Mystic Philosophy and Spiritual Consciousness: A Study on Sri Aurobindo’s Select Poems

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Abstract

Mysticism is a broad term which expresses an area of concern rather than a specific set of beliefs. It is concerned with the nature of the ultimate reality. Mysticism can be a vague, ill-defined, religious and spiritual belief. This paper aims to explain Sri Aurobindo’s poems “The Meditations of Mandavya”, “Nirvana” and “Transformation” on the concept of spiritual consciousness and how the spirit of joy is attained. It focuses on how the poet attains the ideal of adwaita or non-duality. He also brings out the idea of “Absolute” where he drives home the meaning of spiritual unity of all beings in the universe. He is of the view that the world and our own individual existence break all the personal and egoistic limits and become one with our Earth. Mysticism is usually defined as a spiritual discipline used to make contact with the Divine. Mysticism is not an unexamined phenomenon, but one should be able to see its relevance to the human situation too. It proves the individual’s capacity to rise above the conditional factors of nature, nurture and history, to achieve a third force which might change
the core and outline of collective life. The readers have themselves fallen into a trance while reading all of the mystical works. In order to understand the real feeling that a mystic poetry creates, the reader initially has to understand the really what mysticism really is. Only then one gets the accurate meaning and feeling of what a mystic poetry clearly says. There is always depth and meaningfulness in such a poetry. Then it can be stated that the reader has attained that sublime state which a poet usually wishes from his readers. It is not easy to attain that state. It requires real and thorough knowledge of mysticism. The mystical and philosophical beauty has been put forth by all the poets through their poetry.

Keywords: Mysticism, Adwaita / Non duality, Absolute, Spiritual Consciousness

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), was an Indian philosopher, poet, yogi and a nationalist who joined for Indian independence during British rule. He was a spiritual reformer, and spread his visions on human progress and spiritual evolution. Sri Aurobindo was born in Culcutta on 15 August, 1872. He studied Indian Civil Service at King’s College in Cambridge, England. His major works include The Life Divine, Synthesis of Yoga, and the epic poem, Savtri: A Legend and a Symbol. Mysticism is rooted in almost all of Aurobindo’s poetry and he is of the view that “man should transcend the conscious level and realize the super conscious level through the medium of Yoga.”

Mysticism is a broad term which speaks of an area of concern rather than a specific set of beliefs. It is concerned with the nature of the ultimate reality. Mysticism can be a vague, ill-defined, religious and spiritual belief. The term mysticism has ancient Greek origin with various meanings. It has a Greek meaning “to conceal” initially referring to the biblical and medieval Christianity and came to be associated with extra ordinary expressions and state of mind. But in modern times mysticism has acquired a limited definition but a broad application. In the words of Aurobindo, mysticism means “the union with the absolute, the
infinite God.” Mysticism is the art and science of living perfectly – it is the self knowledge that subsumes the knowledge of the world. It is the quest for, and the union with the absolute. To the religious minded, it is the search for God, to the lover, it is the search for the beloved, to the man of action, it is the search for the secret of perfect action and for the scholar, it is the search for truth and so on.

Mysticism is usually defined as a spiritual discipline used to make contact with the divine. The mystical event is a personal experience during which one feels as though one has been touched by some higher and greater power or truth. This may occur inside or outside of a religious setting, within or outside a religious tradition. In some cases, mystical experience is seen as an important component of a religious tradition because it can offer validation of a tradition’s belief system. However, mystical experience is so powerful and has the capacity to provide moral, ethical, intellectual, and emotional direction.

Mysticism shares common areas with magic, prayer, worship, science and metaphysics. It is based on the magical view of life; but though powers are known to exist, the true mystic has little interest in being a miracle man. The mystics have, varied disciplines for moving from one plane to the other. There is science of inner no less than the science of outer. Aurobindo has given a new turn to a great tradition. He speaks of evolution of consciousness, do not consider organized religion has enough, are vitally concerned with collective salvation, a divine milieu. Mysticism is not an unexamined life and one should be able to see its relevance to the human situation. It proves the individual’s capacity to rise above the conditional factors of nature, nurture and history, to achieve a third force which might change the core and contour of collective life.

“The Meditations of Mandavya” is yet another poem taken from Poems from Manuscript said to be written during the later phase of his life, namely, Pondicherry phase of 1920. This poem is regarded as an extraordinary poem which shows the fullest
expression of the mystical realization. The poem confirms the vision of unity of the cosmos, and adds a sense of joy that comes from self-realization. It is a poem of striving and finding, of being fulfilled, but thirsting again. It is a poem of rupture and pain, of union and separation, of submission and rebellion. It is a poem that denies the ability of reason to comprehend the absolute.

“The Meditations of Mandvya” is in three parts. The first part is dominated by a spirit of joy and affirmation, the second part is more skeptical and uncertain, attempting to rationalize the doubts of the poet and third being more pessimistic and despairing, corresponding to the dark night of the soul. Here, the poet rebels against and denounces God. First section opens with unequivocal joy: “O joy of gaining all the soul’s desire!/ O stranger joy of the defeat and loss!” (85). Here the poet brings the idea that there is a consummate fulfillment and that he has attained the goal of life in his union with God. The phrase: “All is attained, attained! The pain dead” (85) adds to the clarification of the claim.

The poet’s bliss in his union with God is expressed in the opening and closing lines of the first section. The middle stanzas stress the unity of the cosmos and its beauty. In stanza two, the poet sees God in a large bird on his garden wall and in stanza three, in a scorpion that has just stung him:

Blue-winged like turquoise, crimson-throated, beaked,

Enormous, fluttering over the garden wall

Thou can’st to me: some moments on a bough

Wast perched, then flaust away, leaving my heart. (88)

Here the poet seems to have attained the ideal of “adwaita” or non-duality in which everything including the scorpion whose bite is considered merely a part of oneself. In such a state, there is no “other”, no alienation and no conflict.
Part three is almost completely reversed of the mood of joy in union that pervades part one. Here the poet stands against God, denying Him and blaspheming against Him, like a bitter lover’s quarrel. In this part, the poet sees a meaningless universe, without plan or design, only a dumb voice in it: “For where in all these stars are any sign of love?/ It is not here, but that which seems like Love/ It is sleek cruel cheat that soon unmarks” (90). Poet says that there is a hungry beast and he questions the existence of love and claims that love cheats the world.

In the second part, the poet cries out: “Lo, I have cursed thee, lo I have denied/ Thy love, Thy being. Strike me with Thy rod,/ Convince me that thou art” (90). Here, it is different from his previous statement. One way or the other, it is clear that the poet is obsessed with the single idea of the “Absolute” and is prepared to give up anything for it. The reconciliation of the reality of human suffering with equal fact of the infinite love of God is the message that is being conveyed in part two. In the words of Peter Kreeft, “It is reasonable to love the absolute absolutely for the same reason it is reasonable to love the relative relatively”. (4)

Finally in the poem “The Meditations of Mandavya”, the poet declares: “I know, O God, the day shall dawn at last/ When man shall rise from playing with the mud/ And taking his hands the sun and stars” (89). Here, it is made clear that nature has to be transformed, the desert must turn fertile and the wilderness embrace the rose, the images are apocalyptic forecasting a vision similar to the Christian notion of the “Kingdom of heaven on earth” in which the lamb and the tiger can lie side by side in peace. Here, Aurobindo reveals himself to be as much a romantic visionary, a myth maker and more evidently a mystic. The determination never to waver until perfection if gained is well expressed in one line in the poem: “I shall not faint, O God” (89). Therefore, the self-realization process has been attained by the poet in this poem.
The poem “Nirvana” is totally different in theme when compared to the poem “Transformation”. In this poem, the mind which is impure is caught in the web of “maya” or worldly pleasures of five senses which cannot see the eternal bliss. This poem demands one’s basic knowledge of the yogic philosophy. In order to enjoy that supreme truth or the “Paramananda”, the yogi has to stop the diverse mental waves and egoism and fix gaze on the “Atman” or the supreme reality. This is the basic theme of the poem. Both the poems speak of the same philosophical thought that in order to attain “nirvana” or salvation, it is a required process that one has to transform oneself. The great sage Patanjali says: “Yoga is the control of thought waves of mind” (qtd in White 10). In order to control the waves, both the seeker of supreme bliss or the eternal truth gets mastery over his five senses, his nerves are thrilled at the highest percipience and he begins to enjoy the divine joy and ruptures beyond ecstasy. In the poem “Transformation”, the lines “I am more a vassal of the flesh/ A slave to Nature and her leaden rule; / I am caught no more in the senses' narrow mesh” (125). It shows that now the heart of the poet is transformed. He is no longer a body but an illumined soul. He is no more a vassal of flesh. He is not a slave to nature. He is no more receiving’s the songs of sensual music but sings an immortal song of the past, present and future. After mastering the five senses, the yogi is not caught in the senses “narrow mesh”. Here, Aurobindo does not discard the existence of the body. It is the body which is the tool for attaining that supreme bliss by awakening the great power of the soul.

“Nirvana” means the absolute liberation from the bondage of the body. Here the poet says “All is abolished but the mule Alone” (15). The phrase “mute Alone” is very suggestive and mystical. It stands for the immortal soul which is never bound by and caste, class, creed and is above everything. It never dies and grows old. It is always fresh and independent. All the worldly things are bound to be perished; the only object which remains permanently is
one’s supreme soul. When the seeker of the eternal truth meditates on the supreme soul, he becomes so much absorbed in the process that it is very difficult to say whether he is a body or a soul. He gets an absolute victory over his “I” which is the root of all evils. He is then fully merged in his own city of mirth and joy; he sees only a shadow without tone. “There is no I, no nature, known-unknown/ The city, a shadow picture with tone” (15). Here the word “shadow” has been philosophically suggested which stands for the indescribable joy even in death or darkness. The yogi very well knows that shadow has an equal meaning and significance to that of light because both shadow and light are two phases of the same thing. Similarly in “Transformation”, body and soul are significant aspects because one can attain “moksha” only through meditation where body is a part.

The last stanza of the poem “Transformation” has both the feeling and form, matter and manner. The rich philosophical thoughts have been beautifully woven into the garland of rich poetry and craftsmanship. The metaphors used here, like “narrow mesh”, “vassal”, “tool” and “vast sun” are very apt and suggestive. When the greatness of soul is discovered, then for the yogi, there is no significance of the body. “My body is God's happy living tool/ My spirit is vast sun of deathless light” (125). His heart becomes the vast sun of light, such light which cannot be killed by the great death or time.

Thus, if one can love the “Absolute”, it is for sure that one can love his relative. Similarly, if one realizes the existence of God, the amount of human suffering will be minimized. The poet himself asks: “Who made of Nature here a Tyrant? Who” (87). So, here the poet declares that one chooses his or her own servitude and it is themselves who create and heap their chains. Thus, it is not God who is responsible for the sufferings of human being, but they themselves.

The only solution according to him is to go the whole way, to accept no limits, to stop at nothing short of perfection and complete self realization. “And high omnipotence
come near our grasp” (88). The omnipotent Almighty comes near us to grasp our difficulties. The goal is perfection. So, the poet in the latter sections of the poem realizes the greatness of God who is more than anything else. This poem captures the ambivalence of Aurobindo’s mysticism unlike other poems analyzed here. The apparent doubting continues intermittently even though self-realisation is attained. Hence four or five fundamental facets of Aurobindo’s mystical experience, namely, joy in union, the agony of separation, the experience of the “adwaitic” or universal consciousness and concern with the reconciliation of the seeming contradiction between the infinite love of God and the fact of human suffering, are summed up in the poem.

In Aurobindo’s mysticism, there is a fine distinction between a personal emancipation from ignorance, and the final emancipation of all nature. The final emancipation of all nature is considered to be the ultimate goal of evolution. It is the return of all manifested matter to its original divine state. The ultimate goal of Aurobindo’s mysticism is the regeneration and transformation of every human being. This early life of sorrow, pain and death will make the life divine.

Furthermore, in his poetry there are essentially two main incentives to spiritual life: the sufferings of the human condition prompt the seeker to strive for self-knowledge and self-realization; and the second aspect being the prospect of a world devoid of the possibility of such realization. The whole of this idea may be summed up in the lines: “There is the thirst,/ And thirst supposes water somewhere” (89).

Aurobindo’s mystical experience has revealed to him the significance of human life. He not only put forth in verse, his rich experience of the metaphysical system embodying a grand ideal, but also outlined the way to attain it. His mystical thought, though complex in nature, can illuminate the world and destroy ignorance and fanaticism. It can also enhance the
toleration level in an individual which in turn can lead to a peaceful mutual co-existence.

Thus he held out the hope of a world-union through divine consciousness.

Therefore, for Aurobindo, the need and attraction of spiritual life are self-evident, requiring no additional incentives. From incentives such as sorrow and death, the hopelessness of the alternatives to the spiritual life, Aurobindo’s perspectives finally goes beyond incentives themselves making the spiritual life, a thing with a logic of its own, self-evident, self-generating and choice less.
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