

# Swami Omkarananda

## The Experience of Unity in European Mysticism



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Intuitive experience, the revelatory states of inner Consciousness, highest mystical perceptions, disclose to us the sole reality of the infinity of divine Existence that is the infinity of Consciousness and Delight. In our inner union with this supreme Reality that is present everywhere, and absolutely conscious of itself as the infinity of Peace, Beauty and Perfection, we transcend completely the experience of the time-space universe and stand totally liberated of all limitations in finitude and individuality. Having obtained unity with the supreme Ground of all being, with the Godhead, the mystics live, while yet here on earth, and in a physical form, in the Kingdom of Immortality and Joy.

Through the centuries, Europe has produced a number of great and inspiring mystics. Among them, the Father of German mysticism, Master Eckhart occupies a prominent place.

So pure was his inner nature that it permitted him to gain true glimpses of the Nature of the Godhead. Reflecting upon the character of his communion with the supreme Ground of all existence, he exclaims, "Oh, wonder of wonders, when I think of the union the soul has with God!"

He also says, "Where the two become one, one loses its nature." "To gauge the soul we must gauge it with God, for the Ground of God and the ground of the soul are one and the same."

From his writings emerges a rare spiritual experience and a grand philosophy of unity of the soul in man, with the Soul in all manifestation. From no other European mystic, there could emerge so wonderful a system of monistic philosophy.

A devoted follower of Master Eckhart, the blessed Henry Suso had obtained mystical experiences of a special order. One day he was gripped in an exalted divine delight, which lasted almost for an hour. He saw and heard things which none can describe, and he knew not whether

it was day or night. Speaking of this ineffable experience he says, "Oh my heart's joy, never shall my soul forget this hour." He continues, "The Spirit dies and yet is all alive in the marvels of the Godhead, and is lost in the stillness of the naked simple unity. It is in this that the highest Joy is to be found."

The fourteenth-century friar-preacher of Strasbourg, another follower of Meister Eckhart John Tauler, describes the mystic's union with the Divine as finding himself to be "simply in God".

Even while he was very young a divine illumination encompassed Jacob Boehme, the untutored sage of Gorlitz. "He was surrounded by a divine Light for seven days and stood in the highest contemplation and Kingdom of Joy."

On a second occasion he entered an inward ecstasy, as a result of gazing fixedly upon a burnished pewter dish. It seemed to him as if he could look into the soul of all things. His own statement is that he "looked into the deepest foundations of things." His vision of the transcendental Reality as infilling the phenomenal world, was a frequent experience. He says he saw and knew the Being of all Beings. This God-intoxicated man has left us eloquent descriptions of the union of the soul with the Godhead.

The Flemish mystic John Ruysbroeck finds that there is no fulfilment of human destiny anywhere except in union with the Divine. He sees Adam's sin not in choosing evil as such, but in his preferring the life of the senses in all its crudeness to the life of the Divine Oneness. The fulfilment of human existence consists in the obtainment of conscious union with God. John Ruysbroeck stresses purity, non-attachment, inner freedom from desires, and the need for the feeling of inward unity with God.

Spanish mysticism at its best is embodied in St. John of the Cross. At the beginning of the thirties of his life, he experienced a paradise of interior delights and heavenly sweetness.

"The soul of one who serves God always", affirms John of the Cross, "swims in joy, always keeps a holiday, is always in her palace of jubilation."

This great Spanish mystic speaks of two forms of union with God.

In one way, God is eternally united with all beings, and dwells in every soul, 'even in that of the greatest sinner in the world'.

This form of union, this eternal presence of God in all beings, in all Nature, is quite distinct from the recovery in conscious experience, by the human individual, of the eternal union that subsists between him and God.

This second form of union is the destiny of all spiritual experience. It is the 'union and transformation of the soul in God by love'.

By the Grace of God, a pleasure-loving young man, Augustine, was transformed into a God-conscious mystic, a great bishop, and an inspiring saint.

His life was divinely illuminated and his thought God-centered. He gained a direct experience of God, the Divine Reality, who, as he says, "precedes all human knowledge and exists independently of the ability of the human mind to know Him."

He gained the deepest insights into the profound realities of the human soul in its union with God.

Augustine clearly perceived God as the one Reality, the Soul of souls, and the Life of lives.

The aim of human existence on earth, consists in the obtainment of union with God.

This has to be gained by much self-discipline, much self-restraint, much self-transformation, by divine Grace, and by rising from the lower to the higher levels of contemplation on God, until the soul transcends time and space and is drawn into the all-absorbing embrace of God.

Many of the European saints could be ranked among the great mystics of the world. We could refer to St. Francis of Assisi as the prince among the nature mystics of Europe. Nature was to this saint and mystic a thin mantle concealing the splendours of God. Divine Grace had granted him many visions of God. He was transformed from a pleasure-seeking young man into a God-conscious person whose life embodies the ideas of unconditional poverty, unbounded love for all beings, and unlimited joy. His love for God, for mankind, for the animal kingdom, was all-inclusive and unending. The elements were his brothers and sisters. All creatures, his experience showed it to him, reflect the divine radiance. This experience filled his heart with joy. The union gained in his own inner consciousness with God in Man, in birds and beasts, in all Nature, was the dominating feature of his inner life.

With a delight that can belong only to men of deeper knowledge and higher experiences, we find the European firmament lit up with many brilliant stars of women mystics. Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hildegard von Bingen, Theresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna, Madame Guyon, the French mystic, and a number of other women afford us inspiring lives that were dedicated to the discovery of the Dimension of the all-sustaining, all-transforming, all-blissful Divinity in the phenomena of mankind and nature.

The Italian mystic, Angela da Foligno, grew to a high stature in spiritual culture and exerted a valuable influence on the later day mystics. Thus speaks Angela da Foligno of her experience, "The soul is illuminated by the presence of God; when God and it are lost in each other it apprehends and possesses with joy good things which it cannot describe. The soul swims in joy and knowledge."

A Spanish Carmelite abbess and reformer, St. Teresa of Avila, reveals in her writings the depths of her mystical experiences and her genius as a disciplined psychologist in presenting clear and valid descriptions of the unfoldment of spiritual consciousness.

One day, it is stated, she was able to perceive in one instant how all things are seen and contained in God.

Humility and Love were the dominating features of her conduct.

Here is the quintessence of her Message: Sacrifice each day a few moments to God. Consecrate an hour or two to Him. Take resort to solitude and silence. Overcome the obsession with, and agitation of, the world, by meditation. As you progress, discrimination will be attained and a desire for liberation from the thralldom of the senses will grow strong. When interior purification is ultimately complete, Union with the all-perfect God will be achieved.

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