

Mystical Practices In Religious Traditions And Ecstatic Madness In Gaudiya Vaishnavism

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Abstract: This paper gives an overview of the practice dimension as followed by mystical traditions of various religions and some idea of their role in inducing mystical experiences. Both theistic and non-theistic practices have been discussed in brief. Emphasis is given on the differences between ritually ordered states of experiences and spontaneous states induced by divine grace or unpredictable breakthroughs and the importance of prescribed practices in both types of experiences. The Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition originating in sixteenth century Bengal holds that the highest mystical states are uncontrolled and spontaneous. They bring the deepest mystical understanding and make the Bhakti mystic. The role of different practices is to induce and control mystical experiences as far as possible. They certainly have a great value. But their value lies in their preparatory nature and in their power in inducing 'imitative' states. More advanced and original states are beyond the scope of scripturally prescribed practices. In Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the value of mystical practices is to be understood in this light.

Keywords: Mystical Practices, Mystical Experience, Progression & Breakthrough, Gaudiya Vaishnavism

I. INTRODUCTION

The religious traditions of the world speak of the importance of practices to lead to certain levels of spiritual states. The scriptural, ritual, personal effort-based practices in which an individual makes use of methods prescribed in scriptures (such as prayer, meditation, mantra recitation, ritual observation, visualization etc.); usually bestow inner purification and a gradual progress in the spiritual way of life. However, such a life may or may not lead to deeper knowledge of the divine or to a direct experience of the ultimate divine reality. Many traditions believe that the source of mystical knowledge comes by a sudden leap into the transcendence, or by some kind of 'breakthrough', which in the ultimate analysis is beyond human control and cannot be assured through individual aspirations or endeavors. The theistic traditions believe in the workings of grace of God as the crucial factor to bring about mystical insight and leading to states of ecstasy. The non-theistic traditions also believe that despite the great importance of practical spiritual methods of ritual, prayer, meditation etc. revelatory mystical insights

cannot be controlled or ordered. If they come, they come as sudden flashes, beyond the control of individuals.

It can be said that mystical experiences are spontaneous and mysterious affairs, not attainable through individual efforts alone. There have been mystics in the world who have attained mystical states without any conscious effort on their own part or without going through any kind of prescribed spiritual discipline. But generally speaking, rituals, meditations, prayers and other methods are used by mystics as modes to prepare them for revelatory experiences. Again, after attaining mystical states, they may take up or continue various practices to prepare themselves for further stages of revelations.

II. RITUAL PRACTICES IN NON-THEISTIC TRADITIONS

The non-theistic traditions of the world – the Buddhists and the Jains – make use of techniques of meditation to reach the final goal of *Nirvana* or *Kaivalya*. In India, yoga

techniques have been developed to realize the unqualified (*nirguna*) *Brahman* and for the self's (*jivatman*) union with the divine (*paramatman*). The highest attainable state in yoga is called *Samadhi*.

The Buddhists follow different types of meditations, each designed to overcome a particular problem or to develop a particular psychological state. The two most common types of meditation are Mindfulness of Breathing (*anapana sati*) and Loving Kindness Meditation (*mettabhavana*). Meditations include proper posture, breathing practices, right attitude, positive thinking and inner concentration. The object of meditation is to free oneself from the delusion of ignorance and craving.

In the Buddha's discourse on the practice of mindfulness, *the Maha-satipatthanaSutta*, both the object and the means of attaining it are clearly set forth. Attentiveness to the movements of the body, to the ever-changing states of the mind, is to be cultivated in order that their real nature can be known. Instead of identifying these physical and mental phenomena with the false concept of "self," they are to be seen as they really are: as movements of a physical body, subject to physical laws of causality, and as a flux of successive phases of consciousness arising and passing away in response to external stimuli. They are to be viewed objectively, as though they are processes not associated with the self but as belonging to another order of phenomena.

The basic practice is *anapanasati*, attentiveness on the in-going and out-going breath. Mental or physical images may be used to focus attention, rosary beads are used to repeat mantras as a means for concentrating attention. *Samathabhavana* or attaining mental tranquility purifies the mind.

Among the Hindu schools, certain theistic traditions like the *Shaivas* and the *Shaktas* make use of *yoga* techniques as does the groups in search of unqualified non-dual divine principle (*Advaita Vedanta* School). The purpose of yoga is to lead to the silencing of the mind. This silence is the prerequisite for the mind to be able to reflect upon reality objectively, without its own subjective distortions. Yoga is considered as a means for *tapa* or austerity and is an integral part of ascetic practices among the Hindus.

III. RITUAL PRACTICES IN THEISTIC TRADITIONS

The usual practices in religions and sects that believe in a personal God as the ultimate source of existence have some common features. Prayer and a devotional state of mind, repetition of holy names or sacred mantras, performance of rituals, visiting holy places, practicing abstinence, and charity – are certain common practices for religious people of theistic communities.

Islam gives utmost importance to its 'five pillars' which consist of *Shahadah* (testifying to God's oneness), *Salat* (performing namaz or prayer five times a day), *Zakat* (giving charity), *Sawm* (fasting) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).

The Christians attend worship services in church on Sundays which comprise of prayer, singing and sermon. Personal prayer and Bible reading are also parts of a devout Christian's life. Communion (also called Lord's Supper and

the Eucharist) and Baptism is the main rituals. In addition, other rituals known as 'sacraments' or 'devotions' are followed. This includes praying the rosary and going to pilgrimages.

Hindu rituals comprise of daily worship of the image of a deity known as *Pooja*, temple worships, repeating holy names or *Japa*, concentration of mind on a holy image or sacred event (*dhyana*), fasting and bathing, pilgrimage, studying religious texts, singing devotional songs (*bhajan*) etc. These are common practices of devotees of respective denominations.

More advanced practices are recommended for those in search of mystical knowledge.

In the Sufi tradition there is a long list of practices for those in search of the beloved who resides in one's own heart. Various prescribed practices for the Sufis are as follows: *dhikr* (*jikr*, *japa* or remembrance), *Hoshdar Dam* (Conscious Breathing), *Nazar bar Kadam* (Watch Your Step), *Safar darWatan* (Journey Homeward), *KhilawatdarAnjuman* (Solitude in the Crowd), *YadKard* (Essential Remembrance) *BajGasht* (Returning), *NigahDasht* (Attentiveness), *YadDasht* (Recollection) etc.

In Christian mysticism the final aim is the soul's mystical union with God. This can become possible through a mystical transformation of the erotic self. Purification of the 'deeds of the flesh' like habits, attitudes, compulsions, addictions; path of illumination or opening up to the Holy Spirit's activity in enlightening the mind; and contemplation or reuniting with divine love are the three steps that make transformation possible. To attain this state of transformation, many mystics follow fasting; sleep deprivation and other types of self-mortifications.

IV. RITUAL DEVOTION AND SPONTANEOUS ECSTASY

June McDaniel (1989, 3) in *The Madness of the Saints* recognizes that in the devotional traditions, devotional ecstasy occurs unpredictably, alone or in a group, with noise or silence, through song and dance or while sitting in yogic meditation or while walking or while performing ones everyday duties. They are absolutely spontaneous states. Spontaneous ecstasy is in contrast to ritual devotional states, which encourage ordered religious experiences through gradual growth of religious emotion and insight.

In contrast to ritual devotion what is actually experienced by a person in ecstasy, are sudden and intense visions resulting in chaos of states. The more we probe into the personal detail of their experiences, the more individualistic and idiosyncratic we find them. They do not usually fit the patterns of prescribed theology and ritual. That is why these people are initially considered mad or in the grip of mental disease.

William James (1974, 156) in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, calls these states abrupt as opposed to gradual states. He further calls the abrupt visions "firsthand and original" as opposed to "imitative" states that copy the prescriptions of traditional scriptures. But once the individualized and abruptly spontaneous experiences are established as truly spiritual in nature, efforts are made by the

immediate religious community to fit them into or connect them to the traditional fold. In June McDaniel's words:

'Both ritual and theology seek to order religious experiences. Ritual puts such experiences under human control, making the link with the deity subject to individual or group will. Theology rationalizes the experiences, justifies the ritual, and often centers on a story or past events that has forged the link with the sacred...' (McDaniel, 1989, 5)

What is the connection between tradition and ecstatic states then? Do ecstatic states arise completely out of traditional folds? In *Presuppositions of Indian Philosophy* Karl Potter (1963, 93) speaks of two types of philosophies about attaining mystical states: one is progress philosophy, the other is leap philosophy. Progress philosophies emphasize action, discipline and ritual for gradual attainment of mystical freedom. According to leap philosophies there is no essential causal relation between spiritual discipline and attainment of freedom. Practice may be preparatory but cannot guarantee enlightenment. The Buddhist concept of *prajna* is sudden knowledge or intuition and cannot be controlled. In theistic philosophies ultimate visions or states are subject to divine grace, on which an aspirant cannot exert demand or control. Still, traditional ritual practices have preparatory value, as they prepare the aspirants to receive grace or intuitive knowledge, if and when the events occur.

June McDaniel also speaks of two paths for attaining mystical religious experiences: the path of progression and the path of breakthrough. She makes this distinction by studying the Bhakti text of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Bengal. Gaudiya Vaishnavism is based on loving devotion to Lord Krishna as expounded in the life of its founder Bhakti-mystic *Sri Krishna Caitanya. Bhakti-Rasamrita-Sindhu* (ocean of the nectar of sacred rapture) by Rupa Goswami is considered as the foundational text of their Bhakti philosophy where the nature and features of raptures of devotional experiences are elaborately discussed. Talking in the context of the Gaudiya tradition, McDaniel makes a distinction between the two approaches of spiritual progress.

The path of progression emphasizes order, harmony, obedience and self-control to reach the divine. It involves loyalty to lineage and tradition, acceptance of hierarchy and authority, ritual worship and the teachings of a particular guru. The path is followed through yogic practices and/or ritual skills and lead to devotion mixed with knowledge. Such a path is pure; God is present in the greatest purity. This is the path of scriptural injunction. The experiences may be defined and bounded by preexisting theology. The devotee may attain various states of consciousness through repetition of mantras or other spiritual practices.

The path of breakthrough is connected to abrupt change. The divine is reached through visions and revelations. The rule of scriptural purity breaks down here. God may be found in pure and impure places alike. He may be found in temples but also in cremation grounds or other unlikely places or among people considered as impure by society. Different gurus may be followed at different times. The aim is neither yogic knowledge nor ritual skill, but *bhava* - the ecstatic state that comes through direct experience of the divine. This path is not accorded by scripture, but it is still accepted and revered by the mainstream religion after adequate testing of the worth

of the devotee in acquiring true spiritual knowledge. They may come absolutely spontaneously without any previous preparation or they may come to persons with some spiritual background. However, even then the experience(s) may be overwhelmingly intense and out of proportion to their preparatory practices, completely uncontrolled and unpredictable. Moreover, they can be very unique experiences, unrecorded in or unprescribed by scriptures.

Both of these paths can be sources of mystical experience and knowledge. But while the path of progression is more associated to states of peace and bliss, the path of breakthrough is associated to ecstatic madness.

V. ECSTATIC MADNESS

In the above passages we have explored the two types of mystics associated with two types of practices mainly in the Indian context. But this does not mean that these two kinds of spiritual personalities are found only within Indian Hindu tradition. Their presence is worldwide. Ecstatic saints are present in many traditions. They are among the Sufi saints, the Hasids (Jew) of Eastern Europe, in Eastern Orthodox and Western Christian saints, in possession cults of folk religions. In India, the Alvares and Tamil Saiva saints were the first begetters of ecstatic tradition. It was soon all over India, in the yogis and saints (sants) of eastern, western, northern and central India. Divine madness was part of ancient religious cultures as well. McDaniel notes Plato's identification of four kinds of divine madness. In *Phaedrus* Plato says that such madness is sent by the gods. (1) The mantic madness comes from Apollo, which brings power of divination, (2) The telestic madness comes from Dionysus which brings possession trances as a product of rituals, (3) the poetic madness comes from the Muses which bring poetic fervor, and (4) the erotic madness comes from Eros and Afrodite which brings frenzy of love. Plato comments that such divine madness is divine gifts and great blessings for us which frees us from our customary habits.

VI. SPONTANEOUS ECSTASY AND CONTROLLED EXPERIENCES

A distinction between spontaneous and controlled mystical experiences is found among at least three great traditions of the world, namely - Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. McDaniel quotes (p. 17) the conflict between the northern school of Shen-hsiu and the southern school of Hui-neng in seventh century Chinese Zen Buddhism. "Northern Zen of gradualness" believes that enlightenment is acquired through purification of mind, quieting of desire and repeated meditations leading to gradual ascent. "Southern Zen of suddenness" believes that enlightenment comes suddenly; it cannot be caused or acquired. Meditation can only contribute to the process of revelation by cultivating purity. But the experience of transcendence can only come as a breakthrough.

The Roman Catholic tradition makes distinction between ascetical and mystical states (McDaniel, P. 18). In ascetic states; one acquires inner purification through one's own

efforts. In mystical experiences, mystical graces come down from divine source like 'rain falling from heaven'. The operations of Holy Spirit lead to visions, insights and mystical lights.

In the Roman Catholic theology, ascetic practices lead to ascetic virtues while the actions of the Holy Spirit bring mystical Vision. Hindu theology is a little different in this respect. Especially in the Hindu devotional theology of Gaudiya Bhakti, both close following of scripturally recommended practices and spontaneous experiences can result in ecstasy. The kind of ecstasy induced by following spiritual practice according to the teachings of the lineage of guru and the teachings of authoritative texts can be called ritual ecstasy. Here divine visions follow the expected models which are of the similar type for different practitioners. They are according to the rule, as expected, and ritually controlled. But there is no room for madness here.

Madness of ecstasy is more intense states of love of God, going beyond the textual forms of ecstasy in their intensity of passion. It happens when the devotee is overcome by the passion for God. Then ecstasy becomes spontaneous, breaks the limitations of texts and deeper and ever new visions and revelation of divinity arise out of such intense devotion. In such divine madness or *divyomada*, the intense love for god is expressed usually through poetry, songs and dances as is exemplified in the lives of saints in the bhakti tradition of India. Here also ritual plays a role of increasing (leading to further visions) or decreasing (calming down the intense fervor) of emotional intensity of the devotee, giving traditional images and actions deeper meaning.

VII. VARIOUS PRACTICES

The above descriptions give a general understanding of the role of ritual practices according to scriptures in different traditions for mystical experiences. Though there are variations in the understanding of the role of ritual disciplines there is no doubt about their connection to mystical states and their importance in preparing and purifying the practitioners.

In the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, the goal of devotional practices is the love of Krishna. The process involves two models of worship – *vaidhi bhakti* or scriptural devotion and *raganuga bhakti* or emotional devotion. *Vaidhi bhakti* is the convenient path of obedience to Vaishnava texts and following the detailed rules of behavior prescribed by them. In *raganuga bhakti*, the devotee tries to establish some kind of loving relationship with Krishna, the lord of the universe, in the model of the people of Vraja, the childhood place of Krishna's life. People of *Vrajabhumi* felt spontaneous love evoked by the beauty and grace of Krishna. The person following the path of emotional devotion visualizes the land of Vraja and imaginatively enters into it as a parent, friend or handmaiden of Krishna.

Both the physical body and the spiritual body of the devotee must participate in the worship of the lord. Chanting, singing, listening to scriptures, painting Vaishnava marks (tilakas) on the body are the visible actions of the physical body. Creating or realizing a subtle spiritual body or *siddha deha* with which one can relate to the God is part of internal

spiritual practice. When the inner form of practice grows real for the person, they are considered to have attained *Bhava-bhakti* (true emotional devotion). They begin showing symptoms of ecstasy like pallor, tear, horripilation etc. A more condensed and deepened form of *bhava*, in which faith and love for God is firmly established and the heart is softened by an intense attraction towards God – is called *prema* (real love). When the intensity of attraction and longing for God takes incredible, superhuman proportion, it is called *mahabhava*. In this state the whole being of the person is directed only towards Krishna and the devotee feels continual burning desire for God. Reason dissolves and melts into emotion, the person forgets outward decorum, laughing, weeping, dancing, crying and singing in ecstasy. In this state passion is like raging fire. It is the highest state of love and the sign of a mystic bhakti saint. Only a rare few can attain this state. Apart from Krishna, there have been saints from Shiva, Rama and Devi centered bhakti traditions and madly ecstatic saints in these traditions as well.

VIII. POETRY, SONGS, DANCES

Music plays a great role in the lives of mystics. The mystic saints are known to often break into impromptu singing and dancing. Many saints are known to be original composers of poems and songs. Those who have not composed have been known to use poems and songs of other devotional saints. They have also been known to be elevated to states of trance by listening to songs depicting love, beauty and grace of God. Songs and dance play a great role in expressing and containing the emotions of saints in all branches of Hindu bhakti traditions. Song and dance are used also by Sufi saints to express their intense emotion of love and longing for the beloved.

Rouget (1985, 11) gives an idea of the role of music in mystical experiences. He explains that music cannot directly produce states of trance but they do create favorable environment to begin it, to regularize it and to ensure that instead of its being an unpredictable phenomenon, it becomes predictable, controlled and in the service of the group.

For the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, the intense God (Krishna)-intoxicated mystic madness is the most highly coveted and revered form of ecstasy, achieved only by a rare few of saints, Sri Krishna Chaitanya or *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu* (the great master) as he is more commonly called, being one of the greatest among such rare mystics.

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