



MYSTICISM: EPISTEMOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS

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Abstract

What if reality's greatest truths could be reached not just by thinking, but by direct experience? Mysticism makes this bold claim, offering a vision where the boundary between self and the ultimate dissolves. This article explores mysticism in three clear stages. First, it unpacks the very meaning of mysticism, tracing its roots, definitions, and the positive transformation it promises. Second, it delves into the epistemological dimension—how mystics describe a unique kind of knowledge that is immediate, unitive, and often beyond words. Third, it follows how these extraordinary insights are developed into full metaphysical systems, especially in Indian philosophy, where different traditions build contrasting but profound visions of what is ultimately real. Along the way, the article discusses key criticisms and defenses of mystical claims. By following the journey from definition to mystical knowing to metaphysical worldview, this study reveals mysticism as a powerful and philosophically serious approach to both knowledge and the nature of reality.

Keywords: Mysticism, Direct experience, Epistemology, Metaphysics, Ultimate reality, Non-duality, Mystical knowledge, Self and Absolute.

Introduction

Mysticism, as a phenomenon and a subject of philosophical inquiry, stands at the frontier of human knowledge and experience. It challenges conventional boundaries by asserting that the ultimate nature of reality can be known directly—through experience that transcends ordinary perception, rational analysis, and linguistic description. This possibility raises some of the most fundamental questions in philosophy: What does it mean to “know” the Real? Can there be knowledge that goes beyond the senses and the intellect? How might such knowledge transform our understanding of self, world, and truth itself?

This article explores mysticism in three interrelated dimensions. First, it clarifies the definition and positive meaning of mysticism, drawing from major philosophical and scholarly accounts to present its core characteristics and claims. Second, it examines the unique epistemological structure of mystical knowledge—its immediacy, unity, and the challenges it poses to standard theories of knowing. Third, the article investigates how these experiences and knowledge-claims give rise to diverse metaphysical systems, each offering a vision of what is ultimately real. Throughout, the discussion remains grounded in critical analysis and original sources, seeking to illuminate both the power and the philosophical complexity of mysticism as a distinctive way of knowing and being.

Part A: The Definition and Positive Meaning of Mysticism

Mysticism remains one of the most debated yet profound aspects of the world's spiritual and philosophical traditions. At its core, mysticism asserts the possibility of direct, unmediated encounter with ultimate reality—whether conceived as Brahman, God, the One, or pure Being. This section explores how mysticism is defined, its historical and etymological roots, and what it positively claims about the nature of knowledge, experience, and reality.

Classical and Modern Definitions

The word mysticism derives from the Greek *mystēs* (μύστης), meaning “initiate,” and *myein*, “to close the eyes or lips.” This refers to the secrecy, inwardness, and contemplative silence characteristic of ancient mystery religions. In Indian traditions, the vocabulary for mystical experience is equally rich, encompassing terms like *dhyāna* (meditation), *samādhi*



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(absorption), mokṣa (liberation), brahma-jñāna (knowledge of Brahman), A survey of major scholars and original sources shows remarkable agreement on the essentials of mysticism:

Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as, “The art of union with Reality” (Underhill, 1911, p. 3).

William James writes, “Mystical states are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain...” (James, 1902, p. 380).

W. T. Stace describes mystical consciousness as: “The apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate” (Stace, 1960, p. 14).

S. Radhakrishnan explains, “Mysticism is not the negation of reason, but its fulfillment in intuitive insight, where the self is united with the absolute” (Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 85).

Swami Vivekananda claims, “The goal of all religions is the realization of the ultimate Truth, and this is achieved not by belief but by direct perception. Religion is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging.” (Vivekananda, 2005, p. 26).

The Upanishads repeatedly affirm the directness of mystical knowledge: “The Self is to be realized. It cannot be known by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor by much hearing. He whom the Self chooses, by him the Self can be gained” (Katha Upanishad 1.2.23, Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 633).

Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic, states: “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me; my eye and God’s eye are one and the same—one in seeing, one in knowing, one in loving” (Eckhart, as cited in Davies, 1981, p. 206).

These original sources clarify that mysticism is not defined by vagueness or irrationality, but by a claim to immediate union or identity with the Real, and an insistence that this union is the highest form of knowing.

Positive Meaning of Mysticism

Contrary to popular misconceptions that mysticism is merely emotional, obscure, or anti-intellectual, the positive meaning of mysticism can be presented as follows:

A) Experiential Realism and Direct Knowledge

Mysticism is fundamentally experiential. It claims that ultimate reality is not just an object of belief or inference but can be directly encountered. “He who knows the Self, knows Brahman,” proclaims the Brhadāranyaka Upanishad (2.4.5, Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 174). This knowledge is not empirical or inferential but immediate and self-certifying.

B) Noetic and Transformative Power

Mystical experiences are not simply “feelings.” They are described as noetic—imparting knowledge and insight of the highest order, often accompanied by radical transformation. As William James notes: “They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority...” (James, 1902, p. 380). The Upanishads likewise declare: “When to the man who understands, the Self has become all things, what sorrow, what trouble can there be to him, once he has beheld that unity?” (Isha Upanishad 7, Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 572).



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C) Philosophical and Metaphysical Depth

Far from being anti-philosophical, mysticism has produced some of the most sophisticated metaphysical systems in history. Śāṅkara, for example, grounds his entire non-dual metaphysics in the authority of mystical realization: “Brahman is the only reality; the world is an illusion; the individual self is not different from Brahman” (Śāṅkara, Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, v. 231, Sivananda, 1978, p. 125). Meister Eckhart insists that, “God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground” (Davies, 1981, p. 209).

D) Universal but Diverse

While mystical experience claims a universal core—unity, immediacy, transformation—it is also expressed diversely. Indian mysticism, for instance, encompasses Advaita Vedānta’s non-duality, Buddhist insight into emptiness, and Jain affirmation of plural realities. These traditions draw on their own scriptural and philosophical sources but all emphasize direct realization as the highest goal.

In summary, mysticism—properly understood—makes a bold and positive philosophical claim. It asserts the possibility and reality of direct, transformative knowledge of the ultimate, uniting knower and known in a living realization. This meaning is attested by both classic texts and modern scholarship, and is not reducible to emotion, dogma, or wishful thinking. Mysticism stands as one of humanity’s deepest and most challenging affirmations: that to know the Real is to be the One.

Part B: Mystical Epistemology

At the heart of mysticism is a profound claim: the possibility of a direct, unmediated knowing of the ultimate reality. Mystical epistemology, then, is the philosophical exploration of how this knowledge is attained, what distinguishes it from other kinds of knowledge, and how it can be evaluated or defended. This part critically examines the character, structure, and diversity of mystical knowledge, grounding its discussion in original texts and major scholarly debates.

The Nature and Features of Mystical Knowledge

Mystical knowledge is consistently described as fundamentally different from knowledge gained by sense perception, inference, or intellectual analysis. Across cultures and traditions, certain core features are repeatedly emphasized:

A) Directness and Immediacy

Mystics insist that their knowledge is immediate—not the product of discursive reasoning or sensory data, but a direct awareness of reality itself. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (2.4.5) declares: “He who knows the Self, knows Brahman” (Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 174).

B) Ineffability

Mystical experiences are often said to be beyond the capacity of language. As William James observes: “It defies expression; no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. Its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others” (James, 1902, p. 380). The Taittirīya Upanishad echoes this sense of the inexpressible: “From which words return, along with the mind, not having attained it” (Taittirīya Upanishad 2.9.1, Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 706).

C) Unitive Character

The dissolution of boundaries between self and other, knower and known, is a hallmark of mystical awareness. As Meister Eckhart writes: “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me” (Davies, 1981, p. 206).



D) Noetic Certainty

Mystical knowledge is often accompanied by a sense of absolute certainty. William James remarks: “They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance... and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time” (James, 1902, p. 380).

Knowledge by Identity

One of the most original contributions of mystical philosophy is the notion of knowledge by identity. Here, knowing is not a relation between two things, but the disappearance of the distinction between knower and known. The Chāndogya Upanishad (6.8.7) proclaims: “Tat tvam asi”—“That thou art” (Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 447). W. T. Stace explicates: “Such knowledge is not a matter of ‘knowing that’ some proposition is true or even ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ of a reality distinct from the experiencer. It is a direct knowledge by participation or knowledge by identity. No distinctions can be made between the subject, the reality, and the act of knowing. No reflection is involved, just being” (Stace, 1960, p. 110). This insight is echoed in Meister Eckhart’s assertion: “God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground” (Davies, 1981, p. 209).

Gnosis, Insight, and “Non-Knowledge

Mystics frequently use special language—gnosis (direct knowing), “illumination,” or even “non-knowledge”—to indicate the unique character of mystical insight. Richard H. Jones observes: “Such knowledge is not a matter of ‘knowing that’ some proposition is true... It is a direct knowledge by participation or identity. No distinctions can be made between the subject, the reality, and the act of knowing. No reflection is involved, just being” (Jones, 2004, p. 143). Yet mystics also acknowledge a two-fold structure: The first is the immediate, non-conceptual insight—the pure experience of unity. The second is the post-experiential claim—the interpretation and articulation that occurs after the fact, often shaped by tradition and language. The Kena Upanishad (2.3) puts it with paradoxical precision: “He who thinks he knows it not; he who thinks he knows it, knows it not” (Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 635).

Diversity of Mystical Knowledge-Claims

While the structure of mystical experience often displays remarkable similarity (unity, immediacy, certainty), the content or interpretation of mystical knowledge is strikingly diverse, especially when seen across different traditions. For Examples, in Advaita Vedānta (Śaṅkara), Mystical realization is the knowledge of Brahman, the unchanging, non-dual ground of reality. Śaṅkara says, “Brahman is the only reality; the world is an illusion; the individual self is not different from Brahman” (Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, v. 231, Sivananda, 1978, p. 125). Buddhist Mysticism (Vasubandhu): The insight is into kṣaṇikatva (momentariness) and śūnyatā (emptiness); ultimate reality is flux, not substance. “All conditioned things arise and perish in each moment. There is no abiding self or substance” (Abhidharmakośa, Vasubandhu, 2000, Ch. II). Jainism (Tattvārtha Sūtra): The soul’s mystical realization (kevalajñāna) reveals the reality of utpāda, vyaya, and dhrauvya—origination, destruction, and permanence. “That which has origination, destruction, and permanence is real” (Tattvārtha Sūtra 5.29, Umāsvāti, 1994, p. 148).

Therefore Richard H. Jones observed, “There is no one universal mystical knowledge; the interpretation of the experience depends on prior beliefs and frameworks. Mystical experiences alone do not determine their own interpretation or knowledge-claims for mystics” (Jones, 2004, p. 62).

Mystical epistemology proposes that there exists a direct, immediate, and transformative knowledge that unites the knower with the known. While the content of this knowledge varies across traditions, its structure is remarkably consistent: immediacy, unity, certainty, and the collapse of subject-object duality.



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Part C: Mystical Metaphysics

Mystical metaphysics seeks to articulate what is encountered in mystical experience: What is the nature of the Real? How does it relate to the world, the self, and the infinite? Far from being mere abstraction, mystical metaphysics grows out of lived experience—one that claims not only to know the Real but to be it. Here we examine the status of the world, the character of the ultimate, the unity of self and absolute, the question of mystical union, and the remarkable diversity of metaphysical claims in Indian traditions.

The Status of the World: Appearance and Reality

Mystics frequently draw a sharp distinction between the world as we ordinarily perceive it—diverse, changing, filled with suffering and conflict—and the absolute ground that underlies it. In Advaita Vedānta, the phenomenal world is termed *mithyā*: not absolutely real, yet not pure nothingness, but dependent on Brahman, the non-dual consciousness. Śaṅkara famously writes: “Brahman is the only reality; the world is an illusion; the individual self is not different from Brahman” (Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, v. 231, Sivananda, 1978, p. 125). Similarly, in Western mysticism, Plotinus describes the world as an emanation—a secondary reflection—of “**the One**.” “Everything is full of the One. All things come from it and are in it, and it is not in anything” (Enneads VI.9.4, Plotinus, 1991, p. 547). Meister Eckhart echoes: “God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground” (Davies, 1981, p. 209). In each case, the apparent world is real only in so far as it reflects or participates in the Absolute.

The Nature of the Transcendent Real

The Real, as encountered in mysticism, is often described as beyond all opposites and all categories. In Advaita, Brahman is *sat-cit-ānanda* (being, consciousness, bliss), yet is also *nirguṇa*—without qualities or form. The Taittirīya Upanishad (2.7.1) exclaims: “That from which words turn back, together with the mind, not having attained it; he who knows the bliss of Brahman fears nothing” (Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 706). For Plotinus, the One is even “beyond being”: “It is none of the things that exist, but is their cause. For all things exist by coming from it, and it is none of them” (Enneads V.2.1, Plotinus, 1991, p. 361). Mystics like Eckhart call this the “Godhead,” a silent, formless abyss beyond even God as creator: “The Godhead is as void and as empty as though it were not. It is neither this nor that. All names fall away from it” (Davies, 1981, p. 232). Thus, the Real is not another being among beings, but the ground of all being, ineffable and absolute.

Self, Consciousness, and the Absolute

A central metaphysical claim of mysticism is the identity or unity of the self with the Absolute, a doctrine that radically reimagines the boundaries of individuality and reality. This theme is memorably captured in the famous dictum of the Chāndogya Upanishad: “*Tat tvam asi*”—“That thou art” (6.8.7, Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 447). Here, the text is not merely offering a poetic metaphor, but a bold ontological assertion: the individual self (*ātman*) is, in its deepest essence, not separate from the ultimate ground of all being (Brahman). In mystical realization, this is not an abstract belief but a direct, lived experience in which the boundaries between self and the Absolute dissolve. W. T. Stace describes this moment of realization as a “ceasing to be a separate observer”—the individual self is “pure awareness, a being-consciousness that is not ‘in’ the body, but is the ground of all reality” (Stace, 1960, p. 131). The implication is that mystical experience offers more than insight; it reveals a fundamental unity at the heart of existence.

Moreover, the metaphysical claim of unity is not isolated from ethical or existential consequences. The Isha Upanishad (6) makes this clear: “He who sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, hates none” (Radhakrishnan, 1994, p. 572). This realization generates a universal compassion and solidarity, since, in seeing oneself in all, the mystic is no longer trapped by egocentrism or alienation. Thus, mystical metaphysics asserts not only the oneness of being, but the transformation of one’s whole mode of existence, suggesting that knowledge of the Real is inseparable from a profound ethical orientation towards all of reality.



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The Question of Mystical Union

The culmination of mystical metaphysics is union-not as a merging of two distinct things, but as the realization of an identity always already present. In Advaita, there is no “becoming” Brahman, only the recognition of one’s eternal oneness. Plotinus describes the soul’s “return” to the One as: “a flight of the alone to the Alone” (Enneads VI.9.11, Plotinus, 1991, p. 552). Eckhart speaks of the “breakthrough”, in which the ground of the soul and the Godhead are discovered to be one and the same (Davies, 1981, pp. 217–219). This union is not metaphorical but ontological—a state of being in which the usual boundaries of self, other, and world dissolve.

The Diversity of Mystical Metaphysical Claims in Indian Traditions

Mystical metaphysics in India is remarkably pluralistic. The comparative ontology of Advaita Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism each reflects their distinctive mystical insights, supported by original texts.

Advaita Vedānta: Trikāla-abādhitvam (Eternal Reality)

Advaita posits that true reality (sat) is trikāla-abādhitvam-unsublatable across past, present, and future. The phenomenal world is transient, but Brahman is the one, unchanging ground: “That which exists in the past, present, and future, that alone is real”

(Śaṅkara, Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, v. 231, Sivananda, 1978, p. 125).

Buddhism: Kṣaṇikatva (Momentariness)

By contrast, Buddhist metaphysics, as seen in Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa, claims that reality is kṣaṇika-momentary. There is no abiding self or substance; only a flux of phenomena: “All conditioned things arise and perish in each moment. There is no abiding self or substance” (Vasubandhu, 2000, Ch. II). The mystical insight here is into emptiness (śūnyatā) and the contingent nature of all things.

Jainism: Utpāda, Vyaya, and Dhrauvya (Origination, Destruction, and Permanence)

Jain metaphysics offers a synthetic ontology: reality possesses three characteristics- origination (utpāda), destruction (vyaya), and permanence (dhrauvya) simultaneously. “That which has origination, destruction, and permanence is real” (Tattvārtha Sūtra 5.29, Umāsvāti, 1994, p. 148). Jain mystical realization (kevalajñāna) affirms this complexity, seeing reality as plural, multi-sided (anekāntavāda), and accessible only through purified consciousness.

Mystical metaphysics, as revealed through original sources and major traditions, provides a vision of reality in which unity is fundamental, separation is provisional, and the self discovers its own deepest identity in the Absolute. This insight, expressed differently in Advaita, Buddhism, and Jainism, suggests that mystical experience does not lead to a single metaphysical doctrine, but to a plurality of sophisticated, experience-rooted worldviews. Ultimately, mystical metaphysics affirms that to know the Real is to be the One—a realization as existential as it is ontological.

Conclusion

Mysticism, as examined in this article, claims a unique path to knowledge: the direct experience and realization of ultimate reality. By clarifying its definitions, analyzing the nature and diversity of mystical knowledge, and tracing its influence on metaphysical systems, we have seen that mysticism is neither mere emotion nor irrational belief, but a serious and complex philosophical tradition. Its emphasis on immediacy, unity, and transformation sets it apart from ordinary modes of knowing and being. Despite ongoing challenges—such as questions of subjectivity, ineffability, and doctrinal diversity—mystical thought continues to inspire rigorous debate and deep reflection. Ultimately, mysticism urges us to rethink the boundaries of knowledge and existence, offering a vision in which knowing the Real is inseparable from being the One.



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