

Unknowing and Unsayings: Negation in the Mystic Quest

By
Robert K. Clark

Until you deny all else, the affirmation of God escapes you;
I am denying in order that you may find the way to affirm.
I play the tune of negation: when you die death will disclose the mystery—
Not the death that takes you into the dark grave,
But the death whereby you are transmuted and enter into the Light.
*Rumi*¹

Mysticism is a word which has been both widely used and also misused. It derives from the Greek word *mystes*, “one who is initiated”, even as the word *mystikos* means “mystic”, “mystical” or “connected with the mysteries”. The etymological relationship of “mysticism” to “mystery” is evident. If mysticism has to do with that which is mysterious, however, it is not “misty” or vague. Nor should it to be equated with the occult or parapsychology, or with the powers with which these deal, such as clairvoyance or telekinesis. Mysticism should also be distinguished from shamanism. Both mysticism and shamanism have a relationship to ecstasy² and, from one point of view, both involve union with a sacred power. However, unlike mysticism, in shamanism the power involved is outside the shaman and has to be invited to enter him or her before union can be achieved.³

It is not surprising that there are many varying definitions of mysticism⁴, as mysticism deals with the infinite, which, by its very nature precludes the limitation of finite demarcation. The following definition, however, affords us a good starting point for our exploration:

Mysticism is “the doctrine or belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality, etc., is attainable through immediate intuition, insight, or illumination, and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination.”⁵

¹ Reynold A. Nicholson, tr., *Rumi: Poet and Mystic (1207-1275)* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 105. This passage is suggestive of the Platonic idea of the twofold death, i.e., the death of the body, wherein the body leaves the soul and, on the other hand, that death wherein the soul leaves the things of the body behind. Porphyry thus writes: “There is a twofold death, one which is known to all, in which the body is released from the soul, and the other death, that of philosophers, in which the soul is released from the body.” (Porphyry, *Starting Points Toward the Intelligibles* 9. Translation © Robert K. Clark, 2006, all rights reserved. Porphyry’s *Ἀφορμαὶ πρὸς τὰ νοήματα* is often cited as *Sententiae*.) Elsewhere Rumi writes:

The Prophet said, “O seeker of the mysteries, wouldst thou see a dead man living,
Walking on the earth, like living men, yet his spirit dwells in Heaven,
Because it has been translated before death and will not be translated when he dies—
A mystery beyond understanding, understood only by dying.

(Nicholson, tr., *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, p. 131.)

² “Shamanism = *technique of ecstasy*.” Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), p. 4. “Nearly all the great contemplatives...describe as a distinct, and regard as a more advanced phase of the spiritual consciousness, the group of definitely ecstatic states in which the concentration of interest on the Transcendent is so complete, the gathering up and pouring out of life on this one point so intense, that the subject is entranced, and becomes, for the time of the ecstasy, wholly unconscious of the external world.” Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 427. See also Marghanita Laski, *Ecstasy: A Study of some Secular and Religious Experiences* (New York: Greenwood, 1968).

³ Eva Wang, *Shambhala Guide to Taoism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1977), p. 46.

⁴ A number of these are included in Appendix A of William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 1899), pp. 335-48.

⁵ *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, 2nd edition. This broadly-based definition has the virtue of not precluding, by its presuppositions, non-theistic conceptions of the ultimate reality, such as are found in Buddhism.

Mysticism thus involves

the apprehension of *an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things*, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate. In other words, it entirely transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness.⁶

Because mysticism involves *direct* knowledge of ultimate reality, mystical experiences often tend to conform to the essentialization theory of deification, or, as we more broadly stated here, of *the attainment of ultimate reality*.⁷ The essentializational theory is basically founded on the viewpoint that attainment of ultimate reality consists in realizing our own true nature. The transformational theory is founded on the gradual transformation of potentiality into actuality, of aspiration into realization, of the glimpse of reality into vision. The substitutional theory is based on the supposition that the attainment of ultimate reality cannot be attained without reliance upon a superior principle. Every religion incorporates elements of each of these three theories.⁸ The mystical element in every great spiritual tradition, when given expression in finite language, points to an ultimate reality which is essentially one, whether it is approached negatively or positively, as fullness or emptiness, as being, non-being or beyond being.

As it transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness, mysticism involves consciousness beyond the limitations of the finite, what Dionysius the Areopagite termed *agnosia*, “unknowing”, which is not nescience, but rather “a super-knowledge not obtained by means of the discursive reason.”⁹

Leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, with Him Who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things thou mayest be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness.¹⁰

⁶ Walter T. Stace, *Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: New American Library, 1960), pp. 14-15. Italics in original.

⁷ These theories are set forth in William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, Appendix C: “The Doctrine of Deification”, pp. 356-68.

⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this article to detail this conformity, several examples can at least be given. While Christianity may be often seen as substitutional (e.g., “Christ in you the hope of glory, *Colossians* 1: 27), Christian mystical experience embodies much of the essentialization (as seen in Meister Eckhart and others). It also involves gradual transformation through such spiritual practices as prayer, meditation, contemplation, fasting, and the practice of the presence of God. Buddhist mysticism, on the other hand, might be considered as conforming more to the essentialization theory. It does not view mysticism as “the art of union with reality”, as Evelyn Underhill* defines mysticism, as the goal is not to *unite* with reality, but to *awaken* to it. “The Buddhist, therefore, does not endeavour to ‘dissolve his being in the infinite’, to fuse his finite consciousness with the consciousness of the all, or to unite his soul with the all-soul; his aim is to become *conscious* of his ever-existing, indivisible and undivided completeness. To this completeness nothing can be added, and from it nothing can be taken away. . . . The Perfectly Enlightened Ones are those who have been awakened to the perfect consciousness of completeness.” (Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1960), pp. 80-81. Italics in original). However, Buddhism also incorporates much that is *transformational* in nature in its various practices, as well as much that is *substitutional* in nature, as, in Mahayana Buddhism, the reliance on saviour deities such as Tara and Avolokitesvara. On substitutionalism in the various traditions, see S. G. F. Brandon, ed., *The Saviour God* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963). Aspects of Buddhist substitutionalism are considered in Edward Conze’s essay, “Buddhist Saviours”, pp. 67-82 of this work). *Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (London: Dent, 1914), p. 3.

⁹ Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom, trs., *Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite*. (Fintry: Shrine of Wisdom, 2005), p. 20 *fn*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

The divine darkness is not the absence of light, but rather a superabundance of light. Thus the Egyptians called the Ineffable “an unknowable darkness.”¹¹ . Similarly the English metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan wrote in his poem *The Night*:

There is in God (some say)
A Deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear;
Of for that night! where I in him
Might live invisible and dim.

And the German Christian mystic Johann Scheffler, under the pseudonym of Angelus Silesius, wrote:

Who in this mortal life would see
The Light that is beyond all light,
Beholds it best by faring forth
Into the darkness of the Night.¹²

Similarly, in Sufism, Islamic mysticism,

Pure Being, devoid of qualities and relations, is called by Jili “the dark mist” or “blindness” (*al-‘Ama*), a term which the Prophet is said to have used in answering the question, “Where was God before the creation?”¹³

The acknowledgement of unknowing, of ascending beyond knowing, is echoed in other mystical works, such as the anonymous medieval text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose author states:

On this same manner ghostly¹⁴ it fareth within our spiritual wits, when we travail about the knowing of God Himself. For have a man never so much ghostly understanding in knowing of all made ghostly things, yet may he never by the work of his understanding come to the knowing of an unmade ghostly thing: the which is nought but God. But by the failing it may: for why, that thing that it faileth in is nothing else but only God. And therefore it was that Saint Denis¹⁵ said, *the most goodly knowing of God is that, the which is known by unknowing.*¹⁶

Even as Dionysius is a primary source for the concept of *agnosia*, “unknowing”, in the spiritual quest, so too is he a wellspring for the use of both *apophasis*, “speaking away” “unsaying” or negation, as well as *kataphasis*, “speaking toward” or affirmation. In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius primarily employs *kataphasis*, “speaking towards”, the *via*

¹¹ Damascius, *Doubts and Solutions Concerning the First Principle* 46 (Ruelle I. 92. 1-2).

¹² J. E. Crawford Fritch, tr., *Angelus Silesius: Selections from The Cherubic Wanderer*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 118.

¹³ R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), p. 94.

¹⁴ That is, *spiritually*.

¹⁵ I.e., Dionysius the Areopagite.

¹⁶ Evelyn Underhill, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London: Stuart & Watkins: 1970), pp. 255-56. A rendition of this passage in contemporary English reads:

It is quite the same in a spiritual way when we work with our spiritual senses seeking a knowledge of God Himself. No matter how much spiritual understanding a man may have in the knowledge of all created spiritual things, he can never come by means of this understanding to the knowledge of an uncreated spiritual thing. And this is nothing but God. But he may do so through his incapacity, for the thing that he is unable to know is nothing else than God.

It was for this reason that Saint Denis said, “The best knowledge of God is what is known by unknowing.” Ira Progoff, tr., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Julian Press, 1957), pp. 229-30.

affirmativa, while in *The Mystical Theology* he predominately employs *apophasis*, the *via negativa*.

The use of *apophasis* is common to many of the philosophers in the Platonic tradition, including Plato, Apuleius, Philo, and Plotinus.¹⁷ It is to be found also in the Christian tradition, as in Dionysius, John of Damascus, and Meister Eckhart.¹⁸ In a broader sense, “unsaying”, the use of denial in the mystical approach to whatever is conceived of as the ultimate reality¹⁹, is also to be found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as in the Eastern traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism.²⁰

Thus Plotinus writes that the One, the ultimate reality of Neoplatonism, is not being, but beyond being.²¹ It is all things, but none of them.²² In the Kabbalah, the mystical tradition in Judaism, the ultimate reality, *En Sof*, is limitless and unknowable.²³ Among the Sufis, the mystics of Islam, the ultimate reality is the Unseen²⁴ and Absolute Unknowableness.²⁵ In the Christian tradition, Dionysius affords us many examples of unsaying, such as the following:

Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that He is neither soul nor intellect; nor has He imagination, opinion, reason, or understanding, nor is He any act of reason or understanding. Nor can He be expressed or conceived, since He is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality, nor similarity nor dissimilarity.²⁶

While Angelus Silesius wrote that:

God is an utter Nothingness,
Beyond the touch of Time and Place:
The more thou graspest after Him,
The more he fleeth thy embrace.²⁷

In Hinduism, Brahman, the ultimate reality, cannot be expressed by words, thought by the mind, seen by the eye, heard by the ear or breathed by breath.²⁸ It is

immeasurable, unborn, inscrutable, unthinkable.²⁹

Sunyata, the Void or Emptiness, is the ultimate reality in Buddhism.

¹⁷ For a detailed study, see Deirdre Carabine, *Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters, n.d. [1995]).

¹⁸ “Inexpressible is the Deity, and incomprehensible”. (John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 1.1). *Apophasis* in Dionysius is evident throughout *The Mystical Theology*, as well as in the works of Meister Eckhart. See especially the Shrine of Wisdom edition of *The Mystical Theology and Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite*; Carabine, *The Unknown God*, pp. 279-300; and Vladamir Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1998).

¹⁹ “God”, “Tao”, “Sunyata”, “En Sof”, “Brahman”, etc., are terms used by the various traditions to indicate this ultimate reality.

²⁰ A useful study centering on unsaying in the Neoplatonic, Christian and Sufi traditions is Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²¹ *Ennead* v. 4. 2. 38.

²² *Ennead* v. 2. 1. 1.

²³ Charles Poncé, *Kabbalah: An Introduction and Illumination for the World Today* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973), p. 15.

²⁴ Aisha Abd Ar-Rahman At-Tarjumana, tr., *The Tawasin of Mansur Al-Hallaj* (Berkeley: Diwan Press, 1974), p. 19.

²⁵ Ismail Hakki Bursevi, tr., Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi, *Kernel of the Kernel* (Robertson, Scotland: Beshara, 1981), p. 10.

²⁶ Op. cit., p. 29.

²⁷ Flitch, *Angelus Silesius*, p. 101.

²⁸ *Kena Upanishad* I. 1-9.

²⁹ *Maitri Upanishad* VI. 17. Raimundo Panikkar, ed. & tr., *The Vedic Experience: Mantramajari* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 667.

Nothing, not even emptiness, can be said to exist from an absolute standpoint, while at the same time something, i.e., emptiness can be said to be the ultimate nature. In other words, nothing exists 'ultimately' (*don dam par*) although something can be said to be 'the ultimate' (*don dam pa*).³⁰

The nature of emptiness in Buddhism has often been misunderstood as nihilistic. The eminent scholar D.T. Suzuki gave the following elucidation:

The term "emptiness" is apt to be misunderstood for various reasons. The hare or rabbit has no horns, the turtle has no hair growing on its back. This is one form of emptiness. The Buddhist *sunyata* does not mean absence.

A fire has been burning until now and there is no more of it. This is another kind of emptiness. Buddhist *sunyata* does not mean extinction.

The wall screens the room: on this side there is a table, and on the other side there is nothing, space is unoccupied. Buddhist *sunyata* does not mean vacancy.

Absence, extinction and unoccupancy—these are not the Buddhist conception of emptiness. Buddhists' Emptiness is not on the plane of relativity. It is Absolute Emptiness transcending all forms of mutual relationship, of subject and object, birth and death, God and the world, something and nothing, yes and no, affirmation and negation. In no Buddhist Emptiness there is time, no space, no becoming, no-thing-ness; it is what makes these things possible; it is zero full of infinite possibilities, it is a void of inexhaustible contents.³¹

Thus, once after the Buddha's disciple Sariputta arose from meditation, the Buddha asked him:

"By abiding in what are you now abiding in its fulness, Sariputta?"

"By abiding in emptiness am I now abiding in its fulness, Lord."³²

Tao, the ultimate reality of Taoism, is also approached by unsaying:

The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.³³

Infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name;
It reverts to nothingness.³⁴

The Chinese terms which are here translated as "nothingness" are literally "no-thing".³⁵ The nothingness of Tao is a "no-thing-ness". Like the emptiness of Buddhism, it is that which is prior to differentiation. Thus the celebrated commentator Wang Pi here notes that:

If we speak of its non-being, everything comes from it.³⁶

³⁰ Thubten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 48.

³¹ D.T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), pp. 27-28.

³² *Pindapataparisuddhi Sutta 2*, from the *Majjhima Nikaya*, the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. Translation from E. Conze, et. al., ed., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 92.

³³ Wing-Tsit Chan, tr., *The Way of Lao Tzu (Tao-te ching)* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 97.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁵ Translated as such by Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-Tzu: Te-Tao Ching* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), p. 66. The various translations of the two Chinese terms are given in *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1943), pp. 1076-77.

³⁶ Paul J. Lin, *A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1977), p. 25.

Apophysis and *kataphasis* are often used in conjunction with each other. A beautiful and striking example is that of Damascius. He begins his celebrated work, *Doubts and Solutions Concerning the First Principle*, with the use of *apophysis*, unsaying:

Concerning the all, however it is conceived, our soul divines that there is a principle beyond all things and uncoordinated with them. Therefore it should be called neither principle, nor cause, nor first, nor prior to all, nor beyond all; still less should one celebrate it as the all. In short, it should neither be celebrated, nor conceived, nor conjectured.³⁷

Shortly thereafter, however, he turns to the use of *kataphasis*, affirmation:

There is nothing the One is not. Therefore all things unwind from it, so to speak. And that which is properly the cause and the first is also itself the end and the uttermost, and the sole nature of the many, not that which is in them from It, but that which, prior to them, is generative of the nature which is in them. It is the most indivisible summit of whatever we call the all, and the greatest circumference of whatever we call the all.³⁸

Through *kataphasis* the mystic attempts to ascend to the summit of what his conceptions affirm of the ultimate reality. By the use of *apophysis*, unsaying or negation, the mystic seeks to go beyond even these. Both have their part to play in the mystic quest.

³⁷ Damascius, *Doubts and Solutions Concerning the First Principle* (Ruelle I. 4. 6-10). Translation © 2006 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, (Ruelle I. 4. 22 – I. 5. 1). Translation © 2006 by Robert K. Clark. All rights reserved.