

Summer 1989

## Mysticism, Enlightenment, and Morality

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### Recommended Citation

Novak, Philip, "Mysticism, Enlightenment, and Morality" (1989). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 135.

<https://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/135>

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# Mysticism, Enlightenment, and Morality

Philip Novak

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*To refrain from all evil, to achieve the good, to purify one's own heart—this is the teaching of all Awakened Ones.*

Dhammapada, 183

*From the crooked wood of which man is made, nothing quite straight can be built. Only an approximation of this goal is expected of us by nature.*

Immanuel Kant

Our outspoken anthropologist friend, Dr. A. Bharati, once remarked that if someone is a stinker before a mystical experience, he'll be a stinker afterwards.<sup>1</sup> The swami's observation stemmed from years spent among the holy men of India and, no doubt, from considerable personal experience. It is an exaggeration, of course, but we cannot dismiss his crucial point: it is quite possible to be a mystic and a stinker. If we refuse to take Bharati's word for it, we need only to examine the numerous recent accounts of the oafish behavior displayed by acclaimed mystic-teachers. Or we can scan our friends—lots of them have had mystical experiences (A. Greeley puts the figure of mystically experienced Americans at about 40 percent), and some remain incorrigible. Mystical experiences can come and go, it seems, without altering the fundamental habit patterns and tendencies that vector our behavior.

It is precisely this that separates mystical experience from the wider, deeper process of enlightenment. Enlightenment necessarily involves a lasting transformation of character (*character* is my shorthand for deep structural determinants of consciousness), while mystical experience does not. Enlightenment is an irreducibly moral notion and is, existentially speaking, inversely proportional to stinkerism. At least this is so for Buddhism, the tradition to which we owe, more than to any other, the very notion of enlightenment, and the tradition on which I base the assertions ventured here.

We often picture the Buddha, cross-legged beneath the Bo Tree, aglow with his enlightenment experience; we imagine perhaps that if we too could have this experience we would suddenly be the radiantly wise and compassionate being he was. In doing so, we forget that the snake's skin cannot be ripped off, but must be shed. The Buddha's enlightenment moment was itself the culmination of a long process ("many lives") of moral and intellectual development, and this moment could neither have occurred nor been what it was without the gradual transformation of character that preceded it. Swami Vivekananda once said that a fool who enters samadhi comes out a sage, but we know enough now to see this as a well-intentioned oversimplification.

As many seekers in the last decade have shifted their primary attention from mushrooms to meditation, the distinction I am drawing here has become increasingly obvious. The democratization of mystical experience made possible by psychedelics had fueled an experiential fascination with "peak experiences" and an intellectual cottage industry in comparative mysticism, but slowly the suspicion has grown: mystical experiences alone cannot an awakened being make. Reminders such as the following from Buddhist scholar Robert Gimello have been helpful:

The mysticism of any particular mystic is really the whole pattern of his life. The rare and wonderful "peaks" of experience are a part of that pattern, but only a part, and their real value lies only in their relation to the other parts, to his thought, his moral values, his conduct towards others, his character and personality, etc. The modern study of mysticism has, I believe, tended to overlook those relations.<sup>2</sup>

There are no enlightened beings because, strictly speaking, there are no individual, independent beings whatsoever.

The transformative process of enlightenment may well involve one or more mystical experiences, but it muddies matters to speak of enlightenment as any single, discrete experience. While denying neither the breakthrough character of mystical experience, nor its potential to reorient the human will, it is a mistake—even for those of us to whom the experiential dimension of religion matters most—to emphasize it as the goal of the Path. For no single experience, no matter how extraordinary, is likely to permanently reorient the deep structures of consciousness. Lacking the accompaniment of an ongoing personal transformation, the mystical experience often fades into a happy memory with steadily diminishing effect.

Our conformation to spiritual archetypes and ethical ideals requires a slow maturation of the psyche, and such maturation can take place only in the gradual unfolding of the Path, whether or not it is accompanied by the mystical experience. Enlightenment properly names not an altered state of consciousness but an altered *trait* of consciousness, a transformation of character that is, except in so few cases as to be negligible, never complete (more on this below). Mystical experience is certainly not antithetical to enlightenment; although it may be one of its necessary conditions, it is not a sufficient one.

## MYSTICISM AND MEDITATION

Another way to look at this is to examine the relationship between mystical experience and the practice of Buddhist meditation. It is falsely supposed that the former is the proper end of the latter. Falsely, because mystical experience as it is usually understood corresponds to only one of the two components of Buddhist meditation, the component that falls under the general heading of “tranquility” (*samatha*) and under the specific heading of “absorption” (*jhana*).

The various forms of Buddhist *bhavana* (mental culture, i.e., “meditation”) begin with an effort at sustained attention so as to establish some stability within the mental flux.

This process is called “calming down,” or “tranquility,” and tranquility admits of degrees. Though it begins with simple attentional training, it can lead to those increasingly profound states of absorption that Buddhists call *jhana* (classically, there are eight of them) and that comparativists have tended to identify as examples of Buddhist mysticism. But *jhana* are at best ancillary (and at worst counterproductive) to the full fruition of Buddhist practice.

Scriptural accounts tell us that the Buddha mastered the seventh and the eighth *ghanas* under his first two meditation teachers, respectively. He found, however, that his virtuoso mastery of these rarified states of absorption could not produce liberating enlightenment; that is, they could not eradicate the deepest layers of craving, aversion, and false understanding. Therefore, he abandons them, the scriptures say, “in disgust.”<sup>3</sup> Robert Gimello makes the point emphatically:

... the ecstatic and unitive experiences . . . (i.e., *samatha*, *samadhi*, etc.), which are just the experiences usually cited by those who aver the essential identity of Buddhist mysticism with the mysticism of other traditions, are shown to have *no liberative value or cognitive force in themselves*.<sup>4</sup>

The learned Buddhist commentator, Sangharakshita, adds that, “to get ‘stuck’ in a super-conscious state [*jhana*—the fate that befalls so many mystics—without understanding the necessity of developing insight, is for Buddhism not a blessing but an unmitigated disaster.”<sup>5</sup>

Sangharakshita’s mention of “insight” introduces the second and indeed more important component of Buddhist meditation. *Vipassana* (literally, seeing in a variety of ways), which perhaps can best be translated as “discernment,” is the truly active ingredient in Buddhist *bhavana*, and it is something quite different from what is usually meant by “mystical experience.” “It is,” says Gimello,

an intellectual operation which, though it may be abetted by mystical experiences, . . . is also *performed upon them* [his emphasis]. It is a form of meditative analysis . . . by which Buddhists critically evaluate their mystical experiences, *disenchant themselves of them* [my emphasis]. . . . Specifically, discernment combats the tendency, manifest in other “mystical” traditions, to ontologize the content of mystical experience.<sup>6</sup>

Buddhist meditation is, thus, to a perhaps unexpected extent, anti-mystical. Though a significant degree of concentrative mastery is essential to the progress of discernment, the

former is a means to the latter and not an end in itself. The venerable Buddhist scholar Nyana-ponika Thera once told me that no concentrative-absorptive ability beyond the second *jhana* (not easy, but hardly supramundane) is necessary for the full fruition of practice; the higher *jhanas*, though very interesting, are supererogatory (see note 5). Gimello concurs. The ecstatic and unitive experiences of the Buddhist contemplative, he writes, "are only the psychosomatic circumstances in which one can exercise discernment . . . of the truth of Buddhist doctrine. This, in turn, leads to insight (*prajna*) into the true nature of things, thence to compassion (*karuna*) the latter being the final goal of Buddhist practice."<sup>7</sup>

Gimello is correct about this, and his case for the primacy of the moral element in Buddhist practice deserves a final echo:

The point of Buddhist meditation, including the mystical experiences it allows, is as Dogen has said, "not to obtain a certain thing" but to "become a certain man." Mystical experience . . . has no sovereign autonomy in Buddhism. Rather it is seen to have important consequences for all areas of human life—not the least of which is morality—and to be judged according to those consequences. The mystical experience affects the moral life, Buddhists believe, and they therefore take the greatest pains in their meditative disciplines to see to it that its effect is the proper, just and compassionate one.<sup>8</sup>

## OUR TIMES

In the midst of one of the many upheavals that have shaken spiritual communities over the last few years, my friend Lew Richmond offered this oracular reminder: "There are no enlightened beings. There is only enlightened activity." Activity is to be judged on its own merit, not via presuppositions about the spiritual state of the actor.

There are no enlightened beings, furthermore, because, strictly speaking, there are no individual, independent beings whatsoever. This is the central message of the Heart and Diamond Sutras, the pre-eminent sutras of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Reality is a constantly flowing field of activity, some of it enlightened, some not. To suppose that there is a static entity called an enlightened being is to commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, a Buddhist mistake.

If this piece of Buddhist philosophy seems too arcane, however, there is a more obvious existential ground for our assertion. There are no enlightened beings because virtually no one reaches full enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> Full enlighten-

ment means (at least): a process of psycho-transformative insight so complete that all ego-generative tendencies of craving, aversion, and falsely-seizing-upon-a-self within the radically processive phenomenal flow—even the subtlest, most latent, and most deeply unconscious of these tendencies—are *completely and utterly eradicated and can no longer arise*.

Full enlightenment, in this sense, is probably a myth, in the grandest sense of that term.<sup>10</sup> At least we should say that full enlightenment or complete and perfect Buddhahood are extremely rare attainments. It follows that what we have in the vast majority of Buddhist lives—and, I would venture, in the lives of spiritual pilgrims everywhere—are not final "arrivals" but closer and fuller approximations of the enshrined ideal, an increasing degree of ripeness on a scale of virtually infinite degrees.

The search for human spiritual perfection is asymptotic. We are never fully there, but always on the way. The desire to save all sentient beings is but the Buddhist portrait of the universal ethical horizon against which the life of awakening is *endlessly* pursued. To reach *complete* Buddhahood or to enlighten *even the grass* are the *infinitely* distant horizons toward which the aspirant wends his or her way, deepening insight and realizing compassion, as inappropriate notions of selfhood fall away and old suffering-causing behavior patterns erode.

We should, therefore, be systematically skeptical about the label "fully enlightened being" and our tendency to project it onto those who seem further along than we are. To such beings we should show profound respect and an energetic willingness to learn, all the while mindful that enlightened *activity* is the only finally reliable indicator.

A teacher can have plenty to teach without being "fully enlightened," and I for one am acutely aware of and profoundly grateful for all the people in this world who are clearly more enlightened than I. I can learn much from these great beings, but I don't have to idolize them in order to do so. I sometimes think that the "scandals" that have occurred in spiritual communities are due less to the all-too-human foibles of their leaders than to our own uncritical projections of superhumanity onto them. It is, of course, another story if they themselves claim or willingly accept such designations. In this connection, it is worth recalling the tip given by a member of the Nixon White House to a reporter: "Watch what we do, not what we say."

Perhaps the most pernicious abdication of our rationality has been the tendency to see enlightened masters as beyond morality and thus to excuse their grosser breaches of it as subtle teaching, beyond our ken, meant to push us beyond our current conceptual limitations. Even a teacher who is so wise as to know that morality does not exist in "ultimate reality" ought to have the brains to understand that such a breach may well cause in his as-yet "unenlightened" followers a degree of confusion and disillusionment sufficient to reverse all previous spiritual progress. A teacher who violates everyday morality is either guilty of a moral lapse or a strategic error. In either case, the conclusion as to his perfection ought to be easy to draw.

Of the relatively enlightened teachers and mystics of our time perhaps we can say: I learn much from him/her; s/he is more enlightened, wiser, more compassionate than I; s/he is a mystic, a visionary, a seer, . . . and, occasionally, a schmuck. There is little lost in talking like this, except the passion for transference. We need not be overly credulous or worshipful if our Master has been approved by two separate lineages, has had twenty confirmed satoris, or is a reincarnated tulku. Ken McLeod, who has given a large portion of his adult life to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism but who has not lost his critical eye, recently told me that there are now fifty-two "His Holinesses" on the Tibetan landscape. I find this ironic. One of the Buddha's central contributions, after all, was to preach *against* the ancient Brahmanical idea of *hereditary holiness*. Can't we get our enlightenment the old-fashioned way—by earning it?

#### AFTERWORD: MYSTICISM SCHMYSTICISM

Last summer I read two acclaimed and erudite scholarly tomes on mysticism.<sup>11</sup> Their aim was to show that mysticism is really quite different in the different traditions and that the so-called mystical experience is not universal and, therefore, should not be accepted as evidence for a "transcendent unity" of religions. Quite apart from this interesting, though debatable, claim, what caught my attention was a secondary matter. For all the clarity that shines forth in these volumes, a great deal of fog also accumulates, primarily around the very category of mysticism. An informal tally reveals the following mysticisms alluded to: Talmudic, Zoharic, Lurianic, absorptive, nonabsorptive, natural, supernatural, theistic,

nontheistic, Semitic, Indian, monistic, dualistic, Upanishadic, yogic, bhaktic, Buddhist, soul-mysticism, God-mysticism, mysticism of the historical event, rationalistic mysticism, speculative mysticism, and diabolical mysticism. We have here a lifetime supply of grist for the scholar's mill but a trackless jungle for the spiritual wayfarer.

There are obviously lots of experiences out there, but what of it? Human beings have always been able to do much more with their minds and tongues than they have been able to do with their entire behavioral sets. That is why the moral codes of the great religious traditions are vastly more similar to one another than are their eschatological visions, their metaphysical systems, or their mystical reports. I like to think that it was in response to some interminable debate about mystical experiences that the Buddha offered his own monks the following benediction. Notice the absence of mystical categories and the near-total reliance on moral ones:

Of whatsoever teaching . . . you can assure yourself thus: these doctrines conduce to dispassion not to passion, to detachment not to bondage, to decrease of worldly gain not increase, to frugality not covetousness, to content not discontent, to solitude not to company, to energy not to sluggishness, to delight in the good not delight in evil. Of such teachings you may with certainty affirm:

This is the norm.

This is the discipline.

This is the master's message.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This is a rough paraphrase from memory of a passage in his *Light at the Center*.

2. Robert Gimello, "Mysticism and Its Contexts," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 85.

3. Majjhima Nikaya, I.240 ff, quoted in *The Life of Buddha*, Edward J. Thomas (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1927), 63.

4. Gimello, "Mysticism and Its Contexts," 63.

5. B. Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (Bangalore: Indian Institute of World Culture, 1966), 172. Sangharakshita's full statement on this issue is worth noting: "In fact, with the sole exception of neighborhood-concentration, though the various stages of *samadhi* are a means to the development of liberating insight . . . they are even as a means not indispensable. Hence two kinds of disciples are distinguished. There are those who attain the transcendental paths (*ariya-magga*) with "tranquility" as their vehicle (*samatha-yanika*) and those who, on the other hand, attain them by means of bare insight alone (*suddha-vipassana-yanika*), without having passed through any of the *jhanas*."

6. Robert Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 189.

7. Gimello, "Mysticism and Its Contexts," 63.

8. Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," 193-94.



9. In his *Theravada Meditation*, Winston King notes "... a contrast between the Buddha's day and our own: then there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of monks who had achieved arhantship; now there are few if any arhants" (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1980, 118; italics mine). I once asked Nyanaponika Thera if in his sixty years as a Theravadin monk he had ever heard of anyone claiming to be or declared (by whom?) to be an arahant (fully enlightened one). He said he was not aware of any such cases. Do these observations mean that contemporary humanity is in a deplorable state? Or do they suggest that scriptural reports of "thousands" of arhants are very likely exaggerated?

10. Was the Buddha himself fully enlightened? I mean no disrespect by the question, and, in any case, it is one

that admits neither of proof nor disproof. Given what historians of religion now know about the tendency of religious communities to attribute a certain kind of supra-human completeness to their founders, my point in asking it is simply to suggest that Buddhists who are astute at pointing up the mythic elements of other traditions often have a blind spot with regard to their own. Full enlightenment may be a myth and Perfect Buddhahood an archetype that the man Gautama approximated to an extraordinary degree in somewhat the same way that Jesus of Nazareth approximated Divine Sonship and Perfect Love.

11. The books cited in notes 2 and 6.

12. *Vinaya-Pitaka* II.10, re-ordered and edited to eliminate repetitions.