from the root meaning, “to close”. Upon the mystic who had these experiences, also laid the necessity of keeping silence concerning the sacred knowledge (Smith, 1977). Now the secrecy is slowly breaking due to the acceptance of such phenomena as not an abnormal occurrence and also by increased interests among the scientific circles in collecting such data. However even today in certain religious traditions the teachers advice not to disclose such experiences to others.

### **Definition**

Mysticism is usually defined in dictionaries and encyclopedias as a ‘spiritual discipline used to make contact with the divine’. There are many definitions that more or less express what Lukoff, David and Francis (1988) in their review on mystical experiences define. According to them, “the mystical experience is a transient, extraordinary experience marked by feelings of being in unity, harmonious relationship to the divine and everything in existence, as well as euphoric feelings, noesis, loss of ego functioning, alterations in time and space perception, and the sense of lacking control over the event. In a recent article Phillips (2001), defines mystical experience as, “a psychological event of indefinite duration that a mystic herself takes to be a direct awareness of such a ‘Spiritual Object’ as Brahman”.

### **Nature**

Mystical experience is not dreaming, because the subject is awake. It is not hallucination, because there is no organic disturbance.... yet it differs from and transcends the emotional, intellectual, and volitional life of ordinary men (Sircar, 1977). The central mystical experience is characterized by loss of individuality and dissolution in a limitless divine totality. Stace (1960) argued that mystical experience is neither objective nor subjective but that it transcends this distinction and is best classified as trans-subjective. It is an experience untouched by plurality. According to Eliade, mystical consciousness is like a state beyond dreamless sleep. Mandukya Upanishad calls this state as ‘*deep sleep*’.

### **Characteristics**

The occurrence of mystical experience is universal and has many common features. Lukoff (1985) identified five common characteristics of mystical experiences. They are: ecstatic mood, sense of newly gained knowledge, perceptual alterations, delusions and, no conceptual disorganization. The most important characteristic feature of mystical experience according to Stace (1960) is that they involve the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate.

Typically, mystical experiences are characterized by subjective qualities. Pahnke (1966) lists nine: ego transcendence; objectivity and reality –a transcendence of time and space; a feeling of sacredness; deeply felt positive mood; an awareness of

paradoxicality; a feeling that the experience is ineffable; transiency; and positive changes in attitude and/or behavior.

### **Classification**

Stace (1960) and many other philosophers, say that there are two kinds of mystical experience. One may be called extrovertive mystical experience, the other introvertive mystical experience. Both are apprehensions of the One, but they reach it in different ways. The extrovertive way looks outward and through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there. The introvertive way turns inward, introspectively, and finds the One at the bottom of the self, at the bottom of human personality. It is suggested that the extrovertive type of experience is a kind of halfway house to the introvertive. Of the introvertive mystical consciousness the Mandukya Upanishad says (Stace, 1960) that it is

*“beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression...It is the pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the Supreme Good”.*

Rupa Goswami, a follower of Chaitanya, in recognizing two forms of devotional consciousness *Vaidhi* and *Raganuga* (sanctioned and spontaneous) has drawn a distinction between the types of mystic consciousness. The former type can be reared up by spiritual discipline and preparation, the latter is the gift of God (Sircar, 1977).

In a number of works, Professor Zaehner has distinguished between three categories of mystical experience (Smart, 1975). They are: Panenhenic or nature mysticism (as exemplified by Rimbaud, Jeffries and others), Monistic mysticism (as found in Advaita, Sankhya-yoga etc) and Theistic Mysticism (as in Christian tradition, the Gita etc). According to Deikman(1966), the mystical experiences can be categorized as, untrained-sensate, trained-sensate and trained-transcendent.

The stages of mystical experience vary somewhat in the different religions of the East and the West. But the threefold division as summarized by Smith (1977) is relevant to both. According to him these three stages are those of the Purgative life, the Illuminative life and the Unitive life.

### **Effects of Mystical Experiences**

Wuthnow (1978) summarized the effects of mystical experience as long-term and short-term effects from numerous case studies and research. According to him the long-term effects are:

- Mystics say their lives are more meaningful, think about meaning and purpose
- Know what purpose of life is
- Meditate more
- Score higher on self-rated personal talents and capabilities

- Less likely to value material possessions, high pay, job security, fame, and having lots of friends
- greater value on work for social change, solving social problems, helping needy
- reflective, inner-directed, self-aware, self-confident life style
- experience more productive of psychological health than illness
- less authoritarian and dogmatic
- more assertive, imaginative, self-sufficient, intelligent, relaxed
- high ego strength, relationships, symbolization, values, integration, allocentrism, psychological maturity, self-acceptance, self-worth, autonomy, authenticity, need for solitude, increased love and compassion

The short-term effects are as follows:

- experience temporarily disorienting, alarming, disruptive behaviour
- likely changes in self and the world, space and time, emotional attitudes, cognitive styles, personalities, doubt sanity and reluctance to communicate, feel ordinary language is inadequate
- some individuals report psychic capacities and visionary experience destabilizing relationships with family and friends
- withdrawal, isolation, confusion, insecurity, self-doubt, depression, anxiety, panic, restlessness, grandiose religious delusions.

### **Meditation and Mystical Experiences**

Meditation consists in the undisturbed flow of thought round the object of meditation. It is the steadfast contemplation without any break (Sharma, 1987). Meditation is the method that makes one aware of Reality. This is an inward journey from the gross, to the subtle, to the most subtle aspect of one's being. It is an inward method that leads one to the center of consciousness by stilling the mind. The science of meditation was developed systematically in ancient India during the Upanishadic period and was later elaborated by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras. The fact that it was popular then can be evidenced in the excavations of the Harrappa and Mohenjodaro sites where a figure of Lord Siva in meditative posture was found. The meditative practices that were developed spread far and wide. A school of meditation was established by Indian monks in Egypt around 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C and in China by the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Later the teachings were carried to Japan. Over the centuries meditation has developed into a highly evolved and systematic science for expanding consciousness. Meditation is the art of concentrated inner awareness.

Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras described 'Meditation' as the seventh step of the Astanga Yoga. Meditation is an inward way of fathoming all the levels of consciousness,

from where consciousness flows on various degrees and grades. Meditation is a process by which there is the fullest possible development and unfoldment of the personality, the total illumination of all the powers latent in the personality.

A senior guru of meditation explains regarding the mystical experiences during meditation as follows:

Sometimes during meditation, you will see an infinite, blue sky, ethereal space. . . . You will see physical forms, human beings, children, males, females, Rishis with beards, Siddhas and lustrous Tejomaya forms also. . . . The visions may be of these things or beings, or they may be purely imaginary. They may be crystallization of your own intense thinking.

Grey Dubs (1987) in his work on Zazen meditators reported that the practitioners went through a stage of ‘derepression’, where there was lifting up of the repressions and previously suppressed thoughts came into the consciousness during meditation. Often during meditation there are powerful mystical experiences which individuals claim have radically altered their lives, given them a new sense of meaning and purpose, new values, and a new relationship not only with themselves, but with other people and the world around them (Shapiro, 1983).

Hardy (1979) surveyed thousands of people with mystical experiences and found that meditation triggers such experiences in many of them. Patanjali describes the powers or mystical experiences that arise in the progress of meditation to the sadhaka.

### Conclusion

Some authors conceptualize the “mystical” experience as one, which can momentarily occur in the process of the development of higher states of consciousness. For them the core state of consciousness is pure consciousness and from it develops these higher states of consciousness. Whatever the conceptualizations of mystical experiences are, they are unique and highly individualistic. However, studies on different people who had mystical experiences showed that some patterns emerged based on which the characteristic features of mystical experiences have been attempted. Newer research should aim to not only study the mystical experiences in depth, but also to explore the transformative changes brought about by them.

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