

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE HINDU TRADITIONS

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The very title of this essay indicates the simple difficulty we have in developing any unified account of the nature of religious experience in classical, non-Buddhist (and non-Jain) India: there are many traditions — systems, schools, beliefs and practices — which we count as Hindu. An exhaustive (and exhausting) typology seems a prerequisite for any such examination as the one on hand. I will try to meet this requirement only obliquely, by mentioning a few dominant, often incompatible, features of the conceptions of religious experience found in the Hindu systems and letting these features stay in the background of the discussion to follow.

Intellectual Development in Hindu Traditions

Probably the most general division in the understanding of religious experience is between mystical or otherwise exalted states attained in the course of a life and the climactic attainment of what may be called liberation from life itself (which is to say, in the Indian traditions, from the cycle of lives). This division is important because, while the former type (except in a few cases) is always thought to be markedly less important to the subject than the latter, it is the former which is rich in emotional detail and contributes directly to the religious life.

This division is important in that it has a phenomenological consequence. What we could possibly take as experience in the normal sense of the term is confined to the former, mystical states and excludes the attainment of liberation. To that extent, it seems closer to our intuitive grasp of the religious life.

Another division, however, is of paramount importance to the intellectual development of the Hindu traditions. On the one side is the conception of religious experience as an end in itself, as self-authenticating and fulfilling simply through its occurrence. On the other is the conception of it as a mode of arriving at a truth or attaining a reality, and therefore requiring checks that it is veridical (ie, that it is indeed what it purports to be). This division does not sit exactly on the one above; both mystical experiences and liberation are subject to analysis by those concerned with philosophy, while the possibility of attaining them is taken as given by the religious. This latter division is characterised, especially in modern (19th and 20th century) interpretations of the Indian past, as one between the path of cognition [*jnana-marga*] and the path of devotion [*bhakti-marga*]. But matters are not so simple. For one thing, many — though certainly not all — philosophers of the path of cognition claim personal lives of devotion; but even more significantly, the so-called path of devotion itself is

treated systematically by Hindu theologians and so becomes intellectualised. The real division is between those living a life of emotional devotion, for whom religious experience (mystical and ultimately liberating) is existentially real, and the philosophers and theologians for whom it is a matter that has to be studied, analysed and evaluated. This division is important in Hindu intellectual history, since the idea of studying, analysing and evaluating conceptions of religious experience is a major motivation in Indian analytic philosophy, functioning as the formal aim of such philosophy even in such 'non-religious' areas as logic, semantics and epistemology.

Hindu Philosophy and Theology

A third and smaller division is indicated by my distinction between philosophers and theologians. Not all religious experience in India is taken to occur in the context of a personal God. Some are taken to occur in a cosmos with a founding, creative source which is not a personal, loving God but an impersonal principle; this is argued for by Advaita Vedanta. Also, other systems occur without any ultimate power, though not, for that reason, without transcendental goals. So the Mimamsa schools, concerned with the proper exegesis of Vedic ritual, deny the existence of any creator, personal or impersonal; but they accept the Vedic texts as revelations (we could anachronistically say, a blue-print) of the cosmic order. But since they argue specifically for a conception of liberation as wholly without any experiential character (and as strictly the ending of the cycle of lives and the occurrence of pain-filled consciousness), we can ignore them in this context. For this reason, we can set aside too the conception of the Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophical logicians, for whom liberation is a state in which all suffering has ceased, but nothing more.

Naturally, all the experiences we are talking about advert to something other than this world and the natural environment in which we exist. It is this sense of the transcendental, which makes the experiences religious. This should always be kept in mind, especially when looking at the more austere and non-theistic accounts. In other words, I am suggesting keeping to a fairly conventional idea of divinity which is recognisable in Abrahamic religions, such that only some of the Hindu traditions come out as theistic. I would prefer to work with a broader, though vaguer conception of the transcendental as the mark of religious experience. This contrasts with the strategy of widening the net of divinity to catch as many religions as possible within a belief in God. The reasons I give are as follows. Firstly, it would seem more historically accurate to accept the absence of anything like an engaged and loving God in many Indian systems (including the many Buddhist and Jain schools); secondly, it conveys a sense of the rich diversity of Hindu conceptions of the religious life.

Having outlined what could function as a typology of religious experience, I am now going to stop referring to it. For one thing, it would make this too elaborate a work if I discussed various accounts according to their place in the schema. For another, it would leave no place for ambiguity and interpretation. But readers can keep what I have said in mind and perhaps themselves organise what I have to say on the basis of what I have already said.

Mystical states and the goal of existence, self-authentication and analysis, all mingle in a dramatic whole in the earliest accounts of religious experience in India, the Upanisads (1000-600 BCE). In these texts, which contain cosmological, personal, eschatological and other abstract forms of speculation, are found descriptions and anti-descriptions which became, in different forms, dominating (though neither unquestioned nor unifying) ideals of subsequent spiritual life in India.

The Upanisads present the idea of a creative, cosmic principle, sometimes understood as a God, but more clearly as a logical source of everything, and call it *brahman*. Already, this

conception of the ultimate is daunting to contemplate, for it reaches for the greatest level of abstraction, completely unencumbered by anthropocentric values like love, benevolence and the like. *Brahman* is simply whatever is the case for there to be a universe at all to have come into existence and continue to exist. To this highly abstract conception of reality and its source is added another idea that is, in its subsequent appeal to many Indian thinkers, an important one: the concept of the self or *atman*. But the self is no ordinary philosophical entity to do with the individual person. While encompassing the individual subject, it is finally the term for consciousness itself; not one person's consciousness but consciousness such as is intrinsic to any and all subjects.

It is this understanding of the purest characterisation of the being – consciousness as such – which plays the central role in the early descriptions of religious experience. For the forbiddingly metaphysical claim is that the ultimate experience that any individual subject undergoes is the realisation that its (his, her) consciousness is in fact that cosmic, creative, sustaining principle and power called *brahman*. The realisation is that the consciousness that was hitherto thought to be merely awareness limited by body is in reality the same as that universal principle itself. It is put in the famous Upanisadic phrases thus: 'You are that' (Chandogya Upanisad 6.8.7), 'I am *brahman*' (Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 1.4.10), 'This self is *brahman*' (Brhadaranyaka 4.4.5).

The earliest type of religious experience reported in the Indian texts, then, is an envisaging of the self as universal, in some sense. It is a report of an experience because the writer claims for himself the experience of universality. This is self-authenticating; its happening is of supreme importance to the subject, and no further reasons need be given for saying that that experience genuinely was what it purported to be. Yet it also involves a general theoretical claim. It is not just that someone has had an experience which seemed like being universally conscious. The claim is that all conscious individuals are indeed capable of such experience because, in reality, they are manifestations of that universal consciousness. But this claim, being about what is in fact the case rather than just how it was for the subject, does require analysis and theoretical support. So at one and the same time, the Upanisads provide both particular mystical experiences and general philosophical claims about the nature of reality.

Experience of Universality

We turn to another aspect of these Upanisadic reports. Though they are descriptions in some sense, it is not clear in exactly what sense they are so. What, we could ask, could an experience of universality be like? What is it to say that my consciousness is really a contingently limited manifestation of the universal consciousness? Let us grant that religious experience is grasp of the transcendental, the universal entity not available to ordinary experience. Then, language and thought, which are part of this world and our experiences in it, by definition lack the capacity to convey to those who have not had such grasp anything about what was grasped. That is the problem. It is not just to do with the failure of language; even the content of an experience of listening to a beautiful piece of music might, strictly speaking, be beyond linguistic communication. This has to do with the utter incapacity of every human capability – of projection, sympathy, empathy and imagination – to go beyond what current life provides. Such religious experience is supposed to make consciousness aware in a way that it was not capable of until then: for it is clear that there is nothing in my consciousness now which gives the remotest indication of its being universal in any way. We simply do not have the resources for understanding what such experience could be like, for the reason that our understanding is precisely the limited one that we possess in our present self-awareness as strictly non-universal, individual loci of consciousness.

Those who give these reports are acutely aware of the simple impossibility of taking those who lack such experience into an understanding of the mystical state of universality. First they attempt to describe the state the attained in terms which may seem accessible to us:

Like a man who is enveloped in sexual embrace ... is not aware of anything at all that is outside or inside ... once he has merged with the self that is wisdom, he knows nothing at all what is outside or inside. That now is his form in which his desires are fulfilled, his passions are his own self, his cravings cease, and in which all unhappiness has come to an end.
(*Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, IV, 3. 21.)

The Ultimate Transcendental State

This sort of concern to relate the transcendental with the ordinary is evident in the description of the ultimate state of non-duality with *brahman* as one of bliss [*ananda*]. This always presented a major problem to the philosophers who attempted to build an account of transcendence on the Upaniṣadic reports of the non-duality of self- and universal consciousness. The problem is that because bliss or happiness is such an intensely human emotion, it seems an inadequate pointer for gesturing towards the radical nature of the ultimate state. The Advaita philosophers (eg, Citsukha in the 14th century) had to develop an elaborate account in which it was argued that since happiness was the only psychologically plausible human motive, it had to function as part of the necessarily limited description of the ultimate state. Some other Advaitins, like Vacaspati Misra, simply said that bliss was used as an empty synonym of universal consciousness, applicable to the extent that that too would have to find a place in universal consciousness.

The point to note about the attempt to include a rich human emotion in the description of the highest state is that for all that, it is phenomenologically empty. Yes, we understand bliss in the human sense, but since the whole point about liberation is its transcendence of human nature, what could happiness possibly mean without body, mind and objects? So perhaps the best thing to do is to accept Vacaspati's claim that bliss is merely a vague indication of universal consciousness and not to be taken literally. Any attempt to describe the ultimate state in rich human terms invariably leads to insuperable difficulties.

It is then that the descriptions of such religious experience become what I have called anti-descriptions. That *atman*, however, is (described) thus: 'not', 'not'. It is incomprehensible, for it is not comprehended, indestructible because not destroyed, unaffected, for nothing affects it, not fettered, not disturbed, suffering no harm (*Bṛhadaranyaka* 4.2.4 and elsewhere). Anti-descriptions also take the form of deliberate use of contradiction, to symbolise the ineffability of what is encountered in transcendence:

It stays, yet wanders far from here, reposes, yet roams everywhere around; the movement, hither and thither of the deity, who could understand besides me?
(*Katha* 2.21)

(The reference here is not specifically to a God but to the power of the self as such, but could, of course, be interpreted that way by theists.)

In reporting on experience that transcends any normal consciousness, one anthropocentric element seems ineliminable. At the very least, the universal principle is understood as consciousness, and though its universality remains beyond intellectual grasp, the starting point for the search is already available to humans, namely, their own nature as conscious beings. But even this is at most a pedagogical move, for understanding of consciousness is itself limited, in a way our intellects can in fact grasp.

This supreme state of being, infinite, limitless, consists of nothing but consciousness. [Yet] when the liberated one has departed, there is no more awareness.

By saying, "there is no more awareness", you do bewilder me.

Certainly, I am not saying anything bewildering. [W]here, verily, everything has become the self, then what and by what could one smell, see, hear, speak to, think about or be aware of?

(Bṛhadāraṇyaka 2.4.12ff)

We are in a strange situation: we know that consciousness as we have it is always consciousness of something outside itself. But transcendental consciousness is universal, so there is nothing that is not within it. That means there is nothing to be conscious of. But if there is nothing to be conscious of, what consciousness can there be? It is a strange situation because, though we seem to understand, yet we have to accept a blank contradiction: to have such ultimate consciousness is not to have consciousness (as we understand it) at all. The limits of our understanding are reached.

The Highest State of Liberation

Now, the move from reports of religious experiences to liberation comes to the philosophically minded. What is the point of attaining the highest state howsoever it is conceived? The significance of attaining such a state should be of eternal value and general significance. So the point of religious experience becomes the attainment of the ultimate state. All the philosophical systems agree that this is liberation, a freedom from the conditions of ordinary existence (or even extraordinary existence) which fall short of the highest possible state. The emphasis is now on the clarification of the nature of liberation, the ways in which the resulting conception of it can be developed and defended, and finally the appropriate ways in which it can be attained by all. Correspondingly, the details of any actual phenomena which may go with mystical experience on the way is de-emphasised. The idea is that such experience is part of the eventual attainment of liberation from the conditions of life; so if that liberation did not come, mystical experience would not be worth pursuing. Concentrating on developing the most defensible and justifiable conception of liberation is important, for what use would it be to set forth on a search in which the goal was misconceived? Moreover, such a conception must have general applicability, if it purports to be about experience of a reality; it cannot simply be a subjective occurrence, such as a mystical experience, however intense. We have already seen how, in the Upanisads, there is a move from reports of mystical experience of universal consciousness to a general claim about the nature of the relationship between the self and the creative, cosmic principle.

In contrast, those who are concerned with leading a religious life rather than the examination of it, simply go on living as they are motivated to do. They do not deliberately try to understand what religious experience could be but actually have it (or mean to have it) as a product of leading a life of the spirit. In that case, commitment to that way of life comes first, and there is no felt need to justify it or determine its veracity; this is faith, in contrast to inquiry. To a certain extent, it is possible to see the original Upanisadic reports as exemplifying a life lived in this spirit, but only to a certain extent. Whatever the self-authenticating nature of these early reports, they quickly go on to build a theory of general applicability and involving claims of factuality. So they are much more closely tied to the philosophical tendency. But in so far as they are about what actually certain people claimed to have undergone (rather than purely an analysis of what must be the case in liberation), these Upanisadic reports are like those that came out of religious sects in later times.

In the Hindu traditions, this was primarily in a theistic context (in contrast to the Buddhist and Jaina non-philosophical but religious life). So the Hindu life of the spirit is one in which individuals simply devote themselves to relating to God in whatever way motivates them; and religious experience becomes a product of such a life. The emphasis is on religious or mystical experience that comes of an orientation to God. Those devoted to devotion even go

so far as to say, as Kulasekhara does in his poem the Mukundamala, that they do not care for liberation [*moksa*] so long as they spend their lives in love of God. The Tamil Vaisnava saints, the Alvars, frequently elevate love for Krsna over liberation.

In contrast, the philosophers focus on the nature of the highest end, liberation, which is held to be the only worthwhile purpose of any transcendental awareness (like mystical experience); this may or may not involve a deity. So a matter of attitude towards what was considered significant affected the divergence of interests, the philosophers concerned with their conception of liberation, the devotees with living a life of love towards their deity, in which religious experience simply happened (occasionally).

Religious Experience in Literature

Religious experiences, understood as being occurrences in the course of a life of devotion, come to be reported systematically in the literature of India from the fifth or sixth centuries onwards, in the songs and poems of the saintly devotees of Visnu and Siva in the Tamil land. They find expression in other parts of the south and also in North India from the 11th or 12th centuries, and dominate the religious life of Hindus thereafter, though they do dwindle down in the second half of the millennium.

The single most important methodological warning in approaching these religious experiences is that the philosophical concerns must be set aside. The point is different. Those whose lives exemplified religious experience simply did not care for developing a general theory, or defending themselves against charges of madness or fraudulence; indeed they often welcomed it, for it heightened their sense of theocentric expression. From the 18th-century, the Bengali Ramaprasad Sen writes:

People say: Ramaprasad is mad.
But I cannot control my tongue,
and turn my words into poetry.
Are these words of mine ridiculous?
I try so hard
but people fail to understand me.

The single most significant indication of this is that the philosophical literature, even when contemporary with the devotional works, virtually ignores the latter. There is no attempt to use devotional material in illustration. Even when, as in the case of the 12th-century theologian, Ramanuja, an explicit claim is made to give a systematic theory about the nature of the Visnu who was the God of the earlier Tamil Vaisnava saints, the devotional and the analytic material are kept apart.

Religious Experience of Mystics

Though the religious experience of the mystics finds philosophical analysis and justification irrelevant, many of the great mystics find themselves, like Ramaprasad Sen, 'unable to control the tongue', and what they say about their experience seems remarkably like what some philosophers say such experience should be like. Arguably, the powerful yet inchoate nature of religious experience struggles to find expression in language, and because language is structured by the ideas to which the person has access, religious experience is often reported in terms which are keyed to the ideas of the mystic's milieu.

I hope with this formulation to take a middle path in the argument over whether religious experience is essentially universal or structured by specific religio-cultural factors. I suggest only that the very nature of linguistic mastery implies that reports which struggle to bridge the chasm of ineffability must make the best use of the tools of communication, and that the

ideas found in one's particular language are such tools. So, whatever the essential nature of religious experience, what we have access to are reports necessarily structured by particular ideas. The 17th-century mystic poetess, Bahina Bai from Maharashtra, says of the experience which set her on her subsequent path away from a domestic life beset with brutality, that

all things were forgotten and silence descended. ... Duality disappeared in the one and undivided essence in which words lose their sound.

She clearly expresses her experience in terms of the philosophical notion of non-dualism or Advaita, and it is difficult to decide whether she might not have used some other terminology before Sankara and his followers made Advaita dominant as a religious philosophy.

Sometimes too, the use of terminology from the same cultural milieu leads to a subsequent reading of philosophical meaning into spontaneous songs and poems. The 13th-century theologian of the Saiva sect, Meykanta, in his Tamil Sivananapotam, finds it necessary to emphasise that his use of the term Advaita to describe the truth behind the experiences of the Saiva Nayanmar saints is meant to indicate **oneness in union** and not the **identity** of the Advaita philosophers (6.2.4, etc.). It is clear that he feels compelled to find different meanings for an evocative term to suit his needs. We will return to the case of 'union' and 'non-duality' soon, and see how it exemplifies the complex situation found in the Indian religious material.

Essence and Non-Duality

So even when we find religious experience described with words which are found in the philosophical treatises, it is not always clear that there is any correlation between them. On the one hand, the philosophers spend a great deal of their time trying to make precise what they mean by words like 'essence' and 'non-duality' and the like; as the explanations develop, we understand that these words take on more precise meanings only in the context of complex theories. On the other hand too, the mystics' use of words in an expression of their aesthetic and emotional sensibilities. It is not a systematic account of matters of fact; as the descriptions grow, we begin to feel that the words are important only for the sentiments they arouse in us, not for any systematic sense they may have.

This coincidence between philosophically loaded notions and free-flowing expressions of religious feeling is especially noticeable with the term 'union'. We have already seen in the Upanisads the seminal conception of identity between the self and the universal principle, through the non-duality of consciousness. In the Yoga system, developed largely to expound the practice necessary for the attainment of the ideal spiritual state, various techniques for the progressive isolation and focusing of self-consciousness are recommended. All this practice is said to culminate in the state called samadhi. It has been suggested by Mariasusai Dhavamony that this difficult term be translated as 'enstasy', in contrast to 'ecstasy' (*Classical Hinduism*, Gregorian University, Rome, 1982, p 306). This is a good suggestion; where ecstasy is derived from the Greek compound of 'out' + 'to cause to stand', this new term replaces the first part with 'in'. The worth of this suggestion will immediately be obvious with the definition of the culminating state of consciousness in the Yoga-Sutra:

That [consciousness] is enstatic in which the object alone appears devoid of its [the consciousness'] own nature.
(Yoga-Sutra, 3.2)

This is explained later (by Vyasa in his commentary and Vacaspati in his gloss of Vyasa) as a state in which what is contemplated on so occupies consciousness that there is no sense of the act of contemplation itself. There is nothing in consciousness but what is contemplated on. The extraordinary nature of this state can vaguely be understood when we consider that our normal awareness is always filled with the sense of our being aware; so our

consciousness is never void of the sense of the self who is conscious. Normally, there is always a distinction between who is aware and what one is aware of. But in ecstasy, the former sense is held to vanish, leaving an actual unity between consciousness and its content, namely, that of which there is awareness.

Re-Interpretation of Experience

In the philosophical texts of Advaita, this contention is theoretically substantiated (most powerfully, in fact, by Vacaspati in his gloss on Sankara) and re-interpreted. There, an account of experience is given in which the nature of the subject and objects of experience is developed; thereafter, it is demonstrated that ordinary experience can be understood only through a theory which combines self-consciousness and consciousness of objects. From this is derived the contention that it would be theoretically possible to separate the sense of self from the act of consciousness itself. These arguments culminate in the abstract claim that the final conceivable state of consciousness (as opposed to ordinary consciousness) is one in which there is no difference between consciousness and its content. Meanwhile, the Upanisadic texts about the nature of the universal, creative power are evoked to present the picture of the ultimate reality as consciousness itself. An epistemological argument is made that the world of objects is not ultimate. These two ideas — of the ultimacy of consciousness and the non-ultimacy of the objective world — are then joined with the claim about the final state of consciousness. The Advaitic conclusion thereupon emerges: the final state is that in which consciousness becomes no different from the ultimate content, which is universal consciousness itself.

When the whole world is understood, there is the attainment of non-duality. The self resident in all beings will be seen to be one; and all beings to be the self.
(Sankara: Mandukya-bhasya, mantra 3)

If there is a culminating experience (if it can be called an experience at all) of non-duality, the Yoga texts present practices which are supposed to lead to it. In Advaita, highly sophisticated arguments are made to establish that it is rational to believe in the ultimate nature of non-duality. Along the way, however, we must think through and accept very complex ideas about the nature of consciousness, of subject-object relations, of the world and about the ultimate. Even if we come to some intellectually coherent explanation, we must still find ourselves wondering what all this would actually be like to undergo - even when the philosophers point out that that is not the proper question to ask.

The situation can be more complicated. In theologians such as Ramanuja, we find an explicit philosophical account which seeks to find a place for the experiences of the mystics (or at least, of those mystics who adhere to Ramanuja's own form of God). Ramanuja takes the same principle of *brahman* from the Upanisads but understands it as a creator God. The objective world is seen by him as not ultimate only because it is the very body of God and therefore dependent on its Creator. For the rest, the culminating state is one of union, as mentioned in the Upanisads, but that is not to say that there is lack of duality between the self and the universal, as the Advaitins claim. Indeed, the very notion of union implies a relationship between different entities, and so it is. The self attains union with God.

Immediately, we can see that this is not the abstract non-dualism we have previously encountered. Whatever union means here, it cannot be an obliteration of the principled difference between God and self. It would be absurd to postulate a Supreme Being, a loving, benevolent creator and then say that one is just that being. The Advaitin's ultimate principle is not a God in this sense, and so would not carry the same absurd presumption. (It is another matter as to whether the conception is a coherent, epistemically and morally defensible one.)

The Ultimate State of Union

Ramanuja therefore accepts the notion of the ultimate state as realisation of the universal principle, but gives it a theistic interpretation.

He who has realised the state of brahman, he to whom the essential nature of the self has become manifest as consisting of infinite knowledge and as having the sole character of being absolutely dependent on and subservient to Me ... is tranquil in spirit ... Knowing Me truly thereafter, that is, through love, he enters into Me ... The meaning is that that he attains Me through love ... (Gita-bhasya, 18.54-55)

Clearly, what Ramanuja takes to be transcendental unity is not what the Advaitin takes it to be. But whatever the conception of unity here, Ramanuja is still concerned to present a cosmological relationship between the subject and its God, still concerned to provide philosophical justification for his account of the highest state. He is still concerned to present a view of reality within which religious experience can be accommodated systematically.

This concern with a systematic theory about the nature of the highest state stands in an interesting relationship with the words of the mystics themselves. Ramanuja is clearly concerned to defend specific mystical reports, namely that of the Vaisnavite saints, the Alvars. So his theory consciously locates mystical reports within itself, echoing the words of the Alvars. Yet the Alvars' own words, even if using the same terminology of theistic union, represent a different, free, self-authenticating, non-analytic spirit. Six hundred years before Ramanuja, Nammalvar writes,

By merely thinking [of You] my soul already swells; tell me, o Form who measured the cosmos, can it really be that I too become of the expanse of the existent universe, when I gaze [at You] and unite with you bodily?
(*Periyatiruvantati*, 76)

There is present, in these words, the germs of ideas that Ramanuja develops, but for the Alvar they merely express a simple wonder at feeling the way he does.

To a certain extent, though perhaps without equally rigorous philosophy, this is true of the theologians of the Saiva sect, who attempted to put the reports of the saints of the Saiva sect, the Naiyanmars (roughly contemporary with the Alvars), into a systematic context. The Nayanmar, Tirumular, says,

There is no difference between my mind and Siva, for Siva shines within my mind ... I have become stripped of all relation to rebirth and chains; I have become one with God.
(*Tirumantiram*, 2809; 2918)

The Saiva Siddhanta writer, Arulnanti, repeatedly argues, in his Tamil text the *Sivanana Cittiyar*, that this sense of union (in Tamil, to mix [*kalappu*] or to join [*poruntutal*]) consists in an intense feeling of that love which is God's grace alone. It is a feeling of being in God's presence, but it is also God being present in the soul. This presence makes God one with the self, but that is never to say that there is no difference between the two. We have seen a similar argument in another Saiva Siddhanta writer, Meykanta.

In attempting to accommodate the actual reports of mystical experience, even the Vaisnava and Saiva theologians, for all their doctrinal — theoretical and abstract — differences, find little scope for argument. It would seem that the nature of emotional expression in the various Indian theistic traditions is strikingly similar. The differences would seem to lie in the ideas of the philosophers.

Thus, as we stand there, puzzled (and perhaps ashamed that we are puzzled) by the philosopher's daunting arguments, we come across the mystics, blithely — with no qualms about their self-authenticating, unphilosophical claims — describing what they feel as they feel they have to. Do we take their rich descriptions to fill in the spaces left open by the

philosophers' abstractions? Especially when they talk of union and the like? We should be careful. They talk of particular, personal experiences, the philosophical accounts are about some final state. Perhaps we should content ourselves with acknowledging that these may be very different modes of making sense of the transcendental.

Philosophical Contentions

The key difference between philosophical conceptions — even the devoutly theistic ones of Ramanuja and Arulnanti — and the reports of mystical experiences lies in the phenomenological richness of the latter. I have commented on how the urge towards transcendence makes the Upanisadic accounts self-consciously anti-descriptive. They try to be as free of anthropocentric qualities as possible. This is understandable, because the ultimate state is supposed to be beyond reach of all ordinary grasp. So, attempts to use such human emotions as bliss in the description of the highest state do not work that well, conceptually speaking. In a sense, all religious experiences are potentially ineffable, if they attempt to report on the nature of the reality encountered. But the poems of the mystics do not in the main attempt to grapple with this problem. This is because the mystics, in reporting their experiences, simply describe what they feel, not what they think was presented to them in experience. Is there a difference? It would seem so. For the songs of mystical experience are vibrant in their descriptions, and they are so because they are filled with human emotion, however exalted we might think the circumstances of their occurrence. This is what I mean when I call them phenomenologically rich.

In some ways, there is nothing daunting about what the mystics feel. They have the emotions and attitudes that we ordinarily have...the extraordinary things about them are the intensity with which they have them and the object of that intensity, namely their vision of God.

In reading or listening to the poems of the mystics, we react intuitively, because their emotional lives are enriched and exalted versions of ours. One dominant motif is that of the love they have, not in union, but in separation from their God. The Alvar poetess, Antal sings,

He entered inside me and crushed me to pieces; he let my life escape, and enjoys seeing me dance [in agony] ... My bones melt, my eyes find no sleep many days.

(Tiruppavai, song V, 2; 4)

Few of us have not felt that with loving another human being ... and thus we feel ready to react to her feeling that way about the God who is as real to her as human beings are to us. Moreover, her religious appeal lies in the fact that her feelings subtly lead us into new realms of expression. We are capable, sometimes, of an aesthetic appreciation of the nature of loving sadness, as when we look at a place where once we were happy. The mystics who cultivate the path of separation are not sunk in misery at being distant from God; rather, they use the present sense of a physically felt separation to build towards such an intensity of love that they experience ecstasy. Here, it would be worthwhile to note Fred Hardy's emphasis (in *Viraha Bhakti*, p.365) on the root of ecstasy **out + to cause to stand** — meaning **to be outside oneself** — can mean both the exquisite agony of breaking apart with love and blissful contentment of breaking limitations. We can see the contrast with the concept of ecstasy already mentioned.

Erotic Religious Experiences

It is the centrality of emotion, incidentally, that allows some types of religious experience erotic in the Hindu traditions. God is repeatedly the lover, the spouse. The Nayanmar, Manikkavacakar, interprets mystical union as a (literally) eternal love-affair.

Wearing the flowery cassia wreath, I will entwine myself in Siva's mighty arms; and so entwined, I will cling to him, lost in ecstasy. Then shrinking, I will melt with love of his roseate lips; I will seek him [first] and seeking him, meditate on his feet.
(Tiruvacakam, 8.17)

The mystic is neither degrading divinity nor mistaking human feelings for something exalted. He simply takes the feelings which he has and is bound to have as a human being, and feels them for the divine in which he believes. Putattu Alvar specifically takes the classical idea of pleasurable desire (*kama* in Sanskrit, *inpu* in Tamil) and holds it to be the quality of devotion to Krsna.

The appeal of the mystic poets lies therefore in their apparent accessibility. They express primarily the emotions which are available to us. Periyalvar, in another example, treats his devotion to Krsna as that of a mother to a boy, utilising the theme of Krsna's childhood relationship with Yasoda in the stories of the Bhagavatapurana. But that accessibility is, of course, only apparent. We may, initially, start with an understanding of the emotions they express, because we ourselves have them. But we cannot proceed beyond this unless we are moved by the feeling that such emotions can genuinely be felt about God. Here is where the philosophical urge takes hold of us: would we not be foolish to feel this way if there were not a God towards whom we could feel thus? Perhaps; but we have now taken a different path altogether; we have entered another form of discourse. The mystics simply express what they feel, and there is no further question about the content of their feelings.

The irony then is that the philosophers' abstractions, for all their apparent distance from our ordinary reading, are closer than they seemed. What they have to say is exactly what can be thought about, pondered on, debated. That is the very nature of the philosophical conception of liberation. The mystics' poems and songs are bad objects of study and analysis (unless such study be anthropological, cultural or linguistic, and therefore hold their contents to be irrelevant). They present themselves with pellucid simplicity. They are worthy of our attention really only if we are already committed to the possibility of sharing or coming to share those emotions about the divine. From seeming close, because of their common emotional vocabulary, they become more distant, for between them and the reader stands the mystery of faith. Their appeal to us lies in their deceptive intimacy with our daily feelings; their power lies in their literally phenomenal leap into transcendence.

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