

Mysticism as Everyday Life: The Recurring Mystical Moment - James B. Klee

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Zen is your everyday life.

Nirvana and Samsara are one.

Before I studied Zen mountains were mountains, trees were trees. Then as I began to study Zen the mountains and trees were no longer just mountains and trees. After I experienced satori the mountains were mountains, the trees trees.

A rose is a rose is a rose.

The above paraphrased expressions reflect one of my recently realized notions - in fact convictions - that the mystical experience is ordinary; that it is an everyday, thread of life aspect of experience which is the continuous thread of karma, in maya and atman, and which is the subject-object continuum. William James called it the stream of consciousness. F. S. C. Northrop called it the "immediately apprehended differentiated (or undifferentiated in the core as atman) aesthetic continuum." Aldous Huxley called it the perennial philosophy. A. H. Maslow recognized it as "peak experience." Yet it is only as the last that the mystical experience is mostly conceived, a rare mysterious occasional event which happens at best but rarely and that only to a select few. And many of these few, at least in the West, have tended to identify it with some "super" divine "millennial" consciousness which as the "holy" has turned the experience into an object of an end game that ignored all its "ecological" manifestations. (The distinction is Thomas Merton's.) As Harvey Wheeler recently pointed out the end result has been the total desanctification of all life experience except some impossibly rare moment that left all else pale and insignificant and ignoble and ignorable and exploitable, dross for misuse. Witness not only the destruction of the environment in the name of man's alleged dominion over earth, waters, and living forms, but also of man by man in the name of God and of man's body by himself in the same alleged cause. Now, though this has been especially true of the West, the pursuit of austerities has also been a dominant motif in the major part of the East as well. Indeed it appears for the nonce to have been a universal human trait. No wonder the desire even

of "the holy" is so roundly witnessed as the root of man's misery by those few individuals who like the Buddha were able to see beyond such narrow conceptions of the holy - (w)holy.

The resanctification of the whole and all its parts is a necessity if we are not to continue the ruthless destruction of not only the ecological surround, but of man by man, and of self by self. But obviously this cannot be legislated or forced by a few defensive or protective measures. It can only come by the direct experience of the holy in each part or function of the whole that man is capable of experiencing, each in its turn. For this the traditional analytic pursuit of the holy as only one part separable from the whole prepares us but poorly. Traditionally when any one fraction appeared as divine in and of itself it was expected to be so forever. It was *permanently* enshrined and turned into an idol. No wonder the concept of maya grew. All such moments regarded without reference to its temporal condition, its momentariness, could only in the context of permanentness appear as illusory. Any such "good" regarded the absolute without recognition of temporal relativity could only be deceptive. The momentariness of any "good," that is its own being in itself, its suchness, indeed the very possibility and fact of continuance, was scorned because *permanence* was sought instead of the eternity of change accepted. In the context of permanence any moment can only be a disappointment. Its continuity into fading staleness at best could only warn against any kind of attachment. Yet in the context of eternity each moment is the realization of all that is (w)holy but each moment must be relinquished before the glory of the next moment and its own self-realization. In other words it is not the temporality of the moment which is illusory but the attempt to arrest it, to make it essentially non-temporal, to try to hold onto it and *use* it in other contexts or dimensions of analysis, especially those formal and/or qualitative and the quantitative and/or evaluative. Indeed is this not why man falls? Should he try to know as permanently good and evil that which was only the wealth of the moment, he could only be led into ignorance of the next moment's own particular virtue. Is man's fall only the punishment of an act of disobedience of God's command or was it a consequence of a misinterpretation of the divine order in the sense of its pattern?

The temptation to arrest and hold the moment past its momentariness is one that to a large degree our species has circumvented even if individual members or groups have succumbed to such temptation. And of course such "sin" has its temporary successes if defined

primarily in a defensive way. Those creatures who have so sinned are among the most numerous and "successful" on the earth. Witness the insects and other body armored creatures, or those who wear a mantle of glory on a special basis as mane of lion, plumage of bird, crown of antlers, of stag and ram. Man too temporarily seems fair for permanence with his uniforms, surplices, feather headdresses or his pyramids, superdreadnaughts, palaces, churches, or temples, and nations. Yet as we look back upon the temporary permanencies of the past it is to the tourist in us that they most appeal. Today children wear the once-honored war bonnet in play, our hippies now outbead the rosary, outgrow the sacred earlock but as a game, and even make the distinctions of sexual dress no longer special and permanent. We seem as a species to be on the verge of breaking over from the insectocidal exoskeletal protective armor of culture affected by traditional societies to a freer and endoskeletal or vertebrate, i.e., with "backbone," more relativistic cultural style. As Ortega has repeatedly suggested we are moving from an ideal of "invertebrate" Spain to an appreciation of the existential life. We are "shipwrecked" as he termed it. Curiously this we share with all vertebrates, indeed even chordates, but only recently have we begun to use culture in a way appropriate to the daring choices we had already made on the evolutionary voyage as animals. But what does a "vertebrate" life mean for our purposes vis a vis the mystical experiences temporally conceived?

James found the answer so obvious that in the end he was mystified that it could be no other. In the flow, the karmic ongoingness, one goes from one event or happening to another. Truth had the pragmatic finality of the moment, of a now never to be repeated. Life, mind, experience or consciousness was essentially phenomenological, the subject and object were at best hypothetical divisions made of the unitary experience. Each event sacred and unalterable in its momentary suchness made a pluralistic conception absolutely essential, not that there might not be an overwhelming wholeness which could be misleadingly called "one." Yet in that whole the sanctity of the suchness was maintained. A story related by Maurice Friedman about D. T. Suzuki might express this. Suzuki was being entertained at Sarah Lawrence College in connection with a lecture and conversation developed with a Hindu lady about basic monism. She had implied that a variety of events such as a shoe, cough, god all had an underlying monistic substrate and solicited Suzuki's agreement with this position. He disagreed, asserting each was entirely its own. Yet each

was an aspect of the whole. Each was itself as such. Each was its own mystery. And like each haiku, each work of art, each was a moment or short series of moments in itself.

Why do we accept this when pointed out yet so soon forget? The most obvious answer is our relation to and understanding of what we conceive of as repetition of similarity and identity. To create a mathematics of repetition of identical elements, though useful in a large but limited sense, and then to apply such a calculus to living events without regard to the uniqueness of both the moment and the individual event is a great temptation to say the least. Repeatedly we fail to resist such an overwhelming temptation. Despite our protestations as to the limited intent of census or statistics we succumb to the almost irresistible lure of reduction of events to the qualitative or the quantitative. And of course it does work for a while. After all events rarely differ that much. If there were not an almost essential repetition there could not be an organism, a body, a word or symbol, a culture, indeed evolution. That some events "recur" more often

than not, more often than other events enables us to develop a sense of continuity. But if we only sense the recurrence and not the continued miracle of its creation and recreation we lose the sense of vitality of the renewed moment to that of boredom. We come to expect its recurrence. We act as if the golden age were ever past or ever still ahead instead of ever present. And of course we then begin to desire occurrence or recurrence and suffer the miseries of frustration, of unfulfilled desire and longing.

The more we desire a repetition or the thoughtfully conceived ideal the less sacred each moment becomes and the more we ignore the mystery of the moment. The more we act in belief in repetition of past and future the less faith we have in the actual essential partial recurrence of the ecological-organism unity without which life ceases to exist. Even though such repetition is seldom exact and enormous flexibility is required to even recognize relevant recurrences yet on the whole it has been largely sufficient enough to have brought the current species to their present vitality. And unless man intervenes to an exaggerated degree there is little reason not to expect its somewhat fitful continuance. Sufficient at least to retain a vaguely justifiable faith. For if it ever altogether ceased as it threatens to in a major earthquake, drought, or flood, fire or storm, then that would be that, period. Yet so far death has never ceased either. Is this death, the ultimate fear that makes us fiercely want exact repetition? My dog on Easter Sunday lost to death his best friend and most constant companion, my other dog. Although obviously disrupted by the

non-recurrence of his constant companion yet the rest of his life seems not to have lost its zestful vitality. Is he the less for his failure to grieve? Has not the human animal also but temporarily strayed from such wonderful vitality albeit for several tens of thousands of years? The temptation to arm himself against his awareness of death by means of the new possibilities of symbol, tool, and culture so recently created was and is great. But we are possibly on the verge of a new sense of consciousness based on the recurrent divinity of the moment of the continued sacredness of each event of the (w)holiness of eternity. Perhaps as we realize this we will be able to give up the defensive and armored attempt to make permanent any one particular revelation in history. (Incidentally, perhaps such inspiration is relegated to "history" to reduce the obligatory sense of relevance each moment inspires.)

The reorientation of consciousness from a concentrated desire ordered pursuit of a seemingly monistically conceived goal (so effective in creating our current cultural achievements and also in creating the crises now apparent as the result of such an effort) to a more flexible pluralistic orientation which acknowledges the sacredness of each concurrent event not to mention their recurrence calls for a lifestyle for which we have little or at best vague preparation. That a continuous creative and recreative effort has to be made is obvious. That a continuous creative and recreative milieu is also given even though it cannot be expected in any exact way. A pluralistic orientation also implies the possibility of rhythmic alternations of experience more complex than the monoemphatic patterns to which the West has accustomed itself, the

oom-pah-pah of waltz, rhumba, foxtrot, or big beat rock. I would suggest instead the polyrhythms of Indian or African music with their emphases on complex occurrences and recurrences rather than the thematic repetitions of melody and harmony so long the standby of the analytic monistic, monothematic, and monotheistic West.

This unexpected recurrence of the sacred is what to me C. S. Lewis means when he speaks of being "surprised by joy." Rather than seeking pleasure the "doing good" of traditional religious observance (the pleasure principle, the expected payoff) or postponing gratification while more clever means to the goal are devised, "doing better" (the reality principle of the scientific West), a third way is potentially emerging, a "doing best" not as the perfectionistic continuation of good and better but as a turn towards relevance. This third way involves a comparison of values on a qualitative as well as quantitative dimension and

especially are cogniscent of presence, of temporality which takes full advantage of what is being given in all their polyrhythmical dimensions. In this sense each event is passed through and released in turn not grasped, held, accumulated, imprisoned, arrested and ultimately fossilized. The rhythmical conception of breathing in and exhaling again, inhaling and breathing out so typical of Eastern meditation and yoga seems the better physiological analogy than the peak experience of sexuality and/or success achievement so typical of Western emphases. For ultimately the acceptance of relinquishment of past sacred experience makes the experience of divine presence far more possible and probable than the holding on to as if permanent like a mounted fish or head trophy on the wall. For the latter works only by exclusion, the fish lasts longest when all forms of vitality especially those useful forms of decomposition (which make possible the recycling of the fish and hence its resurrection and reexperience) are most excluded. By purifying (purification always excludes other aspects) by excluding life and death we make the mounted fish permanently ours but all of us are just a bit dead in consequence. Better to have "thrown it back" and fished again another day. (Is not the latter closer to the true meaning of the resurrection? Are not the dead to bury the dead?) In this sense the ecstasy of the peak experience is the more regressive (as suggested by Roland Fischer in a recent talk on consciousness at the Third Interdisciplinary Conference on the voluntary control of internal states) than the potentially cyclical, albeit irregular and seldom extreme analogy of breathing, indeed of the life-death cycle itself, growing to, passing through, and letting go only to grow again would seem the more authentic way of realizing the ever-present nature of the divine than to try to grasp and mount it on wall or altar. True as it is mundane, more "temporal," less ecstatic, or more ordinary; but that is where I started.

Zen is our everyday life. But then today is the first day of the rest of our lives, and in the rest we could realize the ever recurrent divinity inherent in all aspects of the continuous stream of consciousness. This ever-present sacredness we now often ignore and ignore by our desire for ultimate and exclusively "divine" god-object permanently enshrined and isolated from the whole by being made the one and only.

For this exclusive "god" we are recurrently tempted to trade the continual sacredness of eternity. How many more tens of thousands of years will our species go before we have broken out of these attempts to freeze into permanence a few revelations when we could have continuous access to each and every moment? But then how courageous we would

have to be, to be! Dare we risk it? But then could we even possibly lose for isn't it all sacred all the time?