

Mysticism and Mystical Experiences

The first issue is simply to identify what mysticism is. The term derives from the Latin word “*mysticus*” and ultimately from the Greek “*mustikos*.”¹ The Greek root “*muo*” means “to close or conceal” and hence “hidden.”² The word came to mean “silent” or “secret,” i.e., doctrines and rituals that should not be revealed to the uninitiated. The adjective “mystical” entered the Christian lexicon in the second century when it was adapted by theologians to refer, not to inexpressible experiences of God, but to the mystery of “the divine” in liturgical matters, such as the invisible God being present in sacraments and to the hidden meaning of scriptural passages, i.e., how Christ was actually being referred to in Old Testament passages ostensibly about other things. Thus, theologians spoke of mystical *theology* and the mystical *meaning* of the Bible. But at least after the third-century Egyptian theologian Origen, “mystical” could also refer to a contemplative, direct apprehension of God. The nouns “mystic” and “mysticism” were only invented in the seventeenth century when spirituality was becoming separated from general theology.³ In the modern era, mystical interpretations of the Bible dropped away in favor of literal readings. At that time, modernity’s focus on the individual also arose. Religion began to become privatized in terms of the primacy of individuals, their beliefs, and their experiences rather than being seen in terms of rituals and institutions. “Religious experiences” also became a distinct category as scholars beginning in Germany tried, in light of science, to find a distinct experiential element to religion. Only in the early 1800s did a theologian (Friedrich Schleiermacher) first try to ground Christian faith in religious experiences. And only in that era did the term

“mysticism” come to refer primarily to certain types of religious experiences (involving “infused contemplation” as opposed to ordinary grace).

But this is not to deny that there were mystics in the modern sense earlier or in other cultures. Simply because the term “mysticism” did not refer explicitly to experiences before the modern era does not mean that “mystical theology” was not informed by mystical experiences. In Christianity, mystics were called “contemplatives.”⁴ The Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite first used the phrase “mystical theology” in around 500 CE to refer to a direct experience of God. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century first referred to the “book of experience.” By the Middle Ages, when Christian contemplatives were expounding the “mystical” allegorical and symbolic meaning of biblical passages, the meanings they saw were ultimately based on the notion of unmediated experiences of God—in Bonaventure’s words, “a journey of the mind into God.” “Mystical theology” then meant the *direct awareness of God*, not a discipline of theology in the modern sense; and the “mystical meaning” of the Bible meant *the hidden message for attaining God directly through experience*.

Today “mysticism” has become a notoriously vague term. In popular culture, “mystical” refers to everything from all occult and paranormal phenomena (e.g., speaking in tongues or alleged miracles) to everyday things such as childbirth or viewing a beautiful sunset. But in this book “mystical” will refer only to phenomena centered around an inward quest focused on two specific classes of experiences. However, it is important first to note that *mysticism* is a more encompassing phenomenon than simply practices related to cultivating *mystical experiences*. Mysticism is no more private than religion in general. It is a sociocultural phenomenon, but one in which a particular range of experiences has a central role. It is a “way” (*yana, dao*) in the sense of both a path and a resulting way of life. Mystical traditions involve values, rituals, action-guides, and belief-commitments. Traditionally, mysticism is also tied to comprehensive religious ways of life.⁵ Only in the modern era has mysticism come to be seen as a matter of only special experiences. The modern reduction of mysticism to merely a matter of personal experiences was solidified by William James in 1902 (1958). Nevertheless, mysticism is traditionally more encompassing than simply isolated mystical experiences: it is about living one’s whole life aligned with reality as it truly is (as defined by a tradition’s beliefs).

Nevertheless, what distinguishes mysticism is its unique *experiences*: it is the role of certain types of experiences central to mysticism that separates it from other forms of religiosity and metaphysics. “Mysticism” is not simply

the name for the experiential component of any religious way of life or for the inner life of the intensely pious or scrupulously observant followers of any strand of religiosity. One can be an ascetic or rigorous in fulfilling the demands of a religion without having the experiences that distinguish mystics. Nor is mysticism the “essence” or “core” of all religion—there are other ways of being religious and other types of religious experiences, even if mystics have been a shaping force in every religion.⁶ Indeed, many mainline Protestants deny that God can be united with in any sense (since we cannot become divine) or known experientially (since God is utterly transcendent and so cannot be approached experientially) or that the self or soul can be denied, and so they deny that mystical experience is a way of knowing God or reality. Moreover, not all people today who have mystical experiences are religious: mystical experiences need not be given any transcendent explanations but can be given naturalistic explanations in terms of unusual but perfectly normal brain activity or of a brain malfunction having no epistemic or ontic significance at all. In particular, isolated spontaneous mystical experiences (i.e., ones occurring without any prior intentional cultivation through meditation or ones stimulated by drugs or other artificial “triggers”) are often taken to have no ontic implications.⁷ In short, mystical experiences are not always taken to be revealing a “divine” reality.

Mystical Experiences

A “religious experience” can be broadly classified as any experience imbued with such a strong sense of reality and meaning that it causes the experiencers to believe that they have been in contact with the source of the entire natural realm or some other irreducibly fundamental reality. That is, these experiences are taken to be a direct awareness of another component to reality: either the “beingness” of the natural realm or a transcendent reality. (A “transcendent reality” is a nonspatial and nontemporal reality that is not part of the realm of reality that is open to scientific study, such as a self or soul existing independent of the body or a creator god or a nonpersonal source, or, if that reality is immanent to the natural realm, one that is not experientiable as an object—hence, not a “phenomenon”—and so is not open to scientific scrutiny.) Either way, the reality is allegedly experientiable, and mystical experiences allegedly involve an insight into the nature of reality that people whose awareness is confined to the natural order of objects have not had. There are many types of experiences properly classified as

religious—e.g., prayers, alleged revelations, visions and auditions, conversion experiences, and those “altered states of consciousness” (i.e., states of awareness differing in nature from our normal, baseline waking state) that the experiencers take as having religious significance. Indeed, seeing all of the universe as the creation of God, enjoying sacred music, or even writing theology can be called a “religious experience.”

Thus, there is not merely one abstract “religious experience.” Of particular importance here are allegedly preconceptual, theistic experiences of an overpowering and mysterious otherness—a noetic sense of “absolute dependence” on a reality beyond nature that is greater than oneself (Schleiermacher 1999) or the nonrational *sui generis* sense of something mysterious, dreadfully powerful, and fascinating that is “wholly other” (Otto 1958). Some Christians take this to be the source of all religion. Theists may well have experiences of transcendent otherness where the sense of self that is separate from that reality remains intact—a sense of encountering the presence of sacred “Something Other” with which a person can commune (Hardy 1979: 131). But there are also nontheistic religious experiences and other types of theistic experiences. Following Rudolph Otto (1958), scholars in the past distinguished such “numinous” experiences of the “holy” from mystical experiences: the latter do not involve a subject/object duality as with a sense of otherness or presence, while numinous experiences involve a sense of seeing or hearing some reality distinct from the experiencer, as with visions.⁸

Many scholars include visionary experiences among mystical ones (e.g., Hollenback 1996). However, a narrow definition of “mysticism” is used here: it is emptying the mind of conceptualizations, dispositions, emotions, and other differentiated content that distinguishes what is considered here as “mystical.” The resulting experiences are universally considered mystical. Thus, visions and auditions and any other experience of something distinct from the experiencer are excluded.⁹ In addition, many persons who are deemed here to be mystics (e.g., John of the Cross) point out the dangers of accepting visions and voices as cognitive. Visions are often considered to be merely the manifestations of various subconscious forces that fill the mind when it is being emptied of “dualistic” content or when a mystic is returning to the baseline state of mind. In Zen, visions, sounds, and sensations occurring during meditation are dismissed as hallucinatory “demon states” (*makyo*). Mystical experiences are also associated with paranormal phenomena, but paranormal powers are also objected to as a distraction (e.g., *Yoga Sutras* 3.36f). But mystics may also have revelations, visions, or other religious experiences or alleged paranormal abilities—indeed, in

emptying the mind of other content, meditation may open the mind up to these and to “demonic” phenomena. Mystics may also interact with others within their tradition who have had visions when developing doctrines.

Calling mystical experiences “trances” mischaracterizes them, since mystics remain fully aware. Calling them “ecstasy” is misleading, since the experienter is not always incapable of action or coherent thought. In addition, there is no hard and fast line between extrovertive mystical experiences and other spiritual experiences or even ordinary sense-experience since some mystical experiences involve only a slight loosening of our mind’s normal conceptual control, although they do involve an altered state of consciousness. So, too, both extrovertive and theistic introvertive theistic mystical experiences share with numinous experiences a sense of reality, although numinous experiences have the additional element of a sense of a subject/object differentiation and may also involve receiving a message or vision. Nor is a mystical experience a vague sense or feeling that there is more to reality than the natural universe. So too, one can transcend a sense of self without mysticism (e.g., becoming a dedicated member of a social movement). And nonmystical experiences can have lasting effects and can transform a person.

At the center of mysticism as stipulated here is an inner quest to still the conceptual and emotional apparatuses of the mind and the sense of self in order to sense reality without mediation (as discussed in the next chapter, constructivists disagree). Mental dispositions and emotions and their roots must all be eradicated. The quest begins with substituting a desire for enlightenment for more mundane desires, but even this desire must be overcome for the mind to become clear of all conceptual, dispositional, and emotional content. But there is not one “mystical experience.” Rather, there are two classes of mystical experiences: the extrovertive (which include mindfulness states of consciousness, “nature mysticism,” and “cosmic consciousness”) and the introvertive (which include differentiated nontheistic and theistic mystical experiences and the empty “depth-mystical experience”). Extrovertive and introvertive mystics share terms such as “oneness,” “being,” and “real,” but their subjects are not the same: extrovertive mysticism is about the “surface” world of phenomena while introvertive mysticism is about the underlying “depth” sources.¹⁰ Thus, all mystical experiences should not be placed on one continuum. Introvertive experiences may lead to metaphysical arguments that extend to the phenomenal world, but this does not mean that the introvertive and extrovertive experiences themselves can be conflated.

In extrovertive experiences, the mind retains sensory content; in introvertive experiences, consciousness is void of all sense-experiences but may retain other differentiable mental content. The distinction goes back to Rudolf Otto (1932: 57–72), and the labels “extrovertive” versus “introvertive” were set by Walter Stace. The distinction appears to be supported empirically by differences in their physiological effects (see Hood 2001: 32–47; Dunn, Hartigan, & Mikulas 1999). For Stace, there is a unifying vision of “all is one” with the One perceived extrovertively versus the One apprehended introvertively as an inner subjectivity in all things (1960a: 62–135). Regardless of his theory, an awareness of a fundamental component of reality is allegedly given in both classes of mystical experiences. In either class, mystical experiences can occur spontaneously without any cultivation or meditative preparation. The impact of such isolated experiences may transform the experiencer or may be taken only as interesting ends in themselves. But classical mysticism was never about isolated mystical experiences, including “enlightenment experiences.”

The accounts of what is experienced in mystical experiences are shaped by the cultural categories of each mystic. But it may be possible to get behind these accounts to come up with a phenomenology of mystical experiences—i.e., to get to the “givenness” of an experience itself by depicting the experiential characteristics presented to the subject while bracketing the questions of what is being experienced and whether the experience is veridical. And there are some characteristics that all mystical experiences of both tracks share in one degree or another: the weakening or total elimination of the usual sense of an “ego” separate from other realities, while the true transcendent “self” seems deathless; a sense of timelessness; a focusing of consciousness; a sense that both the experience and what is experienced are ineffable (i.e., cannot be adequately expressed in any words or symbols); feelings of bliss or peace; often there are positive emotions (including empathy) and an absence of negative ones (anger, hatred, and so on); and a cognitive quality, i.e., a sense that one has directly touched some ultimate reality and attained an insight into the fundamental nature of oneself or of all reality, with an accompanying sense of certainty and objectivity (Hood 2002, 2005). To William James, mystical experience without the “over-beliefs” concerning any reality that might be involved have these four features: ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (1958: 380–82). Walter Stace’s description has been especially influential in psychology: a sense of objectivity or reality; a feeling of blessedness, joy, and so on; a feeling of holiness; paradoxicality; and (with reservations) ineffability (1960a: 79).¹¹ A

phenomenology of each type of mystical experience might help in giving an empirical basis for a knowledge-claim, but the phenomenal features alone are limited in providing what can be inferred about what is experienced and so are limited in adjudicating competing mystical knowledge-claims (as discussed in chapter 3).

Both experiences are passive, or better *receptive*. One may do things to cultivate such experiences, but in the end one cannot *force* the change in consciousness involved. Meditators cannot force the mind to become still by following any technique or series of steps. Indeed, as Teresa of Avila said, “the harder you try not to think of anything, the more aroused your mind becomes and you will think even more” (*Interior Castle* 4.3). In Buddhism, nirvana is considered “unconstructed” (*asamskrita*) since it is not the product of any action or the accumulation of merit. To nontheists, external help is not needed, but to theists enlightenment is a matter of grace (e.g., *Katha Up.* 2.20, *Mundaka Up.* 3.2.3, and *Shvetashvatara Up.* 1.6). To Teresa of Avila, “God gives when he will, as he will, and to whom he will.”¹² Mystical training techniques and studying doctrines can lessen a sense of self, remove mental obstacles, and calm a distracted mind; thus, they facilitate mystical experiences. But they cannot guarantee the complete end to a sense of self—as long as we are trying to “get enlightened,” we are still in an acquisitive state of mind and cannot succeed in becoming selfless. No act of self-will or any preparatory activity (including the natural triggers discussed in chapter 4) can force mystical experiences to occur: we must surrender, simply let go. In short, no actions can make us selfless. But once meditators stop trying to force the mind to change and become receptive, the mind calms itself and the mystical experiences occur automatically. To mystics, it seems that they are being acted upon: in introvertive mystical experiences, the transcendent ground that is already present within us appears while the meditator is passive; in extrovertive experiences, natural phenomena shine forth unmediated by interference from our discursive mind.

Mystical Paths

Today people meditate for health benefits and to focus attention, but the traditional objective of a mystical way of life is not for those reasons or to attain exotic experiences: it is *to correct the way we live* by overcoming our basic misconception of what is in fact real and thereby experiencing reality as it truly is, as best as humanly possible. One must become directly aware

of reality, not merely gain new information about the world. Through the mystical quest, we come to see the reality present when the background conceptual structuring to our awareness is removed from our mind—either experiencing in extrovertive states the phenomenal world independently of our conceptualizations and manipulations, or experiencing in introvertive experiences the normally concealed transcendent source of the self or of the entire natural realm free of all other mental content. No new messages from a transcendent reality are revealed (although mystics may also have such experiences). Thus, a mystical quest begins with the notion that reality is not constructed as we normally think and leads to a new way of seeing it: the world we experience through sense-experience and normal self-awareness is in fact not a collection of independently existing entities that can be manipulated to satisfy an independently existing ego. And by correcting our knowledge and our perception, we can align our lives with what is actually there and thereby ease our self-inflicted suffering.

Of particular importance is the misconception involved in the “I-Me-Mine” complex (Austin 1998, 2006): we normally think we are an independent, self-contained entity, but in fact this “self-consciousness” is just another function of the analytical mind—one that observes the rest of our mental life. By identifying with this function, we reify a separate entity—the “self” or “ego”—and set it off against the rest of reality. We see ourselves as one separate entity in a sea of distinct entities, and our ego then runs our life without any conscious connection to the source of its own being. This error (called *avidya* in Indian mysticism) is not merely the absence of correct knowledge but an active error inhibiting our seeing reality as it is: there is no separate self-existing “ego” within the field of everyday experience but only an ever-changing web of mental and physical processes. There is no need to “kill the ego” because there is no actual ego to remove to begin with—what is needed is only to free our experience from a sense of ego and its accompanying ideas and emotions and thereby see what is actually there.

More generally, the error is that our attention is constricted by conceptualization. The inner quest necessary for overcoming this falsification involves a process characterized in different traditions as “forgetting” or “fasting of the mind”—i.e., emptying the mind of all conceptual content, and in the case of the depth-mystical experience the elimination of all sensory input and other differentiated mental content. The Christian Meister Eckhart spoke of an “inner poverty”—a state free of any created will, of wanting anything, of knowing any “image,” and of having anything; such a state leads to a sense of the identity with the being of the Godhead that

is beyond God (McGinn 2006: 438–43). Anything that can be put into words except “being” encloses God, and we need to strip away everything in this way of knowing and become one (Eckhart 2009: 253–55). In medieval Christian terminology, there is a radical “recollecting” of the senses and a “purging” of the mind of all dispositional and cognitive content, especially a sense of “I.” This involves a calming or stilling of mental activity—a “withdrawal” of all powers of the mind from all objects. It is a process of “unknowing” all mental content, including all prior knowledge.¹³

Sometimes theists characterize God as “nothing” to emphasize that he is not a thing among the things in the universe. Such negative terminology emphasizes that mystics are getting away from the world of differentiation, but mystics affirm that *something real* is involved in introvertive mystical experiences: through this emptying process, mystics claim that they become directly aware of a transcendent power, not merely conceive a new idea or interpretation of the world. Nor does “forgetting oneself” mean desiring to cease to exist: in the words of the medieval English author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* in his “Letter of Private Counsel,” this would be “madness and contempt of God”—rather, mystical forgetting means “to be rid of the knowledge and feeling” of independent self-existence. The result is an awareness where all sensory, emotional, dispositional, and conceptual apparatuses are in total abeyance. And yet throughout the process, one remains awake—indeed, mystics assert that only then are we as fully conscious as is humanly possible.

Medieval Christian Franciscans and Dominicans debated whether the will or the intellect was the higher power of the soul—and thus whether love or knowledge is primary—although the consensus was that both are needed. The path to enlightenment is usually seen as an ascent, and various traditions divide it into different stages. In Christianity, since Origen of Alexandria the path has traditionally been divided into three phases: purgation, illumination, and union. Other traditions divide the quest differently. Some, such as Sufism and Buddhism, have many stages or levels of development and attainment. But progress is not steady, nor are all the experiences positive. There is also distress and anxiety and periods in which there is no progress—arid “dark nights of the soul” as John of the Cross called them in which he felt that God was absent and not working. One also may become satisfied with a blissful state on the path—what Zen Buddhists call the “cave of Mara”—and remain there without attaining enlightenment. Shri Aurobindo spoke of an “intermediate zone” where a mystic believes he or she has attained enlightenment but has not and may

end up indulging selfish desires. The Christian *Theologia Germanica* also warns against leaving images too soon and thereby never being able to understand the truth aright. There are also attacks of apparently “demonic” forces, although these may be only our normal conscious and subconscious mind not giving up without a fight—the mind may reassert itself during meditation in the form of anxiety and fear. There may also be visions and other alternative states of consciousness.¹⁴ Thus, William James can rightly refer to “diabolical mysticism” (1958: 326).¹⁵ There may also be visions and other altered states of consciousness. And after a depth-mystical experience, the analytical mind also returns quickly.

“Meditation” broadly defined involves an attempt to calm the mind by eliminating conceptualizations, dispositions, and emotions. In no mystical tradition can meditation be reduced simply to breathing exercises. Overall, meditation has two different tracks. In the Buddhist Eightfold Path, it is the distinction between “right concentration” (*samadhi*) and “right mindfulness” (*smriti*). The former focuses attention on one subject, thereby stabilizing consciousness and culminating in one-pointed attention; the latter frees experience by removing conceptual barriers to perception and thereby “expanding” it to a “pure awareness” that mirrors the flow of what is actually real as it is presented to the mind unmediated by conceptualizations. In the terms of the *Yoga Sutras*, the mind becomes clear as a crystal and shapes itself to the object of perception. There is neurological evidence supporting the claim that mindfulness meditation helps working memory and the ability to maintain multiple items of attention, and that focusing techniques increase perceptual sensitivity and visual attention (e.g., MacLean et al. 2010).

There are many different meditative techniques within each track, and not all are introvertive—e.g., Buddhist calming techniques (*shamatha*), concentration techniques focusing all consciousness with or without an object and with or without conceptions (*savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa samadhi*), Buddhist insight techniques (*vipashyana*) using one’s stabilized focus to see the nature of internal and external realities leading to insight (*prajna*), visualizing objects, relaxation techniques, extrovertive mindfulness techniques involving walking or working, repetitive prayer, ecstatic dance or other activities that overload the senses (including music, incense and flowers, and food and drink), ritualized activities (e.g., archery or gardening), repetition of words or movements, and fasting (see Andresen 2000; Shear 2006).¹⁶ Repetition of a word or phrase as a tool initially keeps the analytical mind occupied while the meditator works to calm other aspects of the mind; eventually one becomes “one” with the words, as a dancer becomes one with a dance, and

the phrase no longer interferes with one's awareness. One no longer has the thought "I am repeating this phrase" or any sense of a self separate from the actions. Different aspects of the inner life can be the subject of practice: attention, feelings, bodily awareness, and so on. There are even contradictory practices—e.g., celibacy versus sexual excess, unmarried or married, whirling Dervishes versus silent Sufis, or cultivating dispassion versus *bhakti* theistic enthusiastic devotion. (It should also be noted that meditating rigidly through a set technique for years may itself lead merely to a new mental habit and not to freedom from the conceptualizing process.) Mystical traditions also have discursive analytical exercises less directly related to emptying the mind (e.g., *koans* or studying texts). But no techniques belong inherently to only one tradition. Cultivation may cover many facets of life as with the Buddhist Eightfold Path and the *Yoga Sūtras*' Eight-Limbed Path. So too, in all religions there are institutions such as monasteries and convents with elaborate sets of rules for instruction and social support.

Meditators may practice different techniques, including techniques from both tracks since each track can aid the other in calming and focusing the mind. So too, both extrovertive and introvertive mystical experiences may occur on the path to "enlightenment" (i.e., the permanent eradication of a sense of an independent phenomenal ego). Experiences may be partial and not involve the complete emptying of a sense of ego. So too, theistic mystics may have progressively deeper experiences of a god. Extrovertive mystical experiences can also transition to introvertive ones, but the physiology of the experiencers then changes (Hood 2001: 32–47; Dunn, Hartigan, & Mikulas 1999). Different types of nonmystical religious experiences may also occur. In addition, different or more thoroughly emptied mystical experiences may occur after enlightenment.

Cultivating selfless awareness is central to mystical ways of life, but it should be noted that classical mystics actually discuss *mystical experiences* very little—how one should lead one's life, the path to enlightenment, knowledge, and the reality allegedly experienced are more often the topics. Traditionally, the goal is not any momentary experience but a continuous new existence: the mystical quest is not completed with any particular experience but with aligning one's life with the nature of reality (e.g., permanently uniting one's will with God's). The knowledge allegedly gained in mystical experiences is utilized in a continuing way of life. The reality supposedly experienced remains more central than any inner state of mind. Most mystical texts are not meditation manuals but discussions of doctrines, and to read all mystical texts as works about the psychology of different

states of consciousness is to misread them badly in light of modern thought. Even when discussing inner mental states, mystics refer more to a transformation of character or an enduring state of alignment with reality than to types of “mystical experiences,” including any transitional “enlightenment experiences” that end a sense of self. This does not mean that cultivating the special mystical experiences is not the defining characteristic of mysticism or that one could attain the enlightened state without any altered states of consciousness. It only means that mystics value most the *reality experienced* and the long-lasting *transformed state of a person* in the world and not any *state of consciousness or momentary experiences*, no matter how insightful. Even if a mystic values the experience of a transcendent reality over all doctrines, still the resulting transformed state of a person is valued more.

But mystics do claim that they realize a reality present when all the conceptual, dispositional, and emotional content of the mind is removed. Mystical experiences and states of consciousness are allegedly cognitive. Mystics claim to have a direct awareness of the bare being-in-itself—the “is-ness” of the natural realm of things apart from the conceptual divisions that we impose—or of a direct contact with a transcendent reality whereby they gain a new knowledge of reality. Both their knowledge and their will are corrected (since the individual will is based on the sense of an independent ego within the everyday world that is now seen to be baseless); and, free of self-will, mystics can now align their life with the way reality truly is and enjoy the peace resulting from no longer constantly trying to manipulate reality to fit our own artificial images and ego-driven emotions and desires.

Extrovertive Mystical Experiences

The first important distinction is between the two classes of mystical experience: “extrovertive” and “introvertive”—i.e., those with sensory input and those without. Extrovertive experiences, like introvertive experiences, have an “inner” dimension, but the two classes differ in the reality experienced. A mystical quest may lead an experiencer to an extrovertive sense of a connectedness to or unity with the flux of impermanent phenomena that can be seen when our mind is free of our conceptual, dispositional, and emotional apparatuses. Extrovertive mystical experiences involve a passive receptivity to what is presented in sensory events—indeed, a greater openness in general (MacLean et al. 2011). They may give a sense of a transcendent reality immanent in nature. All extrovertive mystical experiences involve differen-

tiated content. Thus, these states are “dualistic” in the sense that there are diffuse phenomena present in consciousness even if such phenomena are not seen as a collection of ontologically distinct entities. Mystical experiences with differentiated content have something for the mind to organize with the concepts from a mystic’s culture. But one state of consciousness may be free of all conceptualizations: a “pure” mindfulness involving sensory differentiations but not any conceptualizations.

Also note that the extrovertive mysticism remains *this-worldly*: its experiences are of the natural realm. These mystical experiences produce an alleged insight into the ultimate construction of the dynamic world of change, including in some a sense of a transcendent source within the world. But even if there is a sense of a transcendent reality immanent in the natural realm, the natural world is still the locus of the experience. What is retained from all extrovertive mystical experiences is a sense of fundamental beingness, immutability, and oneness. Thus, not all mystical experiences involve delving into the changeless transcendent source of being but can involve an experience of the beingness of “surface” phenomena. Since both types of mystical experience involve an emptying of the mind, it may seem natural to consider extrovertive experiences as simply low-level, failed, or partial cases of introvertive mystical experiences, but they are a distinct type of experience with different physiological effects in which the mind still has sensory content. Buddhism and Daoism are traditions in which extrovertive experiences are considered more central than introvertive ones for aligning one’s life with reality.

Especially prominent among extrovertive states are the spontaneous experiences of the natural world of “nature mysticism” or “cosmic consciousness.” In the former, the sensory realm may be transfigured. To William Blake, it is “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an Hour.” Nature may take on a vivid glow as if alive. Or there may be the presence in the world of a transcendent god outside of time in an “eternal now.” A sense of a transcendent reality grounding the universe may be part of an experience and not merely an inference made after the experience is over. This is a shift from nature mysticism to a cosmic consciousness. Richard M. Bucke presented the classic account of the latter (1969; see also Rankin 2008). They have in one degree or another a lessening of a sense of self and of any boundaries between the experiencer and nature and also of boundaries within nature set up by our analytical mind, leading to a sense of connectedness or partless unity (“oneness”) of oneself with all of nature.

(Interestingly, these experiences are more often reported in the West than in South Asia.) They can lead to a sense of the living presence of a timeless reality of light and love that is immanent to the natural world. Both types of experiences come in various degrees of intensity, but there is always a profound sense of connectedness with the natural world, of knowledge, and of contact with something fundamentally real. The event may be a short experience or a longer-lasting state of consciousness.

Paul Marshall describes extrovertive “noumenal experiences” as perfectly clear, luminous, highly noetic, fully detailed, and temporally inclusive, unlike ordinary sense-experience (2005: 267). He concludes that in the simplest extrovertive mystical experiences, the noumenal background is not felt strongly: the stream of phenomenal experience becomes nondual through a relaxation of sharp self/other distinctions, so that the everyday self and the body are felt to be an integral part of the stream; this brings a sense of unity, perceptual clarity, living in the “now,” peace, and joy, but no dramatic transformations of phenomena. In more developed cases, the phenomenal stream begins to reveal its noumenal bedrock, bringing luminous transfigurations of the phenomenal content, more advanced feelings of unity, a growing sense of meaning and knowledge, and a significantly altered sense of time. In the most advanced cases, the noumenal background comes to the fore, blotting out dualistic phenomenal experience altogether, and the mystics experience an all-encompassing unity, knowledge, a cosmic vision, eternity, and love, having accessed the depths of their own minds (*ibid.*). Marshall explains extrovertive experiences by combining realism and idealism: nature is externally real but mental in nature (*ibid.*: 261–68). But his approach places introvertive mystical experiences with differentiated content in the same class as extrovertive experiences.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, exemplified in Buddhism, falls into the group of extrovertive experiences when sensory data are involved. But it is not necessarily extrovertive: it may involve internal mental differentiations free of all sensory input.¹⁷ To mindfulness mystics, the analytical mind alienates us from what is real, and language is its tool: conceptualizations embedded in language stand between us and what is real, interfering with our view of what is actually real.¹⁸ Thus, language-guided perception is the opposite of mindfulness. Through habituation, our everyday perceptions, and indeed the rest of our

consciousness, become reduced to no more than seeing the very categories that our mind has itself created as being present in the external world—consciousness, in the words of the very nonmystical W. V. Quine, becomes only the reaction of our mind to our own prior reactions. Mindfulness counters this: it loosens the grip that the concepts we create have on our sense-experiences, inner experiences, and actions. The sense of a separate long-term ego vanishes (Farb et al. 2007). In mindfulness meditation, one does not try to suppress thoughts and feelings but rather to observe them silently as they occur without mental comment; in this way, they do not become distractions but other objects of awareness.

Mindfulness thus consists of simply being totally focused on what is occurring in the present moment without judgment or commentary, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. (This is easier to describe than to achieve—as the Buddha put it, it is easier to quiet a tree full of monkeys than to quiet the mind.) One comes to experience the only moment in which we are actually alive without being distracted by the past or future (Kabat-Zinn 1994). Such mindfulness results in seeing the flow of sensory input and the inner activity of the mind as it is free of memories, anticipations, emotional reactions, and the normal process of reifying the content into distinct objects based on our conceptualizations. The world is seen as a constant flux without discrete objects. Thus, mindful states of consciousness still have sensory or nonsensory mental content, but some or all the background structuring normally associated with such content has been removed. Such mindfulness may be a transient experience, but it also may become an enduring state of transformed consciousness.

Mindfulness exercises in working, walking, or just sitting destructure the conceptual frameworks structuring our perceptions. Like other meditation, this can lead to increases in vitality and energy. The resulting focus of attention produces an inner calm and clarity of awareness. This is not so much a change in the content of our sensory consciousness and inner awareness as a change in our relation to that content. Our usual way of thinking and experiencing both fade away. We normally see rugs and hear trucks—with pure mindfulness all structuring would be removed and we would see patches of color and texture free of rugness and hear sourceless noises. This is a “bare attention” to what is presented to our senses, without attention to anything in particular and with no accompanying intellectual expectations or emotional reactions. It is not a trancelike state or self-hypnosis or a state of unconsciousness—one remains fully awake and remembers it afterward. But it does involve a complete focus on what is being presented to the mind.

We like to think that we normally see the external world “as it really is,” but neuroscientists have found otherwise. There is evidence that our conscious and subconscious mind *creates* an image of the world, not merely *filters or structures* sensory data (see Peters 1998: 13–15). Experiments show that our mind “corrects” and constructs things (e.g., filling in visual blind spots). More generally, apparently our mind automatically creates a coherent, continuous narrative out of all the sensory input it receives. We see a reconstruction of the world, and this leads to the question of whether our visual world is only a “grand illusion.” Overall, the mind seems to have difficulty separating fantasies from facts—it sees things that are not there and does not see some things that are (Newberg & Waldman 2009: 5). It does not even try to create a fully detailed map of the external world; instead, it selects a handful of cues and then fills in the rest with conjecture, fantasy, and belief (ibid.). Our brain constructs a subconscious map that relates to our survival and another map that reflects our conscious awareness of the world (ibid.: 7). Mindfulness interferes with this fabrication, making us more alert and attentive, and thus lets in more of the world as it really is into our awareness. Indeed, contra cognitive science, mindfulness mystics claim that we can have a “pure” mind free of all conceptualizations that mirrors only what is actually there.

It is this sense of “illusion” that is the central concern of mindfulness mystics: conceptualizing off independent “entities” from the flow of events. We live in a world of items conceptualized out of the flow of events and react to our own conceptions. Only in this sense is the world “unreal” or an “illusion,” and what we need to do is to rend the conceptual veil and get to what is really there. To convey the sense of what is real and what is illusory, *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.1.3–4 gives the analogy of a clay pot. The clay represents what is real (i.e., the permanent beingness lasting before and after whatever shape it currently is in) and the potness represents what is illusory (i.e., the temporary and impermanent form the clay is in at the moment). If we smash the pot, the “thingness” is destroyed, but what is real in the pot (the clay) continues unaffected. Mindfulness mystics see the clay but no distinct entity (the pot).¹⁹ And they do not dismiss the world as “unreal” or “illusory” in any stronger sense. (Even for the depth-mystical Advaita Vedanta the world cannot be dismissed as a complete nonreality: the world is neither the same as Brahman nor distinct from it, and so its ontic status is indescribable [*anirvachaniya*].) That is, mindfulness still involves a realism about the experienced realm, but it is a realism not grounded in an awareness of sensed differentiations or linguistic distinctions.

Through mindfulness there is Gestalt-like switch, not from one figure to another (e.g., from a duck to a rabbit in the Kohler drawing), but from any figure to the bare colors. That is, our awareness becomes focused on the beingness of the natural realm rather than the things that we normally conceptualize out. (This is not to deny that there are figures but to see their impermanence, interconnectedness, and beingness.) There is an openness and passive receptivity not previously present. This permits more richness to the sensory input that is now freed from being routinely cataloged by our preformed characterizations. The experiences may not have the intensity or vividness of cosmic consciousness or nature mystical experience, but perception is refreshed by the removal of conceptual restrictions.

In the resulting state, an experience of a uniformity and interconnectedness to all we experience in the phenomenal realm comes through—what Nagarjuna called the “thatness” (*tattva*) of things—is presented to the senses. In particular, with this new sense of shared beingness any sense of a distinct ego within the natural world vanishes. The conceptual border separating us from the rest of the natural world has been broken, with the resulting sense of an intimate connectedness of everything. In sensory mindfulness, one can be aware that there is content in your mind without dropping out of the experience, unlike in a depth-mystical experience. And if an experience involves a sense of the presence of a transcendent reality in nature or of the “mind of the world,” then the mind is still not emptied of all differentiated content as with the depth-mystical experience.

With mindfulness, we see what is presented to our mind as it is, free of our purposes, feelings, desires, and attempts at control. The content of sensory experience remains differentiated, but we do not pick and choose, setting one conceptually distinct object against another. The mindful live fully in the present, free of temporal structuring, witnessing whatever arises in their consciousness without judging and without a sense of possession, and they respond spontaneously. (As discussed in chapter 9, this spontaneity does not necessarily mean that mystics are acting free of values and beliefs; even in their enlightened state, mystics may have internalized values and beliefs from their religious tradition or other sources.) To most of us, the present is fully structured by our past categories and our expectations and future intentions. To mystics, as long as we have this intentional mind, we have no access to reality: only with a mindful mind do we no longer identify with our thoughts and emotions but simply observe things free of a sense of self, living fully in the “now.” There is a shift in consciousness from mental categorizations to an awareness of the sheer beingness of things.

In Buddhism, a person with a concentrated mind knows and sees things as they really are (*yathabhutam*). Awareness is freed from the dominance of our habitual categorizations and anticipations, and our mind becomes tranquil and lucid. Jiddhu Krishnamurti called this “choiceless awareness” (Lutygens 1983: 42).

The field of perception is no longer fragmented. Awareness is no longer tied to the images we manufacture—i.e., in Buddhist terms, it no longer “abides” anywhere or “grasps” anything. In the words of the Dalai Lama, “nondual perception” is “the direct perception of an object without the intermediary of a mental image.” Note that he does not deny that there is something there to be perceived—only now we see it as it really is, free of conceptualizations setting up dualities. The false world we create of distinct, self-contained entities is seen through, and phenomenal reality appears as it actually is. The mind mirrors only what is there, without adding or distorting whatever is presented. Mental categories no longer fix our mind, and our attention shifts to the “thatness” of things, although some conceptual structuring will remain present in all but a state of pure mindfulness.

Since language refers to the differentiations in the phenomenal realm and is itself a matter of differentiations, mystics always have trouble with applicability of language to undifferentiated beingness. Moreover, empirical studies of meditators suggest that a nonlinguistic aspect of the brain is attuned to beingness, and thus conceptualizations remove us from the proper state of mind to experience beingness. In addition, even phenomenal reality cannot be mirrored in any conceptualizations: words denote distinct entities, and according to mindfulness mystics phenomenal reality is not constructed of discrete parts. But mindfulness mystics are generally realists in the broad metaphysical sense: extrovertive mystics uniformly reject the idea of ontologically distinct, independent, and self-contained entities within the phenomenal world, but they affirm a reality “beneath” such concept-generated illusions—only objectness is an illusion generated by the mind. That is, the beingness of the world’s phenomena is affirmed, although it may also be seen as related to a theistic or nonpersonal transcendent source. Such common-sense realism does not have a built-in correspondence theory of epistemology or any views on materialism, determinism, reductionism, or naturalism.

Misled by the appearance of permanence and our categorization of what is experienced, we unenlightened folk “create” distinct objects by imposing our ideas onto the world—i.e., reifying our conceptualizations into a world of multiple, distinct entities. What is actually there inde-

pendent of our conceptualizations is real, but we take the conceptual and perceptual distinctions we ourselves create as capturing what is “real” in the world. Most importantly, this includes the idea of a distinct ego. Buddhists affirm that there is thinking and other mental events, but no thinker: if we think of the “person” as a string of beads, there is a succession of beads (momentary mental events) but no string. So too, the discrete “objects” of sense-experience and introspection are “unreal” only in this limited sense: the beingness behind the conceptual differentiations remains real and undifferentiated. While still on the path to enlightenment, a mindfulness mystic sees individual “objects,” but it is their beingness that is the focus of attention, and once enlightened any self-contained individuality in the experiencer or the experienced world is seen as illusory. In sum, we misread sensory experience and construct an illusory world of multiple realities out of what is real in phenomena. What we conceptually separate as “entities” are only eddies in a constantly flowing and integrated field of events. That is, the world of multiple “real” (independent, self-contained) entities is an illusion but not what is really there—the eddies in the flow of events are not unreal but are simply not isolated entities, unconnected to the rest of the flow. The alleged discrete entities are the “discriminations” that Buddhists deny are real.

Thus, with mindfulness we see the mundane with fresh perceptions. It removes habituation from our perceptions. It renews attention to all that is presented and ends the role of concepts guiding our attention. Our attention is “purified” regardless of what we are observing. Mindfulness is thus not about attaining a state of consciousness unconnected to observations, or seeing something special about the world, or anything more (or less) profound than seeing the flow of the world as it is free of the constraints of our conceptualizations and emotions.

Introvertive Mystical Experiences

The second class of mystical experiences occurs in the concentrative track of meditation when there is no sensory input. It leads to an introvertive awareness of a transcendent reality underlying at least all of the experiencer’s subjective phenomena or in fact all natural phenomena. Such a reality can be called another “level” of reality than the phenomenal world since it is the source of at least something in the natural world. An important distinction here is between introvertive mystical experiences with differentiable content

and those without. Both theistic and nontheistic experiences occur in the first group. In theistic experiences, the differentiated content seems personal in nature. Introvertive experiences may be what Teresa of Avila referred to as “supernatural” and John of the Cross called “infused contemplation.” With these experiences, there is a change in the state of consciousness from both ordinary awareness and extrovertive mystical experiences: attention shifts from the phenomenal realm to an inner wellspring of reality lying outside the realm of time and change that grounds either phenomenal consciousness or all of the phenomenal realm. The inward turn begins with objects of concentration, but it is not a matter replacing the content with an image of nothingness (e.g., a big, black, silent, empty space), but of eventually emptying the mind of all thought, emotion, sensation, and any other internal distinguishable content. Extrovertive states may be long-lasting or even permanent, but introvertive experiences are transient, being disrupted by life in the phenomenal world.

Theistic introvertive mystical experiences are differentiated since there is a sense of a self realizing another reality. That is, there are dualistic introvertive experiences where differentiated phenomena are not yet eradicated, and theists take what is sensed as an experience of an active separate self—the presence of the benevolent transcendent God loving the experiencer. This sense is especially strong when a sense of bliss is part of the experience itself. Nontheists may dismiss this as merely the product of enculturation in a theistic society or of the mystical training in a theistic tradition and not the presence of God but merely the experiencer’s own subconscious. “Love mysticism” is then seen as dominating Christianity only because the doctrine of God’s unconditional love is central to Christian theology, not because of anything experiential. But theists take the sense of being unconditionally loved as a genuine part of a theistic introvertive experience itself.

Whether theists are correct or not, it does appear from the mystical texts that these experiences differ in nature from the “empty” depth-experience: the experiences themselves still involve differentiated content of a personal character. They are not merely theistic postexperience interpretations of the depth-experience, contra Walter Stace (1960a) and Ninian Smart (1965). But Stace discounted all theistic descriptions of mystical experiences as obviously interpretations, while accepting nontheistic descriptions as closer to a bare description, for philosophical reasons: he wanted to use the latter descriptions in an argument from unanimity to support mystical knowledge-claims and had to get around the conflict of theistic and nontheistic accounts. Theists may just as easily discount nontheistic interpretations