On Becoming a Mystic

Or “demystifying mysticism”

By Dan Ofstedal – August 15, 2025 [1]

“I’m free / And freedom tastes of reality!” —The Who, “I’m Free”

The mystical traditions across cultures and religions have something surprising in common: the assertion that, despite anything that is going on around us or in us, "all is well." This paradoxical claim, made in the face of apparent suffering and evil, points to a profound transformation of consciousness that characterizes the mystical path. From Meister Eckhart's Christian mysticism to the non-dual insights of Advaita Vedanta and Dzogchen, this paper explores how mystics arrive at this radical acceptance of reality and examines the essential role of dis-identification from ego in achieving this state of consciousness.

The Mystical Perspective: All Is Well

Anthony de Mello, the Jesuit mystic and spiritual teacher, emphasizes the unanimity of mystical insight across traditions: "All mystics—Catholic, Christian, non-Christian, no matter what their theology, no matter what their religion—are unanimous on one thing: that all is well, all is well." This suggests something beyond mere theological speculation or belief; it points to a *shared experiential reality* discovered through mystical practice.

Here is a story from the Hasidic tradition that epitomizes this insight: When Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg sought understanding of the Talmudic commandment to praise God for evil as much as for good, he was directed by his teacher Dov Baer to consult with another student, Zusha. Finding Zusha living in apparent misery—"emaciated, filthy, clothed in rags"—Shmelke posed his question. Zusha's response: "*I can't tell you, because nothing bad has ever happened to me*." This answer cuts to the heart of mystical perception: a radical reframing of experience that transcends conventional categories of good and evil.

The statement in Romans 8:28 that "all things work together for good for those who love God" takes on new meaning in this context—not as a theological proposition but as *a description of reality* as perceived through mystical consciousness.

The Path of Dis-identification

The key to understanding this mystical perspective lies in dis-identification from ego, or identity. This insight appears consistently across traditions. Meister Eckhart, the 13th-century Dominican mystic, spoke of the necessity of “Gelassenheit” (letting go or releasement) and the need to empty oneself completely to make room for God's presence. He taught that when we truly abandon ourselves, we discover our essential unity with the divine ground (grund) that underlies all reality.

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Contemporary spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (who took his name from the great Meister, above) suggests this approach: "Whatever the present moment contains, *accept it as if you had chosen it*. Always work with it, not against it. Make it your friend and ally, not your enemy." This practice of radical acceptance becomes possible only through a fundamental shift in identity—moving from identification with the ego's preferences and aversions to a broader consciousness that fully embraces all experience.

De Mello elaborates on this transformation: "When you finally awake, you don't try to make good things happen; they just happen. You understand suddenly that *everything that happens to you is good*." This awakening involves seeing through the ego's narrative of good and bad, desirable and undesirable, to recognize a deeper unity underlying all experience.

The mystic still move through life with *preferences*, moving toward people and experiences that give us happiness, and away from things we don't want. In the "world of form" we inhabit, there is "good" and "bad," and we make every effort to do what we think is right to improve the world. Yet all the while the mystic also keeps in mind the core truth of omnipresent benevolence.

The Unity of All Things

Through these practices, practitioners gradually (or suddenly) discover what mystics have long proclaimed: the fundamental unity of existence. This unity, described by Meister Eckhart as the divine ground present in all things, referred to as Brahman in Advaita Vedanta, or recognized as the Buddha-nature in Dzogchen, becomes directly perceivable as ego-identification diminishes.

Meister Eckhart perhaps said it best: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me: my eye and God's eye are one eye, and one seeing, and one knowing, and one loving." In other words, it's not that everything is connected, it's that ultimately there is *only one thing* (monism).

Methods of Transformation

The journey from intellectual understanding to experiential realization of this truth is aided by a variety of practices and approaches. Various traditions and teachers have developed methods to facilitate this transformation (for more detail, see supplement below):

1. De Mello's awareness exercises focus on observing thoughts and emotions without identification, gradually revealing the observer consciousness, or awareness, beyond the ego.

2. Advaita Vedanta, the non-dual tradition of Hinduism, teaches the method of self-inquiry (atma vichara) to discover one's true nature. Through persistent investigation of the question "Who am I?", practitioners come to recognize their essential identity with the universal consciousness (Brahman) that underlies all existence.

3. Dzogchen, the "Great Perfection" teaching of Tibetan Buddhism, offers direct introduction to the natural state of mind (rigpa) that is already complete, already perfect. This tradition teaches that our fundamental nature is *already enlightened* and that suffering arises only from failing to recognize this basic reality.

4. Byron Katie offers a systematic approach to questioning stressful thoughts and beliefs, leading to natural acceptance of reality *as it is*. Katie articulates this fundamental insight: that Reality equals God,

and God is always good and benevolent, so therefore reality is always kind. This radical assertion challenges practitioners to investigate their judgments about reality and discover the inherent goodness underlying all experience.

5. Colin Tipping's Radical Forgiveness techniques provide tools for reframing seemingly negative experiences as opportunities for growth and awakening.

6. Tara Brach's Radical Acceptance RAIN method emphasizes the importance of feeling negative emotions fully, prior to disidentification.

Conclusion

The journey of becoming a mystic involves more than accepting spiritual teachings or practicing religious disciplines. At its heart, it requires a *fundamental transformation of consciousness* through dis-identification from ego, leading to direct perception of the unity and rightness of all things. While various methods and practices can support this journey, the essential insight remains consistent across traditions: when the ego's narrative of good and bad dissolves, what remains is the profound recognition that "all is well."

The experiential nature of this realization is critical. As Zusha's story illustrates, intellectual understanding must give way to *direct experience*. This transformation represents not merely a change in perspective but an awakening to a deeper reality—one in which, as Zusha expressed, nothing bad has ever happened.

Supplement:

Examples of self-inquiry methods

2. Anthony De Mello "self-observation":

1. Identify the negative *feeling* in me.

(take time to FEEL the feelings. Don't suppress or repress them.)

2. Understand that the negative feeling is in ME, not in external reality (i.e., I am adding the feeling to reality)

3. See that the feeling is not a part of the essential "I" (awareness or consciousness). Feelings come and go; awareness is constant.

4. When I change in this way (steps 1-3), everything changes, leading to freedom.

3. Radical Acceptance, Tara Brach RAIN method:

1. Recognize what is going on emotionally.

2. Allow that to be here; experience it fully.

3. Investigate where it is felt in the body. Face? Chest? Gut? Clenched fists? Etc. Also, what am I believing? What is my story? What does my "self" need?

4. Noticing, or Natural Awareness. Disidentification. What would life be like to not believe those thoughts? (same as Byron Katie's fourth question).

3. Byron Katie: Analyze the negative thought:

1. Is it true? (if yes, go to #2)

2. Can you know it's true?

3. How do you feel when you believe that thought?

4. How would you feel if you could not believe that thought?

Possible "turnarounds," which are pointers to the truth that other "stories" could be equally true. Final turnaround: I look forward to (the thing that had upset me).

Result: realization that thoughts, not reality, make us suffer.

Note: It helps to use "should" or "shouldn't" in the sentence, e.g., "He *should* have been on time."

Note: Focuses on thoughts. Doing the process in writing helps. Free worksheets at Thework.com.

Note: see my essay "The World according to Byron Katie" for a much more complete description of her work.

4. Radical Forgiveness:

Everything happens FOR you; embrace every moment as if you had chosen it.

Must be willing to accept the possibility that what happened was for some purpose. Not necessary to actually believe it.

1. Tell the story of what happened from victim mentality.

2. Feel the feeling associated with the story.

3. Next look strictly at the facts, without interpretation or story.

4. Be willing to consider that it happened for a purpose. It happened FOR me, not to me. Not necessary to actually believe it.

5. Integration of new story through breathwork, etc.

Important to use worksheet, rather than just in the mind.

5. Dzogchen Buddhism:

Look for the looker (small self), and in the first instant see the "emptiness"

6. Advaita Vedanta (branch of Hinduism):

Ask "who am I"

Ask "to whom does a thought arise?

Note: Consider combining methods. For example, use Byron Katie's method regarding thoughts in conjunction with De Mello method regarding emotions, and add the "feel the emotions" part from Radical Forgiveness/psychology.