

MYSTICISM IN EVELYN UNDERHILL AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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Abstract

Mysticism is an ineffable and inexplicable experience involving spiritual quest for hidden truth or wisdom. It is a harduous journey, the goal of which is union with the Divine or the Sacred. The aim of this article is to show the universality of mysticism by analyzing the mystic aspects in the writings of Evelyn Underhill and Rabindranath Tagore, the writers of the West and the East respectively.

Keywords: *Mysticism, Rabindranath Tagore, Rudolf Otto, Dark Night, Shelidah, Gitanjali*

Though mysticism springs from divergent sources, it is one and the same beyond time and space. It is not controlled by circumstances or conditions. It has been there in all religions. It sinks down the differences between the East and the West. Rudolf Otto says,

It is often claimed that mysticism is the same in all ages and in all places that timeless and independent of history it has always been identical. He further declares that for East and West to meet there is no more fitting sphere in the spiritual life of man than that of mysticism and mystical speculation, for these rise from the very depths of the human spirit. The fruit of mysticism is one whether its flower blooms in India or Germany, Persia or California. (13)

Evelyn Underhill classifies the process of mystic experience of a mystic into five stages as follows:

1. Awakening of the Soul
2. Purgative way
3. Illuminative way
4. Dark Night of the Soul
5. Unitive way

Awakening of the Soul

Evelyn Underhill explains that awakening of the Soul is the decisive event in the process of the spiritual experience of a saint. The saint begins his spiritual life with a long period of restlessness, uncertainty and mental stress and one fine morning the awakening of the self takes place abruptly and the saint undergoes intense feeling of joy and exaltation:

It is the disturbance of the equilibrium of the self which results in the shifting of the field consciousness of from lower to higher levels, with a consequent removal of the centre of interest from the subject to an object now brought into view, the necessary beginning of any process of transcendence. (Underhill 176)

This awakening of the self within takes the saint to the consciousness of the true nature of the self. As a result this self becomes free from his mind and all the other consciousness of

the external world disappears. The self is rid off all external aids and freed from the bondages of the senses and the body. It alone is awake and becomes independently active towards mystic vision. The saint receives true wisdom or supreme knowledge. The inner joy of the soul spreads to the mind and body.

As far as Tagore is concerned, his soul was awakened when he took charge of the family estates in Shelidah. Here he came into contact with the Bauls, a group of wandering spiritual “madmen” who reject the outward trapping of institutional religion and seek the indwelling “man of the heart”, the elusive presence of the divine that dwells within every human being.

In **The Religion of Man**, Tagore says how he happened to enjoy his first mystic experience:

When I was eighteen, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away, leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance. The invisible screen of the common place was removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind.... The unmeaning fragments lost their individual isolation and my mind revelled in the unity of vision. (58)

At this stage, Tagore looks upon the eternal relationship of things in the world of multiplicity and gains the vision of unity. He sees himself in the other and understands that the manifold world of objects is one. Moreover, a great and generous soul which has attained the Divine Knowledge is always inclined to share the grace of God with other souls. But as long as his mind functioned, it was not rid off desire, attachments and sorrows:

All Consciousness of the external world, the feelings it aroused, the knowledge gained in practical experience, its maturity, the awareness of the physical existence of the body, all disappeared. (Radha Thiagarajan19)

When Tagore feels that his soul is awakened to the attainment of true wisdom or supreme knowledge, he begins to discard the worldly knowledge which he has gained so far. As a consequence, he undergoes a great inner struggle which puts him in a disadvantageous position to realize God. The divine vision itself disappears. He cries “futile were the flowers that faded in the shade not offered to thee” (**Later Poems** 60). The Nature, which “revealed an inner radiance” now “faded in the shade”.

It is true that at this stage of awakening of the Soul Tagore derives wisdom or supreme knowledge. This supreme knowledge soon begins to rule over worldly knowledge. Wisdom stirs the inner being causing confusion over their spiritual progress. To his dismay, the spiritual disturbance leads him to another greater stage called ‘The Purgation’ or “Purification of the Self”.

Purgative Way

Having tasted the real nature of the divine knowledge, Tagore is now completely restless in its absence and passionately longs for the true and real experience of the self. This longing leads him to a mental storm, conflict and purgation through excessive suffering. He knows that “this experience of suffering is a necessary concomitant of the mystic experience”. (Underhill 201)

Purgation here means the efforts of a mystic to detach himself from all kinds of worldly pleasure. In the process of purgation the saint undergoes pangs, discomfort, conflict and pain. He is tossed between the feeling of the loss of vision and the consciousness of his own unworthiness. As the conflict in him grows more and more, his longing for the Reality or the “Absolute” becomes excessive. The emotion of fervour and anguish to see God and enjoy the bliss engulfs him and he is filled with the pangs of separation which grow more and more acute keeping pace with the self which progresses towards purification. The pangs act as the central point for purgation by leading the self to a long conflict resulting in the freedom from the bonds of attachment and the longing for the realization of God.

Tagore’s wife died in 1902. A year later he lost his second daughter and in the following years his eldest daughter and youngest son also died. His teacher from whom he received fatherly care and attention departed in 1905. The departure of his dear and near ones are a great blow on him and he bore it with religious fortitude. He feels that he is in a forlorn state. He spends his days in solitude like a friendless child. He receives no love from any quarters. He undergoes pangs and pain because he feels that he is “a nameless boy, an outcaste” (**Later Poems** 60). He tries to elicit the love of God by purifying both this body and soul:

Life of my life, I shall ever try to keep my body pure, knowing that thy loving touch is upon all my limbs. I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind. I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower, knowing that thou hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart.

And it shall be my endeavour to reveal thee in my actions, knowing it is thy power gives me strength to act. (**Gitanjali** 4)

He feels that his is like a remnant of a cloud of autumn roaming in the sky. His yearning for the love of God is so earnest that he lives by counting months and years of separation from Him. Tagore’s pangs of separation from God grows more and more making his self progress towards purification of his soul resulting in mortification of his self. Mortification involves getting rid off the ego and discarding of the body. Tagore gets rid off his ego when he says,

If this be thy wish and if this be thy plan, then take this fleeting emptiness of mine, paint it with colours, gild it with gold, float it on the wanton wind and spread it in varied wonders.

And again when it shall be thy wish to end this play at night, I shall melt and vanish away in the dark. Or it may be in a smile of the white morning, in a coolness of purity transparent. (Gitanjali 85)

At this stage of mystic experience, the mind is balanced and poised and feels that God does everything. The mystic realizes that God is Omni-present. He overcomes the sense of distinction between good and bad. He sees God in both good and evil as a result of which a sense of oneness comes to him.

The Illuminative Way

The illuminative way is a step forward from the experience of purgation or purification. The attainment of true wisdom or gnana and the mystic vision are together called the illuminative way.

In this stage God is perceived as light dispelling darkness or ignorance. Perception of God as light is nothing but reaching higher consciousness and the awakening of the self is only the first step to this higher consciousness. Higher consciousness is otherwise known as transcendental awareness. Evelyn Underhill says that the higher consciousness which appears abruptly and suddenly at the time of the awakening of the self, recurs again as a result of the ceaseless efforts of the mystics to purify themselves.

When the higher consciousness is attained the mystic feels as if a new flood of light pervades everywhere. The world appears as though “appareled in a celestial glory” (Wordsworth). A new sun emerges and a new morn dawns. The self or ego is replaced by God. The world is no more a wilderness of agony. Now it is a place where the mystic can explore the possibilities of salvation. In the illuminative way, all mystics experience the same vision of God as Light “a Light which knows no light, but rather, as it is always light nothing ever disturbs” (Underhill 249). This is a process of “Becoming” and the self disappears in the glory of the Divine Grace.

After undergoing severe pangs of struggle and pain, Tagore’s self gets purified and receives the Divine Grace of God. He brims over with happiness. He writes with joy:

... I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.

Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim. My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy flame and place them before the altar of thy temple.

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear the delight.

Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love. (Gitanjali 78)

At the depth of everybody’s heart there is a deep longing to be liberated from the clutches of various occupation of the mind. By getting entangled in the worldly affairs we lose

our real identity. Tagore suggests how one can explore the consciousness to attain salvation:

Man has his other dwelling place in the realm of inner-realization, in the element of an immaterial value. This is a world where from the subterranean soil of his mind, his consciousness often, like a seed unexpectedly send up sprouts into the heart of a luminous freedom, and the individual is made to realize his truth in the universal Man. I hope it may prove of interest if I give an account of my own personal experience of a sudden spiritual outburst from within me which is like the underground current of a perennial stream unexpectedly welling up on the surface. (*The Religion of Man* 56)

The illumined mind acquires new realizations of everything in the world. He perceives godliness in everything he sees and comes in contact with. Since Tagore is in the state of the illuminative way his life takes a new turn oriented towards spiritual bliss. He witnesses the presence of God in Nature which in turn teaches him spiritual values. He rises to a higher state of consciousness seeing God not only in Nature but also through Nature:

In many a morning and eve thy foot steps have
been heard and thy messenger has come within
my heart and called me in secret.
I know not only why today my life is all astir,
and a feeling of tremulous joy is passing
through my heart. (*Gitanjali* 47)

By mentioning “morning: and “eve” Tagore asserts that God invites him each and every moment of his life. God’s unfailing love is expressed through two heavenly bodies namely the ‘Sun’ and the ‘Stars’ representing “morning” and “evening”. Tagore is sure that God’s presence is hovering around him constantly spreading His sweet fragrance.

The experience under this Illuminative way brings an inner conversion. Now Tagore has an overwhelming emotion to love all beings and to realize Reality more and more intensely. His body and soul join together in responding to the powerful impact of the mystic vision. But soon the experience under the Illuminative way leads to a great swing-back.

The Dark Night of the Soul

After the Illuminative way, the mystic undergoes a most intense period of a great swing-back into darkness, which divides the first mystic life or Illuminative way from the second mystic life or Unitive way. This period of “The Dark Night of the Soul” is,

A period of utter blankness, and stagnation so far as mystical activity is concerned ... The once possessed power of orison or contemplation now seems wholly lost. The self is tossed back from its hard-won point of vantage. Impotence, blankness, solitude are the epithets by which those immersed in this dark life of purification describe their pains. (Underhill 381)

Evelyn Underhill explains the mystical or transcendental aspect of the “Dark Night” as follows:

For the mystic who has once known the beautiful vision, there can be no greater grief than the withdrawal of this object from his field of consciousness, the loss of His companionship, the extinction of this Light. Therefore, whatever form the “Dark Night” assumes, it must entail bitter suffering, far worse than that endured in the Purgative way. (389)

The Purgative way results in the renewed and ecstatic awareness of the Absolute and this awareness becomes the governing characteristic of Illumination but it brings its own negation resulting in the awareness of the Self’s continued separation from and incompatibility with that Absolute which it has perceived. Here the state of illumination begins to break up and the complementary negative consciousness appears showing itself as an overwhelming sense of darkness and deprivation. Referring to the state of the Dark Night of the Soul in the Spiritual progress of a mystic, Knowles says,

The true mystic travels by love through darkness, a darkness which is in fact the rejection, for love’s sake, of everything that is not God. Only those who are called and who go by this way will come to the fullness of mystical union. (136)

In this stage the mystic undergoes rigorous changes as a preparation for unification with the Supreme. He feels the nothingness of the earthly life and aspires to overcome rebirth and seeks for his unification with the Supreme.

Tagore feels the pinch of the Dark Night of the Soul in the following lines:

Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens
 Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait
 outside at the door all alone?
 In the busy moments of the noontide work
 I am with the crowd, but on this dark
 lonely day it is only for thee that I hope.
 If thou showest me not thy face, if thou
 leavest me wholly aside, I know not
 how I am to pass these long, rainy hours.
 I keep gazing on the far away gloom of
 the sky, and my heart wanders wailing
 with the restless wind. (Gitanjali 18)

In these lines Tagore expresses his painful struggle and the gloom spreading over his soul. He is not yet certain of getting united with God. He painfully yearns for the unification.

He earnestly appeals to God to remove the obstacles which stand in the way of his soul's progress towards Him. He is ready to keep vigil without sleeping in the night and keeping the door open for ever in order to receive the Lord. He is agonized because his soul is filled with darkness making him impossible to see the path of his spiritual journey. He desperately prays to God to remove the darkness from his painful soul and enable him to reach Him.

But the Dark Night of the Soul is only a transition from one mystic state to another and it is a "thoroughly detached "Naughted Soul" that is free to enjoy the Unitive Life, which is essentially a state of free and filial participation in Eternal Life" (Underhill 416). The mystic, after experiencing various stages as seen above, now reaches the final state and achieves his goal of getting himself united with the Supreme.

The Unitive Way

The Unitive Way means commingling with the Absolute, which the mystic enjoys ultimately. It is a transcendental consciousness of the Absolute which cannot be rationally analyzed or comprehended by the rest of the mankind.

This awareness of the Absolute is limitlessly deep and ineffably glorious. The mystics themselves have succeeded only to some extent in expressing their experience, though not directly but by means of familiar symbols and images. The Unitive Life means total identification and complete communion with the Absolute. It is not an act but a state. Fresh life is imparted by which aid new creative powers are conferred. The self, lifted to the divine order, is to be an agent of the divine fecundity; an energizing centre, a parent of transcendental life.

Tagore, atlast has found the fulfillment of his spiritual journey. He has reached what he has been looking for. He says,

All that I am, that I have, that I hope and all my love have ever flowed towards thee in depth of secrecy

One final glance from thine eyes and my life will be ever thine own.

The flowers have been woven and the garland is ready for the bridegroom. After the wedding the bride shall leave her home and meet her lord alone in the solitude of night. (Gitanjali 96)

Tagore's union with the Absolute is a bridal union. He imagines himself as a bride and "meet her lord alone in the solitude of night". He takes leave of the people, the material possession and the neighbours and reaches the paradise of God's kingdom. Now eternal glory is all his concern. He cannot denounce the experience offered him by the Supreme and decides to live under the blessing feet of God. He composes himself to live in the language of silence attuned to the wishes of Him in whom he finds ecstasy. He enjoys perfect peace and bliss in the company of God, singing in praise of Him eternally.

In the light of the above said facts, it can be safely arrived at the conclusion that

mysticism of any kind or religion, aims at the ultimate goal of attaining union with the Divine or the Sacred by subjecting the human mind or soul to a mystical evolution through various stages and that mystic experience is universal.

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