

Chapter 1

Mysticism and Mystical Experiences

The first issue in writing any history of mysticism is getting a handle on what phenomena will be covered. The adjective *mystical* (from *mystikos*, meaning hidden or secret) arose in connection to Greek Mystery cults to describe certain types of knowledge (*gnosis*) and rituals that were kept from the uninitiated. Christians adopted it to refer to theological mysteries, such as how Christ's body is present in the Eucharist or how the church is the "mystical body of Christ." It also came to refer to hidden meanings within the Bible, in addition to the text's literal meanings, in which theologians saw how scriptures point to Christ. Those were the principal uses of the term *mystical* in the history of Christianity. The nouns *mystic* and *mysticism* were invented in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when spirituality was becoming separated from general theology in Western Christendom. (The terms were first used to disparage overly "enthusiastic" worshipers in France and England.) Only later did the term *mysticism* come to refer primarily to certain types of private experiences involving "infused contemplation"—as opposed to ordinary grace—in which God, although transcendent, dwells within a person.

But this does not mean that there were no mystics, in the modern experiential sense, earlier in Christianity. The first use of *mystical* as a way of knowing God directly is from Origen of Alexandria in the third century (Bouyer 1980, 50). Such experiences informed Christian thought before the fifth century when a Neoplatonist, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, first wrote of mystical theology. By the twelfth century, when Bernard of Clairvaux first referred to the "book of experience," the "mystical" allegorical meanings of biblical passages that Christian contemplatives expounded were

ultimately based on direct experiences of God: in Bonaventure's words, "the mind's journey into God." That is, *mystical theology* then meant the "direct awareness of God," not the academic discipline of theology in the current sense. It is direct in the sense that one's awareness is not mediated by the presence of a second reality (as with a vision) or through the mental conceptual apparatus that normally structures our experiences. It is an awareness that overcomes the sense of separation.

Today, the term *mystical experience* has been separated from the singular context of Christianity, but it has also become notoriously vague. Among the general public, astrology, magic, spiritualism, and paranormal occurrences have all been lumped together under the banner of mysticism. Academics often use the term interchangeably with *religious experience*, but there is no common scholarly definition. In such circumstances, all one can do is stipulate a definition and defend it. In this book the term *mystical experiences* denotes short-term episodes that involve a direct awareness of fundamental realities (that is, realities deemed "more real" than everyday realities); loosen the conceptual divisions that normally structure the mind; and, most importantly, free the person experiencing the event of a sense of a discrete phenomenal ego or self.¹ The term *mystical states* denotes similar but more enduring states of such consciousness. Such experiences and states are other than the ordinary, ego-centered waking state of sensing and thinking and, thus, occur in altered states of consciousness (ASCs).² *Mysticism* refers to the phenomena—teachings, texts, practices, social institutions, and so forth—surrounding one's interior quest to turn off their sense of self and to stop the conceptualizing mind from controlling their experience in order to bring oneself into alignment with what is ultimately real (as defined by a mystic's tradition). Thus, mysticism is more encompassing than simply having mystical experiences. For someone on a quest for such experiences, it involves not merely a web of cultural phenomena but also a comprehensive, total way of life having practices, codes of conduct, rituals, and a specific goal with doctrines about the nature of what is deemed real as their philosophical spine.³ Other non-ordinary phenomena, such as paranormal powers and visions, may or may not occur in such ways of life. But *mysticism* as used here is not merely a matter of holding certain metaphysical beliefs or propositions but is related to ASCs and their experiences.

Mystical experiences are private, and the goal of mysticism is individualistic: a personal inner transformation of how one experiences and lives. However, much of mysticism involves observable social and cultural phenomena. Mystical experiences may occur outside of mystical ways of

life, but mysticism relates to transforming a person by means of mystical practices, experiences, and states of consciousness. The quest of traditional mysticism is not to attain mystical experiences for their own sake; mystical experiences are not themselves the goal but a necessary *means* to seeing reality correctly in order to inaugurate a new state of being, a life aligned with reality. Thus, mystical experiences play an essential role in mystical ways of life but are not all that matters in the study of mysticism.

Thus, *mysticism* as used in this book is not simply the name for the inner religious life of all intensely pious or scrupulously observant followers of any strand of religiosity, nor is it for anyone who performs supererogatory practices or who dedicates themselves utterly to God. Mysticism is also not the essence or core of all religions; mystics have been a shaping force in all major religions, but there are other ways of being religious and other types of religious experiences, and other factors may be deemed more central. Likewise, not all ASC experiences are mystical. Nevertheless, what distinguishes mysticism is its experiences: it is the central role of certain types of ASCs and their experiences that separates mysticism from other forms of religiosity and from metaphysical speculation. Neuroscientists today are coming to accept that mystical experiences are based in distinctive configurations of neurological events. That these are neurologically “genuine” experiences does not mean that introvertive mystical experiences necessarily involve transcendent realities: nonspatial and nontemporal realities that transcend not just appearances but the entire natural realm and, thus, are not open to scientific study. This does not mean that mystical experiences necessarily provide knowledge. It only means that these experiences are not more ordinary experiences that have simply been interpreted mystically.

It is also important to note that not all people today who have mystical experiences are *religious*. For some people, these experiences have no religious significance. That nonreligious people can have mystical experiences and yet remain secular and naturalistic in their metaphysics presents problems for most definitions of mystical experience. Any sense of transcendence is understood in terms of social and natural realities. It shows that mystical experiences need not be given any transcendent explanation but can be given a naturalistic explanation in terms of unusual but perfectly normal brain activity without resorting to the claim that the brain is malfunctioning. They are then seen as having no cognitive significance.⁴ This tempers the emotional impact. Spontaneous mystical experiences (ones that occur unexpectedly without any prior cultivation through meditation or other practices) are often taken today to have no ontological implications; no

matter how intense a mystical experience may be, it will affect how one sees reality and oneself only if it is taken not to be a hallucination. In particular, experiences enabled by drugs are often seen as overwhelming at the time and as giving some profound cognitive insight (such as the interconnectedness of all phenomena) only to be dismissed the next day as merely subjective, brain-generated events. In short, one can have mystical experiences without the experiences having existential significance or a lasting effect.

Other Altered State of Consciousness Experiences

The definition of *mystical experience* employed here reflects recent scientific interest in certain ASCs, but no definition of *mystical experience* is dictated by science; unless all ASCs have the same neurological states underlying them, which currently appears not to be the case, scholars still have to decide what range of ASCs to include as mystical and what range to exclude. The definition used in this book takes a middle path between including all ASCs as mystical and restricting mystical experiences to only introverted “pure consciousness” experiences in which the mind is totally empty of all differentiated content. The segment of the spectrum of ASCs deemed mystical covers those experiences and states of consciousness in which the mind is partially or completely empty of differentiated content—in particular, a sense of self—and has switched to another mode of cognition, as indirectly indicated by changes in the brain’s configuration of activity. This is not arbitrary since states of consciousness resulting from such emptying are central to all classical mystical quests to align one’s life with reality as it truly is, while experiences from other ASCs are more peripheral to the quest.

Classical mystics may show little interest in non-mystical ASCs, including visions. For example, the Upanishads and Shankara recognize only four states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep (in which one is one with Brahman), and the fourth state (*turiya*) in which one realizes Brahman while awake (ManU 3–7, BSS 3.2.10). But mystics may also have visions, locutions, a paranormal sense of sweet fragrance, pleasant touches, other religious experiences, or paranormal abilities. Many traditions utilize visualization exercises in meditation. Mystics may also have “somatic” experiences in which an energy flow akin to an electric charge is felt through the presence of the Holy Spirit, a touch of a guru, or the unblocking of the *kundalini* or *qi* power present in the body (see Cattoi and McDaniel 2011). But all of these experiences involve a duality of experience

and what is experienced—a sense of separation in which experiencers see beings or symbols and may receive verbal information.⁵ When duality is involved, experiences are not *mystical* as it is defined here, although one experience may fade into the other.

However, many scholars treat all paranormal experiences as mystical. Jess Byron Hollenback believes that paranormal phenomena are not peripheral to mysticism (1996, 276–300) and so includes the psychic D. D. Home as a mystic but excludes Buddhists' realization of *nirvana* as mystical. I stipulate that the center of mysticism is an inner quest to still the whirling conceptual and emotional apparatuses of the mind, subduing one's sense of a self as a distinct reality within the phenomenal world in order to sense reality without one's personal mental constrictions. Visions and other paranormal phenomena are mentioned as part of the content of some mystical ways of life, but such experiences do not become mystical experiences in the sense employed here simply because some mystics have them. Likewise, most mysticisms involve quelling desires, not fulfilling them through paranormal powers. Paranormal powers and experiences such as levitation may occur in mystical practices, but they are disparaged as distractions to mystical realizations and sources of attachment. Moreover, many theistic mystics point out the dangers of accepting visions and voices as cognitive even when they did not come from Satan. According to John of the Cross, we should renounce all external things including supernaturally given external visions (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.17.9). Contemplative experiences were more reliable. In Zen Buddhism, visions, sounds, and sensations occurring during meditation are dismissed as hallucinatory demon states (*mayko*).

All normal human cognitive experiences and thoughts involve a duality between someone experiencing or thinking *of* something. Thus, the only terminology that mystics can adopt from general culture to give the sense of experiencing a reality is dualistic: to contact, encounter, perceive, touch, pierce, hear, unite x and y . However, mystical experiences do not involve the subject/object duality of a reality set off from the experiencer, as with other types of religious and nonreligious experiences. Mystics may say that an introvertive mystical experience is “seen” or “heard” internally and not through the eyes or ears—for example, “heard in the soul”—but the reality is not presented to them as something separate from themselves. Many cultures see the mind as having an “inner eye” that makes seeing mental content the same as a sensory perception. Thus, when mystics adopt a culture's language of visions, they may not be referring to a dualistic experience. For example, Teresa of Avila had inner “intellectual visions” (*Interior Castle* 6.9.4) in which

she did not see or hear as with her “external visions” (6.8.6). She said that although she used the word *vision* in this way, the soul does not see anything (6.10.2). Non-dualistic terminology was simply not available to her.

Mysticism also should not be equated with asceticism. One can be an ascetic without having the experiences that distinguish mystics. The term *asceticism* comes from the Greek word *askesis*, referring to an athlete’s training, and meant a spiritual preparation and training of the body that purified or guarded the mind, as through spiritual exercises. But in the modern usage, it means something more specific: depriving the body of anything that brings pleasure, to the extent of even depriving what it needs. Ascetics see their renunciation of all material things or physical mortification (such as self-flagellation) as ends in themselves to show repentance, to please God, or to stop actions rather than a means for emptying the mind of a sense of self. Ascetics may also become attached to the practices themselves and may not have mystical experiences. Mysticism instead involves an inner asceticism with a different intention: to eliminate all self-will and renounce personal desires. Asceticism to purify the body and mind can lead to mystical receptivity, and some ascetics have had mystical experiences. Likewise, some classical mystics practiced primarily ascetic deprivations. Some meditative techniques involve working the body, not just the mind. Mysticism also typically embrace simplifying one’s life (often including celibacy) and lessening desires, but the Buddha was not alone in ultimately rejecting extreme ascetic practices as a way to enlightenment. Sufism is a tradition that first embraced asceticism but became less ascetic later.

Mystical Paths

Classical contemplatives and monastics are exemplars of mysticism as understood here. Today, many people who meditate do so only for health benefits, but the traditional objective of meditation is to still the mind in order to attain the knowledge of what is fundamentally real in order to overcome misalignment with reality. However, mysticism involves a total way of life, not merely meditation, and it leads to enlightenment: enduring states of consciousness in which any sense of a phenomenal self is eradicated and one’s life is in sync with reality. Through a mystical quest, a mystic comes to see the reality present when their sense of self and the background structuring of their normal awareness are removed from their mind, either experienc-

ing in extrovertive states the world independent of their conceptualizations and manipulations or, in introvertive states, their normally concealed real self or the ontological source of the entire natural realm.

Cultivating nonconceptualized awareness is central to mystical ways of life, but classical mystics actually discuss mystical experiences very little, either their own or more generally.⁶ People who have visions discuss their experiences more, but the style of mystical literature in classical cultures was not to report one's own spiritual accomplishments, even in autobiographies.⁷ There are classical mystical texts like Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*, in which she discusses different types of experiences. (There, she refers to her own experiences in the third person, following the example of Paul in the New Testament: "I know a person who . . ." [2 Cor. 12:1–4].) Mystical texts sometimes discuss states of consciousness, including mystical ones, and sometimes analyze the general nature of experience (with mystical experiences not being a distinct category), but how one should lead one's life, the path to enlightenment, meditative techniques, knowledge, and experienced realities are more common topics. Since mystics' traditional goal is to achieve a continuous new existence aligned with the nature of a fundamental reality, the reality experienced remains more central than any transient experience or a state of mind. Likewise, early meditation texts are more interested in the doctrines behind meditation (such as the metaphysical presuppositions of yoga) and the states of mind it can produce than the practices (Eifring 2016, xiii).

To treat all mystical texts as works about the psychology of various states of consciousness is to misread many texts in light of modern thought. Works like Plotinus's *Enneads* are not only performative texts designed to induce mystical experiences when read out loud. The effect of hearing or speaking some texts may have mind-altering effects, but philosophical texts also have discussions explaining what is ultimately real and make other aspects of a mystical way of life intelligible. Even when discussing mental states, mystics refer more to a transformation of character or an enduring state of alignment with reality than to mystical experiences, including any transitional enlightenment experiences in which a sense of self is finally dissolved. This does not mean that cultivating mystical experiences and states is not the defining characteristic of mysticism or that enlightened states are not altered states of consciousness. It only means that traditional mystics value most the reality experienced, the knowledge attained, and the long-lasting transformed state of a person. Even if mystics value the experience of a

transcendent reality over all doctrines, the resulting transformed state of a person to live an enlightened way of life is still valued more, and doctrines are still deemed necessary to see how to live.

Western theisms accept the reality of the world and individuals apart from God, and thus Western mystics do not typically deny the existence of a soul, although a sense of self may be in abeyance during mystical experiences. But in many of the world's mysticisms, the sense of a separate self within the natural world is only an illusion generated by our baseline state of waking consciousness. We normally think that we are an independent, self-contained entity, but in fact, self-consciousness is just another function of the analytic mind. By identifying with what is experienced in self-consciousness, we reify a separate entity—the *self*—and set it off against the rest of reality in a dualism. Our sense of a self, then, controls our life.⁸ However, as the Buddha emphasized, there is no such separate self-existing entity within the field of everyday experience but only an ever-changing web of mental and physical processes, and thus we should not identify with any contents of our consciousness, even self-awareness. Our error is not merely an absence of correct knowledge but an active error inhibiting seeing reality as it is. More generally, the error is that our attention is constricted by the conceptualizations that our analytic mind constantly generates. Mystical experiences break the hold of that dualistic state of consciousness and enable us to see reality free of the felt sense of self and the other distinct entities set up by our conceptualizing mind.

The inner quest necessary for overcoming this fragmentation involves a process characterized in different traditions as “forgetting” or “fasting of the mind”—emptying the mind of all conceptualized content (especially the sense of self and its accompanying self-will) and, in the case of the depth-mystical experience, eliminating all sensory input and all introverted 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 what has always been present—the being, (*esse*) emanating from the Godhead beyond God, that is of the natural world and also of God. 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 with the beingness (Eckhart 2009, 253–55). It is a process of disentangling one's mind from all things phenomenal, an “unknowing” of all mental content, including all prior knowledge. Yet, throughout the process, one remains awake and fully aware. The result is a clear awareness

where all sensory, emotional, dispositional, and conceptual apparatuses are in abeyance to one degree or another (including a state of complete absence).

Meditation, like mysticism, is a Western term with no exact counterpart in most languages. In its broadest scope, it is any attention-based technique for inner transformation (Eifring 2016, 1).⁹ Livia Kohn characterizes it as “the inward focus of attention in a state of mind where ego-related concerns and critical evaluations are suspended in favor of perceiving a deeper, subtler, and possibly divine flow of consciousness” (2008, 4). Meditation involves an attempt to calm the mind by eliminating conceptualizations, dispositions, and emotions by either sustaining one’s focus of attention on an object or opening up one’s awareness. This disrupts our normal state of consciousness and removes our collective dimension. There are many meditative techniques (see Shear 2006). In no tradition is meditation restricted simply to breathing exercises while sitting.

Overall, meditation has two different tracks. In Buddhism, the distinction is between concentration (*shamatha*) and open monitoring mindfulness (*smriti*, *vipassana*). In the former track, attention is focused on a sensory or mental object—for example, a flame, a crystal, a tradition’s doctrine, a textual passage, or a visualized God. The person meditating gently brings their attention back to the object when their mind wanders. Thus, the mind is not empty of objects at the beginning of these practices, but one progressively withdraws attention from any meditative object. Focusing the mind in this way calms and stabilizes consciousness and culminates in one-pointed attention (complete *samadhi*). It leads to tranquil states of feeling absorbed in the object of meditation, although mindfulness may also do the same. The second track is not about emptying the mind of content but about observing that content objectively; one simply passively notes whatever floats into the mind. Mindfulness frees up experience by removing conceptual encrustation in perception, ending ultimately in a dynamic pure awareness or effortless attention that mirrors the flow of what is real as it is presented to the mind unmediated by conceptualizations or a sense of self. Both tracks can empty the mind of the sense of self and all conceptual divisions, leading to a non-dualistic awareness that abolishes the distinctions of subject, object, and action. With the loss of a sense of a self-contained experiencer, consciousness is altered; without boundaries separating the self from anything, consciousness may seem to expand to encompass the entire universe. Practitioners can engage in both tracks and shift from one to the other since mindfulness requires a degree of concentration and vice versa.

Since Origen, the mystical path in Christianity has traditionally been divided into three phases: purification, 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 experiences positive. A mystical quest may be unpleasant and strenuous—it is likened to climbing a mountain. The stress of a mystical way of life can make one physically and psychologically ill. There is also the distress and anxiety in periods in which there appears to be no progress—arid “dark nights of the soul,” as John of the Cross called them, in which one feels the pain that God is absent (although John asserted that God is actually working away, clearing the meditator’s mind). Theists may feel a sense of abandonment. They may have periods of pain even when they feel that God is present and purifying them. Nontheists report this less often than theists, but they too discuss distress and other problems of the path. One may also become satisfied with a blissful state on the path—what Zen calls the “cave of Mara”—and remain there without attaining a selfless enlightenment. The Christian *Theologia Germanica* also warns against leaving images too soon and thereby never being able to understand the truth aright, as did John of the Cross (*Ascent* 2.13–14). We should not quit “discursive meditation” before God brings the soul to objectless contemplation (2.17.7). There may also be visions and paranormal powers, and after an introverted mystical experience, the wandering analytic mind usually returns quickly.

Mystics, in general, do not claim that the transcendent reality that is experienced is to be feared, as occurs often with other types of religious experiences. There is no “trembling in the presence of God” as with many revelations. Transcendent realities are usually seen as benevolent or neutral. For Meister Eckhart, there is nothing in God to be feared but only loved, and God is a source of joy (2009, 522). But introverted experiences can lead to confusion, fear (especially with ego-loss), panic attacks, and paranoia if meditators cannot handle the experiences. In emptying the mind of other content, meditation may also open the mind up to “demonic” phenomena—that is, negative states that are usually attributed to demons or to the meditator’s own subconscious and are not projected onto a fundamental reality. Thus, William James rightly refers to “diabolical mysticism” (1958, 326).

Such possible negative effects on a mystical path should not be overlooked. Psychedelics and meditation destabilize one’s sense of a self and may exacerbate the conditions of people with mental disorders. Indeed, mystical experiences may open the same subconscious territory trod by schizophrenics and psychotics. A large percentage of serious meditators report at least mild

adverse effects. Some negative effects are strong enough to cause people to stop meditating or require hospitalization. In one psychedelic drug study, 44 percent of the volunteers reported delusions or paranoid thinking (Griffiths et al. 2011). A quarter of the subjects reported that a significant portion of their session was characterized by anxiety, paranoia, and negative moods; 31 percent experienced significant fear. Few reported completely positive experiences without significant psychological struggles such as paranoia or the fear that they were going insane or dying. The researchers suspected that difficult moments are significantly under reported. In one study of intensive *vipassana* mindfulness meditation, 63 percent of meditators reported at least some adverse effects, and 7.4 percent reported negative effects strong enough to stop meditating, and one had to be hospitalized for psychosis (Lindahl et al. 2017, 5). In one survey, 73 percent of respondents indicated moderate to severe impairment in at least one mental domain, with 17 percent reporting thoughts of suicide, and 17 percent requiring inpatient hospitalization (21). Some psychological preparation and a framework of beliefs that would prepare meditators or drug users to handle what is experienced, as provided in traditional teacher/student meditative training, may be essential before any serious mystical training is undertaken to avoid such negative reactions. Otherwise, detachment from the sense of self can lead to depression or worse. Even extrovertive mystical experiences may seem bewildering and lead to confusion and distress if they occur outside a religious framework that gives them meaning (Byrd, Lear, and Schwenka 2000, 267–68).

Mystical Knowledge

As noted in the last section, for classical mystics, knowing how reality truly is and living accordingly is what is important, not the experiences that induce the knowledge. Mystics do not claim to discover new truths but only to find the knowledge already expressed in the sacred texts of their traditions.¹⁰ Nor did classical mystics take their experiences as empirical verification or proof of their tradition's doctrines or as authority for those doctrines; for them, those doctrines do not need any experiential verification. Such concerns about verification arise from modern empirical science. In fact, for classical mystics, the reverse is true: scriptures are taken as validating their mystical experiences.¹¹ The writings of mystics only help to recover knowledge that already exists in foundational scriptures. Thus, if the criteria for being a mystic include the discussion of one's experiences and reliance on those

experiences as authority, one would be hard pressed to find any mystics before the modern era.

While mystical experiences typically have a great emotional impact, mystics also claim that they realize a reality that is present when all the personal and conceptualized content of the mind is removed. A hidden reality is distinguished from appearances. Like all experiences, mystical experiences are internal, but to mystics, they are not subjective in the negative sense of being merely brain-generated events. Mystics claim to have direct awareness of the bare being-in-itself—the “is-ness” of the natural realm apart from the conceptual divisions that we impose—or of a transcendent reality. Even the consciousness they experience does not seem personal or to belong to the experiencer but seems impersonal and objective. Mystical experiences may not even feel like one’s own if they seem to come from a transcendent reality, wiping out any sense of individual existence.

Thereby, mystics gain knowledge of a reality. Their experiences are considered a liberating breakthrough to a fundamental reality. It is not a matter of knowing that some proposition is true or even of knowledge by acquaintance with a reality distinct from the experiencer, nor is it an intuition in the sense of intellectually jumping from a line of reasoning to a new conclusion—such intuitions remain a matter of dualistic content. Rather, if valid, mystical awareness is another type of experiential knowledge—knowledge by participation or knowledge by identity—one *becomes* or *is* the reality that is realized. Unlike ordinary knowledge by acquaintance, here, distinctions between the subject, object, and act of knowing collapse. Knowing we are aware, even though this occurs in an ordinary dualistic state of consciousness, is like this: We never know our awareness as a separate object, only as a subjectivity that we participate in. But mystical knowledge does not rely upon normal modes of apprehension; it transcends normal cognitive faculties and strips away all human effort. No reflection is involved, just being.

To emphasize the difference between attained mystical knowledge and knowledge attained through sense experiences and reasoning, mystics often use terms such as *gnosis*, *nonknowledge* (to distinguish this knowledge from everyday knowledge), *intellect* (to distinguish the mental function involved in mystical experiences from sense experience and reasoning), or *nonconscious* (to denote a state of consciousness utterly unlike normal ones). If one accepts a metaphysics in which God or Brahman is our being or in which one has always had a Buddha-nature, then paradoxically, one has not

achieved anything in one's mystical quest, no matter how strenuous. One merely realizes what has always been the case.

Mystical experiences may be ego-shattering implosions of reality, but the actual insight that mystical experiences are taken to provide does not occur when the mind is in an introvertive mystical state of consciousness. That is, the insight occurs *outside* introvertive mystical experiences; it is an insight into the nature of reality that can occur only when thought has returned. Thus, Advaitins disconnect the depth-mystical experience from the insight that Brahman alone is real. This insight occurs only in our baseline dualistic state of consciousness or in an extrovertive mystical state after the introvertive mystical experiences are over. In those states of consciousness, the mind makes what was experienced into a mental object of reflection for the mystic. And in those states, a mystic's beliefs, shaped by their religious way of life and culture, determine how the insight is understood. The diversity of mystical doctrines shows that mystical experiences alone do not determine knowledge claims in any simple empiricist fashion (see Jones 2016, 80–81). That is, mystical experiences do not carry their own interpretations, even for mystics themselves. Thus, the actual knowledge that is gained in a mystical experience involves elements of the mystic's specific religious and cultural beliefs. Thus, there is no one universal mystical knowledge, and there could not be even if all mystical experiences were the same. This also means that *insight* can be understood in two senses in mystical discussions: it may refer to the mystical experience itself or to the doctrinal knowledge claims adopted after the experience is over from the mixture of input from the experience and cultural beliefs.

The Diversity of Mystical Experiences

Many scholars implicitly assume that all mystical experiences are the same in nature. They refer to “*the* mystical experience” and characterize all the experiences as a “union with God.” However, while mystical experiences share common elements that permit them to be classified as mystical, there are different types of mystical experiences and, thus, should not be treated as the same in all regards. Neuroscientists have found that the neurological states for concentrative meditators differ from those of mindfulness meditators (Hood 2001, 32–47; Dunn, Hartigan, and Mikulas 1999; Milliere 2018). Neuroscientists also have detected that the effects of a temporary loss

of a sense of self differ from the traits of enduring selfless states (Milliere 2018, 19). This strongly suggests that there is not one mystical state of consciousness or mystical awareness but several. This leads to rejecting any essentialism in which all mystical experiences are of one type.

There are two general classes of mystical experiences in the sense specified here, and there are different types of mystical experiences within each class. The distinction is between *extrovertive* and *introvertive* experiences, to use the terminology set by Walter Stace (1960a)—that is, between experiences oriented outwardly and those oriented inwardly. Additionally, a mystic's ascent gradually intensifies to a sense of selflessness: a state of consciousness without even an implicit self of ownership.¹² Many mystical experiences may not involve the complete elimination of a sense of self. Mystics may have both extrovertive and introvertive mystical experiences, and they both may occur on the path to enlightenment. Extrovertive mystical experiences can also transition to introvertive ones, but the neural state of the experiencers then changes. Different types of non-mystical ASC experiences such as visions may also occur. A mystical experience may not be a singular event but may involve different phases or a series of episodes. Visions and theistic mystical elements may occur during the transitional states of consciousness to and from an empty depth-mystical experience to the baseline ego-state or to an extrovertive state of consciousness. In addition, different or more thoroughly emptied mystical experiences may occur after one loses a sense of self or attains enlightenment.

William Wainwright offers a typology of extrovertive and introvertive experiences that captures the phenomenological evidence from different cultures and eras reflected in recurring, low-ramified descriptions of the mystical experiences (1981, 33–40).¹³ With a slight modification of his terminology and categories, the types are:

EXTROVERTIVE EXPERIENCES

- Experiencing being connected or united to the rest of the natural realm with a loss of a sense of real boundaries between the experiencer and the world or borders within nature
- Experiencing a lack of separate, self-existing entities with no emphasis on a connected whole (mindful states)
- Experiencing a sense of an undivided interconnected whole

- Experiencing a vibrant luminous glow to nature
- Experiencing the presence of a personal or nonpersonal transcendent reality that exists outside of time and space but is also immanent in the world (cosmic consciousness)

INTROVERTIVE EXPERIENCES

- Experiences with differentiated content—e.g., an inner bright white light or being enveloped in a golden light
- Experiences of a connection in love or identity with a personal god (theistic)
- Experiences empty of all differentiated content (including any sense of a self) leaving a pure consciousness (depth-mystical)

There are different experiences within each category, with the exception of the depth-mystical experience. The differentiated content in introvertive experiences depends, at least in part, upon one's mind-set and their physical and social setting. In either class, mystical experiences can occur spontaneously without any prior practices. Indeed, spontaneous mystical experiences may be much more common than those cultivated through meditation or other practices. Even when the experiences occur after a long period of mystical cultivation, they are instantaneous, although *sudden* and *abrupt* are most often ascribed to introvertive experiences and non-mindfulness extrovertive experiences. Meditation may lead to different types of mystical experiences within either group. Not all mystical experiences are transient—they may last only a few minutes or last for years and be permanent states of consciousness. So, too, there are different degrees of intensity.

For traditional mystics, both introvertive and extrovertive experiences involve an awareness of a fundamental component of reality that people whose awareness is confined to the natural order of phenomenal objects and mental conceptions have not had. In extrovertive experiences, the beingness of the natural universe shines forth through phenomena free of any cultural coverings. The sense of a transcendent reality that is also immanent may be present. In introvertive experiences, a transcendent reality is directly realized. These realities may include a self or consciousness existing independently of the body, a creator god, or a nonpersonal source of the natural world, but for mystics, such a reality is also immanent to the natural realm in the

consciousness of a person or in the ground of being in the phenomenal realm. Being immanent, that reality is experienceable in mystical experiences even though it is not experienceable as an object and hence is not a phenomenon.

All mystical experiences of both classes share some phenomenological features in one degree or another: the weakening or total elimination of the sense of a separate self within the natural world; the seeming deathlessness of the true transcendent self or consciousness; a sense of timelessness; a heightened awareness, including sense perceptions in extrovertive mysticism; a sense that both the experience and what is experienced cannot be adequately expressed in words or symbols (ineffability); and a resultant feeling of bliss or peace (although a mystical experience may involve a feeling of ecstasy). Often, people who have mystical experiences have positive emotions toward other people and the natural realm and an absence of negative emotions like anger and hatred. Traditionally, there is also a common cognitive quality—a sense that one has directly touched some ultimate reality and attained an insight into the fundamental nature of oneself or all reality—with an accompanying sense of absolute certainty and objectivity. One can attain a sense of pure existence or boundless existence either introvertively as consciousness or extrovertively as nature free of being cut up into distinct entities. But again, classical mysticism was never about attaining isolated mystical experiences, including enlightenment experiences; its objective was to become aligned with reality in an abiding state of consciousness through the knowledge revealed in mystical experiences.

With the analytic mind at rest, the mind in both classes of experience is more passive and receptive, even while one actively focuses their attention on an item. The experiences feel like they are happening *to* the experiencers, not initiated by them. One may do things to cultivate such experiences, but in the end, one cannot force the change in consciousness involved in a mystical experience. Thus, theistic mystics speak of “grace,” “surrendering one’s will to God,” and “other-power” as sources of the experiences. Meditators cannot force or manipulate the mind to become still by following any technique or series of steps and thus cannot compel a mystical experience. The experiences seem uncaused and spontaneous. Mystical training techniques and studying doctrines can lessen a sense of self, remove mental obstacles, and calm a distracted mind, thus increasing the occurrence of mystical experiences, but they cannot guarantee a complete end to the activity of the conceptualizing mind. Meditators can clear the ground in the mind, but what happens next is not up to them. And as long as meditators are

trying to “get enlightened,” they are still in an acquisitive state of mind and cannot succeed in becoming selfless. One begins the quest with an active desire and utilizes the analytic mind along the way, but no act of self-will can force mystical experiences to occur, nor can any preparatory activity (including artificial triggers such as psychedelics). One must surrender—simply let go and not try to control or manipulate reality. Even the desire to become enlightened must be given up. But once meditators end their ego-centric striving and become receptive by letting go of any attempt to control what happens, the mind becomes free of grasping, fear, and anger and stills itself. Mystical experiences then occur on their own.

Extrovertive Mystical Experiences

Extrovertive mystical experiences involve a greater receptivity to what is presented to the mind in sense experiences. Once the mind is free of conceptual, dispositional, and emotional apparatuses, the diffuse phenomena presented to it are no longer seen as a dualistic collection of a self and multiple ontologically distinct entities. This may lead to a sense of a connectedness or unity with the flux of impermanent phenomena in the world. Unlike in visions, only the phenomenal world presented to the senses is seen. Thus, mystical experiences and states with differentiated content have something for the mind to organize with the concepts from a mystic’s culture.¹⁴ But one extrovertive state of consciousness may be free of all conceptual structures: a dynamic, pure mindfulness involving sensory phenomena unmediated by any conceptualizations or associations—that is, sensations not mentally structured into perceptions. Such an extreme state cannot last long since we cannot survive in the world without distinguishing, say, water from poison.

Thus, not all mystical experiences are non-sensory and otherworldly. Not all mystical experiences involve delving into a changeless transcendent reality but can involve an experience of the beingness of the phenomena of the natural world as it is prior to any cultural prism. All extrovertive experiences but mindfulness are types of nature mysticism. The experiencer’s metaphysics may remain confined to the natural realm. Even if there is a sense of a transcendent source immanent in the natural realm, the natural world is still the focus of the experience. What is retained from all extrovertive mystical experiences is a sense of fundamental immutable beingness and a lack of discrete realities. Thus, ASC experiences reveal aspects of the phenomenal world that are not in focus in an ordinary state of consciousness.

Indeed, revealing an aspect of reality not otherwise known is so significant to mystics that, to them, it is almost as if another sense in addition to our normal five is involved.

If we assume that there is only one type of mystical experience, it is natural to consider extrovertive experiences to be low-level, failed, or partial cases of introvertive depth-mystical experiences, as Stace did (1960a, 132). But, as previously noted, neuroscience suggests that extrovertive and introvertive are distinct types of experiences. In addition, Buddhism and Daoism are traditions in which extrovertive experiences are considered more central than introvertive experiences for aligning one's life with reality. Thus, from a historical perspective, extrovertive experiences are not a failure—it is not as if mystics were really shooting for introvertive experiences and missed.

Nature mysticism and cosmic consciousness do not often occur in mystical training (or at least, they are not often reported) but occur more spontaneously in the general populace. Since this book is on mysticism, such isolated experiences will not be mentioned as often as other types of mystical experiences. However, the experiences of such people as William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman are no less mystical for being so. Not all cases of being enthralled by nature are mystical; a sense of self must be lost partially or completely. In different types of nature mysticism, ending our conceptual barriers and sense of self makes us feel connected or identical to what is experienced in the world. Feeling tranquility, ecstasy, or awe is common. Things feel in harmony. Differentiated phenomena are present but without the reification of the content of consciousness into discrete entities. Nature becomes more vivid and may seem to be alive. Objects seem to have an inside, not just an outside. The being of the world may appear luminous; the sensory realm may take on a glow, feeling of being alive, made of vibrant light, or appear translucent and crystal-like. The sense of self may expand to include nature, like how Thomas Traherne felt that the entire universe was inside him. To William Blake, it was “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.” When one feels the worldly presence of a God or other reality that transcends time and grounds the universe, the experience shifts from nature mysticism to cosmic consciousness—a sense of a timeless, transcendent reality of light or love that is immanent to the natural world and present in everyday life.¹⁵ However, the transcendent element to God remains, so cosmic consciousness is not a form of pantheism. Indeed, no classical form of mystical metaphysics equate fundamental reality with the phenomenal world.¹⁶

Yet, all extrovertive experiences have in one degree or another a lessening of a sense of a phenomenal self and of any boundaries set up by our analytic mind between the experiencer and nature. Likewise, borders within nature are lessened, leading to a sense of connectedness. All things share the same beingness, and one participates in that shared beingness in a timeless now: the experience seems outside the eternal temporal sequencing of events.¹⁷ The natural world may become seen as an interconnected whole or partless unity (oneness) of oneself with all of nature. Both nature mystical experiences and cosmic consciousness come in various degrees of intensity, but there is always a profound sense of knowledge, being connected to the natural world, and making contact with something fundamentally real. The event may be a brief experience or a longer lasting state of consciousness.

Mindfulness

With mindfulness, as exemplified in Buddhism, complete focus is on whatever is being presented to the mind in the present moment. (Mindfulness in Buddhism does apply an interpretation to what is presented to the senses in terms of impermanence and conditionality.) This produces a clarity of awareness. Mindfulness is extrovertive when sensory input is involved, but it may also involve monitoring internal mental activity. To mindfulness mystics, the analytic mind alienates us from what is real, and language is its most effective tool: conceptualizations fixed by language distort what is actually there. Mindfulness loosens the grip that the concepts we create have on our sense experiences and inner experiences; thereby, the images of the world and ourselves that the mind creates are shattered. The sense of a discrete self within the phenomenal realm vanishes.

Mindfulness results in seeing the flow of sensory input and the inner activity of the mind as it is presented to consciousness free of memories, anticipations, judgments, and emotional reactions. Likewise, the flow of sensory input is free of the normal process of editing and reifying the input into distinct objects based on conceptualizations. With some or all of the background structuring normally associated with such content deactivated, observation is sharpened: the world is seen as in constant flux without independently existing objects (or experiencers), an objectless sensory stream. Because ego-driven consciousness is ended, states of mindfulness are necessarily different from ordinary states of consciousness. Such mindfulness

may be a transient experience, but it also may become an enduring stable state of transformed consciousness and, thus, an enduring character trait.

In mindfulness meditations, one focuses attention on, for example, breathing without trying to control or manipulate the breath, simply observing what is happening. The input coming into the mind does not change, but there is a change in the meditator's relation to that content. The content is perceived without a conceptual apparatus. There is a "bare attention" to what is presented to the senses without attention to anything in particular and without any accompanying expectations or habitual reactions.

This relates to the notion of *illusion* in extrovertive mysticism. We normally conceptualize independent entities apart from the flow of events and react to our own conceptions. We need to rend the conceptual veil to what is really there, but the discrete objects of sense experience and introspection are unreal only in this limited sense; the beingness behind conceptual differentiations remains real, and appearances are not differentiated into parts. To convey a 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 (the permanent substance lasting before and after whatever temporary shape it currently is in), and the form of the pot, or pot-ness, represents what is illusory (the impermanent form the clay is in at one moment).¹⁸ If we smash the pot, its thingness is destroyed, but what is real in the pot (the clay) continues unaffected. Mindfulness mystics focus on the clay and see the pot as only temporary and contingent and, in that way, incidental and illusory. They do not dismiss the world as unreal or illusory in any stronger sense unless their beliefs dictate otherwise for nonexperiential reasons.

Thus, mindfulness involves a realism, in the broadest sense, about the experienced realm: something exists independently of our conceptions. But this realism is not grounded in an awareness of sensed differentiations based in linguistic distinctions—there can be something objectively real even if there are no objective entities (objects). Since language refers to the differentiations in the natural realm and is itself a matter of differentiations, extrovertive mystics have trouble applying language to undifferentiated beingness. True phenomenal reality cannot be mirrored in any conceptualizations. Words denote distinct entities, and what is real is not constructed out of ontologically discrete parts.

Through mindfulness, ultimately, there is a Gestalt-like switch, not from one figure to another (for example, from a duck to a rabbit in the Köhler drawing) but from any figure to bare patches of colors. In pure

mindfulness, the being of the patches is not seen *as* anything; even the labels *patches*, *white*, and *black* would only arise after the purely mindful state is over. Awareness becomes focused on the beingness of the natural realm rather than the things that we normally conceptualize out of it. In the ocean of phenomena, mindfulness mystics focus on the common water and not the distinctions of the constantly changing waves. There is an open receptivity not previously present in the mystic's mind that permits a greater richness to the sensory input once it is freed from being routinely reduced to objects by preformed characterizations. The experiences may not have the intensity or vibrance of nature mystical experiences, but perception is refreshed by the removal of conceptual restrictions, and one type of mystical experience may slide into another.

In the enduring state of mindfulness, the mindful live fully absorbed in the present moment, free of temporal structuring, witnessing whatever arises in their consciousness without judgment and without a sense of possession and responding spontaneously. The mind becomes tranquil and lucid. To mindfulness mystics, as long as we have a dualizing mind, we are blocking direct access to reality as it really is. With a mindful mind, we no longer identify with our thoughts and emotions but simply observe and accept whatever is presented to the senses, living fully in the moment without a sense of a self. In sensory mindfulness, one can be aware that there is content in your mind without dropping out of the experience, unlike in most mystical experiences. If an extrovertive experience involves a sense of the presence of a transcendent reality or the "mind of the world" in nature, mindfulness is still possible.

The field of perception is no longer fragmented into discrete entities—in Buddhist terms, the mind no longer "abides" anywhere or "grasps" anything. Only now can we see it as it really is, free of conceptualizations setting up dualities. The mind mirrors only what is there without adding or distorting what is presented. Thus, mindfulness sustains attention without the customary habituation of our perceptions. However, some conceptual structuring will remain present in all but a state of pure mindfulness. While on the path to enlightenment, a mindfulness mystic still sees individual objects, but it is their beingness that is the focus of attention. Once enlightened, any self-contained individuality within the experienced world or in the experiencer is seen as illusory. What the unenlightened conceptually separate out as entities, the enlightened see to be only impermanent and conditioned eddies in a constantly flowing and integrated field of events.