

Mysticism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson covers mysticism. It's a term that's easily misunderstood, so some of the basic elements of mysticism will be laid out. Examples from several religions and traditions will also be provided.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Mysticism](#)
2. [Anatman](#)
3. [Mysticism in Hinduism](#)
4. [Desert Fathers](#)
5. [Via Negativa](#)
6. [The Quakers](#)

1. Mysticism

The word **mysticism**, comes from two Greek words: “to conceal” and “to initiate.” Western psychology has a very long history of offering an interpretive lens for understanding mysticism and mystical experience. Sigmund Freud linked it to the primitive ego feeling of a child prior to separation from the mother. In other words, the feeling of complete immersion and oneness with the other, where there is no separation between oneself and life's source and sustenance.

This changes, separation occurs, and the ego develops with all of its constructions of self and other. This development of ego includes all of its defenses that try to protect the individual from the suffering that this might cause.

Very generally and broadly, the term “mysticism” is oriented around the possibility of seeing through these and other false constructions that might hinder awareness of something else. Generally in history, this meant an experience of and communion with the divine. Mysticism is not necessarily a specific path but refers to something experiential that is not that easy to define.



DID YOU KNOW

In the religion of Santeria, which contains elements of many different religions and traditions, including Native American, Roman Catholic, West African, and Caribbean, one custom involves dancing and drumming intending to commune with the deities and make contact with ancestor spirits. Santeria, Vodoun, and other Afro-Caribbean religions will use Catholic symbolism combined with African deities. Oftentimes, there is a spirit possession that takes place in these Afro-Caribbean services.

Many of the world's religions have elements of mysticism in them in terms of customary practices that might guide one toward greater clarity and insight. This perhaps allows for a different level of receptivity, something one might normally be conditioned to avoid. Some examples of these traditional practices include **meditation**, **contemplative prayer**, mantras, and **chanting**.

The idea with mantras and chanting is that an excessive repetition of specific words and sounds will assist in transporting one beyond the realm of the familiar and ordinary world. There are also particular indigenous and tribal practices, such as drumming, dancing, and ingesting psychoactive plants, intended to induce a state of **ecstasy** or a state of union with the divine that brings extreme feelings of joy and happiness.



TERMS TO KNOW

Mysticism

A religious approach that emphasizes one's personal experience of divinity and/or the presence of divinity over philosophical or rational approaches.

Meditation

A practice that aims to clear the mind in order to be receptive to divinity.

Contemplative Prayer

An attempt to put oneself in contact with the sacred/divine via clear and quiet thinking.

Chant

An often-repetitive song that aims to induce a state of spiritual receptivity in the worshipper.

Ecstasy

A state of intense spiritual joy and/or physical pleasure.

2. Anatman

Western psychology has many interpretive structures in common with Buddhism, particularly when talking about the nature of experience and the role of the ego and the self. Freud used the phrase “primitive ego self,” unconditioned by the experience of separation from source and sustenance.

In Buddhism, there's a Sanskrit term, **anatman**, which means “no self.” The idea is that suffering is caused by the endless clinging and grasping for self-identity, an identity that is constantly changing and in flux. Being impermanent, any identity and the associated experience of self is a mere illusion.

In other words, anything that you might cling to for security and identity—such as your things, your body, your concepts, your knowledge, et cetera—is in fact empty. Everything is empty. All phenomena are inherently empty

of self because everything is completely interdependent upon and the result of something else, something other than itself.

The Buddhist hopes to gain insight into this doctrine of dependent origination, as it's called, which is linked with the non-conceptual experience of emptiness—in Sanskrit **shunyata**. Meditation, chanting, silence, and, in many sects of Buddhism, prayer are all used to facilitate these experiences of emptiness and no self.

Another example of mysticism from some branches of Tibetan Buddhism is the practice of creating elaborate, colorful designs called mandalas using tiny granules of sand. Based on the text *Kalachakra Tantra*, these mandalas represent the three wheels of time. They're used for initiation ceremonies, where the initiate meditates on the images, attaining a vision of the Buddha body and divine emptiness. These mandalas are also used for generating compassion and extending peace out into the world.



TERMS TO KNOW

Anatman

In Buddhism, the experience of the loss of self, usually combined with mystical religious experience.

Shunyata

In Buddhism, “emptiness” that leaves one more receptive to enlightenment through prayer and contemplation.

3. Mysticism in Hinduism

In **Advaita** Vedanta, the non-dualistic school of Hinduism, there's this idea that Atman and Brahman can be experienced simultaneously. Atman is the true self, and Brahman is the absolute principle of being or the absolute reality. There are certain methods that one can practice in order to experience this state of non-dualism. This is sought through different yoga practices, chants, and meditations.

In other branches of Hinduism, such as Vaishnavism, there are certain devotional yoga practices called bhakti, which are designed to help the devotee achieve complete surrender to and union with God, with the god Vishnu, or his incarnation, Krishna. In some cases, a vision of some part of Vishnu's body will be encountered and experienced.



TERM TO KNOW

Advaita (non-dual) consciousness

An altered mental or emotional state in which the person no longer experiences a difference between the internal and external.

4. Desert Fathers

The Western religions also have a long history of mystical approaches to the divine. The experiences of the early Christian Desert Fathers are an example. They often lived lives of extreme simplicity with the goal of

getting closer to God.

The hope was that, by stripping away the distractions of the known world, one could achieve some kind of union and communion with God. These early forms of monasticism had a great influence on the mystical tradition that was to follow.

5. Via Negativa

In the fifth and sixth centuries of the Common Era, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite developed a theological system called apathetic theology or “via negativa,” meaning “negative theology.” The idea behind this is that God can’t be defined. It is not possible to say what he is or indicate what his positive attributes might be. It is, however, possible to know God by knowing what he is not.

This is a mystical orientation that aims at removing preconceptions and availing oneself of the insight that the unknown might bring. The via negativa has also inspired other Christian mystics, such as the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the 14th century of the Common Era.

6. The Quakers

In general, there are many branches of Christianity that have some element of mysticism in them throughout the early centuries, heavily in the Middle Ages, and in contemporary society, such as the Religious Society of Friends known as the Quakers. The vision of many Protestant Quakers who emigrated from England was inspired by a desire to step outside of familial structures of religious thought, the Church of England specifically, to gain insight into a truth of a different sort on another level.

They desired to know and to love God without anything in between. This is done through a great deal of silence, contemplative prayer, hard physical work, and dedication to the principles and ideals of a supportive and cooperative community. Some historians of religion have equated Quakers with mysticism because these conditions are thought to support an attitude that might predispose one to mystical experience and union with God.



SUMMARY

The word **mysticism** comes from two Greek words meaning “to conceal” and “to initiate.” Western psychology offers the idea that there is a unified experience that precedes the development of the ego. Freud coined the term “primitive ego self.” This is related to the Buddhist notion of **anataman** or “no self.” The mystical experience in certain schools and sects of Buddhism desires to reconnect with that sense of oneness through mandalas, chants, and meditation. There are elements of **mysticism in Hinduism** as well. It is believed these experiences can be reached through different yoga practices, chants, and meditations. You also looked at the development of mysticism in Christianity, beginning with the early **Desert Fathers** through the Middle Ages with the **via negativa**, or apathetic theology.

Finally, you looked at **the Quaker** lifestyle as a way of aligning oneself internally and with the community such that love of God and appreciation of that oneness can be experienced through the ordinary world and as a transcendence of that.

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