

# **The Way of Mysticism**

by Manly P. Hall

A mystic is a person who believes that it is possible to approach God by entering into the deepest parts of his own nature. According to mysticism, it is not necessary to belong to any sect or denomination in order to attain spiritual insight or consolation of soul. Most of the world's great religious systems and philosophical schools have to some measure encouraged mysticism. We remember the exalted contemplation of Akhenaten, the first and greatest of Egyptian mystics. The universal insight of Lao-tse, as set forth in the *Tao Teh King*, has won the admiration of the world. The simple piety of the Essenes has been fondly remembered for its influence upon early Christianity. Although we think of Buddha as an ethical philosopher, we are mindful of the mystical import of the Great Enlightenment which occurred to this Indian sage as he sat enraptured under the branches of the bodhi tree. We appreciate the inner guidance which led William Penn to establish his community of Quakers in the New World. He came into a savage land without a weapon of any kind because he believed that, in their hearts, all men are good.

Everywhere the "lovers of God" have sought to serve the Divine Radiance which came to them in their raptures and prayers. The Dervishes and Sufis of Islam, the Jains and Sikhs of India, the Franciscans and Dominicans of Europe, and the priestly orders among the North American Indians—all these groups followed the ancient path of silence. They went alone into the wilderness and humbly asked that universal truth reveal to them the will of the Divine for its creations.

In troubled times such as those we live in today, we naturally turn from the uncertainties of mortal existence to those certainties which abide forever in the Divine Heart and the Divine Mind. We know that faith alone, which is the ever-remembering of eternal good, can guide us through the desert of waiting to the promised land. In modern living, however, mysticism is no longer associated inevitably with religion. It is available to all who think sincerely, believe deeply, and labor devoutly.

Material science, exploring the invisible universe of time and space, is rapidly approaching a new dimension of consciousness. It is beginning to think of exact knowledge leading to a magnificent believing. We are discovering a cosmos worthy of our faith, where immutable laws fulfill an infinite plan. Even to glimpse the outer dimensions of this plan is to be strengthened in resolution and purpose. We are building mathematical, electrical, and chemical foundations under our concept of life.

The learned professions, as medicine and law, can also open the way to a larger insight. We perceive, if but dimly, God as the Great Physician, whose love and wisdom are for the healing of the nations. We also sense Deity as the great legislator, the fountain of all law, whose very being is the assurance of justice. We can understand how a man like Emanuel Swedenborg could be led by his mastery of an exact science to the contemplation of that science of sciences of which Pythagoras and Plato have left so faithful a description.

In art and music, the mystical comes very close to the material. Every creative spirit has sensed the God-power in itself. When a friend asked Antonio Stradivari how he came to make such wonderful violins, the simple man thought for a few moments and then answered quietly, "God made Antonio to make violins." Some destiny moving within the depths of our human constitutions has given us Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Bach. Franz Schubert tells us that he first heard the melodies which he transcribed as wonderful symphonies of sound floating in space.

There is mysticism in the building of a house, for if that house is not built according to the law, it will not stand. In every simple task, we advance even the most common of our purposes because we have our existence within a cosmos of infinite means and inevitable ends. One of the most beautiful human beings I have ever known was a simple house painter. He was thrilled because he could make homes more attractive, and it was his philosophy that when a house is bright and clean, the people who live in it will be happier.

It may be fair to say that most thoughtful men and women have some measure of mystical insight. In hours of emergency, they have felt the sustaining presence of a heavenly power. We must be careful, however, not to permit these overtones of consciousness to become involved in abstract speculation. Buddha has told us that we must ascend from this world to the regions of enlightenment by a double ladder consisting of two ladders standing side by side. One ladder is called "conviction" and the other is called "conduct." If we place one foot on the lowest rung of the ladder of conviction, we must then place the other foot on the lowest rung of the ladder of conduct. Every belief that becomes important to us must improve character. It must lead immediately to an action consistent with that belief. We cannot ascend either ladder separately from the other. Conduct without conviction cannot sustain us in our long search for reality. Conviction without conduct ends in darkness and confusion. By right conviction, we cause better conduct; by right conduct, we cause better conviction. Thus, we live in two worlds at the same time—a world rich in spiritual meaning, and a world rich in physical opportunity.

The great mystics have all taught us that insight makes possible a victory over the darkness of undisciplined attitudes and actions. If we believe in beauty,

we must serve the beautiful; if we affirm the reality of divine grace, we must be in every way humanly gracious. One of the most gracious persons I have ever known was the late Luther Burbank. Shortly before his death, he was branded an atheist simply because he did not believe in a God seated on a throne and ruling the world as a divine autocrat. When we were sitting together in his little house in Santa Rosa, California, Burbank said to me, "There is life in everything; flowers and plants are just as spiritual and just as wonderful as human beings. When you pour out your love to the smallest creature, it accepts your love and responds to it and grows and blossoms more beautifully because you have given it your friendship and encouragement."

Burbank was not an atheist; he was a mystic. He could not worship God just in a house built by men. He chose to serve God by working in the earth, planting seeds and guarding them, coaxing them to be fruitful and replenish the earth. The face of this skillful horticulturist was aglow with inner warmth and tenderness. It was the face of a saint, one who loved life so deeply that he spent his own years laboring so that this life could express itself more abundantly.

Sometimes the mystical experience comes unexpectedly to those who feel themselves least worthy to receive its benediction. St. Paul was on his way to persecute the Christians at Damascus when Christ appeared to him in a great light. This theophany altered the entire career of this apostle to the gentiles. Ever after, he referred to himself as the least of the apostles, and wondered why God had so favored him as to reveal by a splendid miracle that which was concealed from the faithful. The answer undoubtedly is the tremendous sincerity of Paul. He was wrong, but he was sincere, and his dedication to what he believed to be right merited for him an extraordinary vision. Boehme, the humble German shoemaker, was permitted to behold the Aurora of the spirit. He beheld the dawn of the mystery of God, and he went forth not only to teach, but to so live that this example might be a revelation of his doctrine. He remained a quiet, patient man, strengthened above all doubt and uncertainty. Never did his faith waver, for he had beheld the splendor of the Eternal.

There are some to whom the mystical experience comes first as a kind of intellectual comprehension. They know with the mind. No vision rewards their piety, nor does any voice speak to them from the clouds that obscure the everlasting throne. They simply know, as Socrates knew, or as Confucius realized, that we abide together under the sovereignty of a perfect benevolence. Each in turn learned to trust the conviction held deeply in meditation.

This really suggests part of the definition of mysticism, for it is truly the acceptance of the substance of things unseen. Faith must prepare the way for life, for if we live according to a noble faith, we so refine our sensory perceptions that, in due time, believing will be rewarded by the beholding of things hidden in the spiritual mystery. Along the way of life, each of us must come, in the end, to a dividing of the ways. We must choose to live either according to faith or according to fear. If we choose to live in the light of faith, we gain a strange kind of immortality.

This does not mean that we continue indefinitely in a physical body, but rather that we come to the dynamic experience of eternity. As spirits, we are timeless and ageless. We are as immortal as the universal mystery which brought us into being. We come and go according to our just deserts; we increase or diminish according to our merits; but as sparks from the wheels of the Infinite, we are one with Everlastingness. Our lives here are no longer incidental or accidental. We are in this world to increase in beauty and in wisdom. The truly rich life is the one in which we grow most rapidly and surely. We are not measured by material success or mortal estate, but by the victory of self over circumstance, of truth over error, of light over darkness.

It is good, in these days of atomic fission, to realize that our primary concern is the quiet path of growing. Regardless of what happens in the mortal sphere, we are moving along a path that must lead, in the end, to union with the Infinite. The Buddhist arhat Nagarjuna taught that it was not enough to be a lonely saint seeking solitary salvation in the wilderness. It was the better part of wisdom for the mystic dedicated to the service of truth to choose the *bodhisattva* way, or the path of compassion. Man attained liberation by forgetting himself in continual service to the needs of his fellow men.

Thus, the mystic is bound by a secret obligation, originating in the law of mysticism itself, to apply all that he knows to the service of all who need to know. The first step is what Boehme called "the Aurora," or the breaking of the spiritual dawn. Our inner consciousness is touched with a warm light that heralds the rising of the sun of truth. By this auroral light, we continue our commonly appointed tasks. After the dawn has come in our minds and hearts, we are more faithful to our daily responsibilities. We are more kindly to our friends and families, more generous in our attitudes, less critical and dogmatic, more patient and sympathetic. Slowly a transformation occurs in the deepest parts of our temperaments and dispositions.

These signs and portents of the coming day herald the redemption of the human soul. In the presence of the Overself, man also attains to the level of the highest worship. It is silent humility, that gentle veneration that comes to the peaceful heart adoring the God of peace. There is no longer any element

of mortal pride, no competition of knowledge, no desperate desire to be greater than our brother. All these false opinions fall away, and we find in the mystical experience freedom from the mortal self and all its chain of attributes. We no longer question the destiny that lies before us, but with perfect acceptance follow where righteousness leads, content that the Good Shepherd will never fail.

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