

Chapter

14

TYPES OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

We have dreamed dreams beyond our comprehending,
Visions too beautiful to be untrue ;
We have seen mysteries that yield no clue,
And sought our goals on ways that have no ending.
We, creatures of the earth,
The lowly born, the mortal, the foredoomed
To spend our fleeting moments on the spot
Wherein tomorrow we shall be entombed,
And hideously rot,—
We have seen loveliness that shall not pass ;
We have beheld immortal destinies ;
We have seen Heaven and Hell and joined their strife ;
Ay, we whose flesh shall perish as the grass
Have flung the passion of the heart that dies
Into the hope of everlasting life.

SIDNEY ROYSE LYSAGHT (from "Horizons and Landmarks").

"From the Unreal lead me to the Real ; from Darkness lead me to the Light ; from Death lead me to Immortality."

A HINDU PRAYER.

THE world of trees and rocks, tables and chairs, is for the ordinary unreflective man the one real world. There may have been some excuse for the materialistic philosophy of the nineteenth century which supported this, but the discoveries of modern physics in the twentieth century themselves have undermined that outlook. The solidity of the material world has proved illusory : it can be resolved into particles and energy. In certain circumstances the particles themselves dissolve into energy of radiation, and this label proclaims our inability to say any more. We only *think* the material world is solid and coloured and extensive in space and time because of the sort of special senses and minds which we possess. These select for us the qualities of the world we know. A bird's world, a fish's world, an insect's world, must be wholly different to their consciousness because their minds and special senses are different from man's. I think we must admit that their respective world-pictures are each true within the limits of the perceiving instrument, but are all extremely incomplete and fragmentary. It may be argued that Man, as the highest mammal, has a wider concept of the world than

any other creature: but this affords no grounds for assuming that man's ordinary picture of the world is itself more than a very partial and limited one. Reality, we may safely assume, is a vast, almost unknown continent, and all we know of it is the little bit of beach upon which we have been stranded by "that immortal sea which brought us hither". We may well ask "What are we?" and "What is our relationship to this many-sided reality?"

The data of psychical research, which we have surveyed, have introduced us to new levels or worlds of phenomena lying behind the material order of appearance. These levels have extended, strata upon strata, below the physical surface of things, through a closely related mediating region labelled "ætheric", into the deep mind. Such a penetration has been, as we have realised, into regions of deepening significance—that is, we have travelled nearer to the ultimate reality. But always behind the things known has been the knower, behind the things seen the seer, behind the various instruments of the self—that Self whose very nature is consciousness. There may be some students who, weighing the evidence of psychical research, are completely satisfied as to the existence of Mind in its own right, but see the self as a body-mind complex and recognise no Self apart from this. To these, the data of mystical experience present an inescapable challenge.

On the evidence already considered, however, we think it desirable to differentiate between Mind as an instrument, and a deeper level which we have called buddhic, where the user of the instrument seems to have his centre of consciousness. We shall call this user the Ego: it is the centre of individuality. It is that which grows and develops by the use of his instruments and by the whole adventuring forth into terrestrial experience. We shall regard the Ego as the lower self—an outpost or ambassador of the higher Self which in its true nature is essentially divine and rests beyond the flux and change of time and form. The evidence for this will be found in the remainder of this book. But before we proceed to consider it, there is, we would point out, a wealth of personal experience—subjective though it may be—which shows to us deeps beyond the Mind. No man, however distinguished be the quality of his mind and however good his technique, can say "I will now sit down and write a great poem, or compose a great symphony, or make an important discovery". There is a level deeper than Mind from which all inspirations and all creative insights arise, and Mind but gives these insights form, and technique gives them permanent expression. When we respond to the greatness of these things, whether found in truth or in music or any of the arts, it is not because our minds have

weighed their merit and pronounced them worthy to be appreciated, but because our own buddhi recognises immediately and intuitively the old authentic quality. "There is a verge of the mind", says William James,* "which these things haunt; and whispers therefrom mingle with the operations of our understanding, even as the waters of the infinite ocean send their waves to break among the pebbles that lie upon our shores."

I. WHAT IS MYSTICISM?

It is not easy to define mysticism, and even less easy to classify satisfactorily the great variety of mystical experiences. We shall therefore do no more than attempt to suggest what we understand by it. The rest of this chapter will present the evidence for mystical experiences and will, we hope, convey to the reader a sense of their significance.

We have been compelled by our analysis to interpret the universe on different levels of significance: the physical, the ætheric, the mental, the buddhic, and so on. Man himself participates in these interwoven levels. When a man discovers that one level is rooted in a higher one—that is, is sustained by it, and understood because of it—and discovers this, not as a result of thought or cogitation, but as a completely convincing fact of *immediate experience*—this is a mystical experience. It is a state of insight—not derived through the mind at all—but a state which is completely illuminating, convincing and satisfying to the feelings. By "immediate experience" the philosophers mean unexpressed awareness, the perception of an object or experience before it has been expressed in words.†

It is as though, to use Browning's metaphor (quoted on p. 31), the light of Reality is dimmed for us by many obscuring screens one around another like garments superposed. Each screen separates one region or world of significance from the rest. These screens between Reality and Appearance the Eastern philosophies call *Maya*. They prevent us from understanding the true nature of the world. In mystical experience, some or perhaps all of the screens become more transparent, and then the greater light reveals the obscure region on the outer side of the screen to be but part of the more highly illumined region on the inner side. Whenever in the presence of the less real a screen is removed or becomes transparent, and the more real breaks through, illuminating and absorbing

* *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lectures XVI and XVII.

† E.g., John MacMurray: *Interpreting the Universe*, Chapter I (Faber & Faber, 1933).

the former, we have the essence of mystical experience. The varying depths of such experience, if one may pursue the metaphor further, are such as might correspond to the removal of screen after screen, so that in the profoundest experience even the region farthest removed from reality is seen to be an aspect of, and one with the Reality itself. The many become the one. "God in all" is the key to mystical experience. At any level those who can dissolve the veils of Maya find only the Divine, and have temporarily realised themselves as a part of the great Unity.

In all mystical experience the sense of separateness, of individuality, is to a great degree lost. In the state of illumination, that which is known seems to merge with the knower, so that there is an intimate unity between them. In the profounder mystical experiences this results in a sense of unity with the All. Jesus expressed on many occasions such insights as "I and my Father are one", and "Ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you". This undoubtedly is the source of the most profound affirmations of Hinduism: "That art Thou", and "The Atman is the Brahman" (The Higher Self is one with the Supreme Being). It is doubtless also the origin of the supreme Buddhist realisation "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea". If we interpret this as an affirmation that individual lives count for nothing and finally slip back into an infinite reservoir of life from which they sprang, we are seriously in error. The mystical experience of unity behind this affirmation is not spatial and could be as accurately portrayed by saying "The shining sea slips into the dewdrop". It is not surprising, therefore, that Evelyn Underhill* attempts to define mysticism as "The art of union with reality".

How does mysticism fit into the general picture of the self which we outlined in Chapter 12 and illustrated in the diagram on p. 239. Would it be true to say that the sensitive who can withdraw the focus of attention from an outer level and focus it on an interior one thereby has a mystical experience? I should not assent to this. Such an experience would be psychical, but not necessarily mystical. The characteristic of mystical experience is not determined by the level on which awareness is focused, but by the quality of the experience on that level. It is true that since some screens of Maya have been left behind by the withdrawal of awareness to an interior level, the direction of approach is towards reality. But the interior level on which awareness is focused is also a world of "appearance", and whether the experience on that level is commonplace (i.e., appropriate to that level) or mystical, will depend on whether the interior screens

* Evelyn Underhill: *Practical Mysticism for Normal People* (J. M. Dent).

remain unchanged or whether they become transparent so as to allow the greater illumination of the Real to break through. Mystical experience is clearly a possibility on any level, provided the interior screens become thin or transparent; but there is no reason for supposing that this is more likely to happen for the sensitive whose awareness is focused on the "astral" level, for example, than for the ordinary person whose awareness is on the ordinary material level. Psychism is thus to be regarded as experience natural and appropriate to an interior level in which awareness is focused. Mysticism is experience which results from the thinning of the veils which hide the light of reality. This may occur on any level. No sensitive, in my opinion, is able to focus awareness beyond the mid-mind levels and retain the capacity for communicating such knowledge. Any withdrawal of awareness to what we have called the buddhic level or beyond may probably be classed as "mystical" without doing violence to our exposition, for the light of Reality must shine there with considerable brightness. In the most profound mystical experience where the withdrawal of awareness is to the innermost levels, "subjective" and "objective" are indistinguishable terms. The Knower and the Known are one in the unity of consciousness.

The examples which follow in some cases contain psychical elements, but I regard them as mystical because of the significance they held for the experiencers. They conveyed to them a message of "value": they felt that through them they had deeper insight into the nature of Reality. It is important, of course, to remember that the formulation of the experience in words is necessarily an imperfect attempt made afterwards by the mind to capture and understand it. All who have experienced such states constantly tell us that they are beyond their power to express: they can only hint at them. To be known for what they are, they must be experienced. William James points out that in this respect mystical states have a closer analogy with states of feeling than with states of knowledge. To know what love is, one must have loved: all the descriptive analysis in the world cannot really convey the knowledge to one who has not himself experienced it. To the classification of mystical experiences in the three sections which follow, little weight is to be attached. It is an attempt for the sake of convenience to arrange a representative selection of experiences in three groups of ascending significance—but of this we can only judge by their admittedly inadequate formulation in words. What we may with apology call the slighter mystical experiences are often new experiences of the familiar world whereby it is "seen" to be a garment hiding so much more. With

further thinning of the veils, life and forms not perceptible to the physical eye appear: the universe is seen to be living and of the essential nature of light, beauty and joy. The meaning and purpose of existence become all clear and illumined, so that doubts no longer trouble and problems no longer exist—although the meaning and purpose are not an intellectual formulation. With increasing penetration of the light of Reality, less and less can be remembered or expressed, but those mystics who have known this experience try to tell us of the sense of infinite wonder and joy which lingers with them and the sense of union with something far greater than themselves.

These words are but introductory: it is desired that the following illustrations should speak for themselves. Their interpretation we shall attempt in the next chapter.

2. EXPERIENCE RECOLLECTED AS THOUGH ON THE LEVEL OF LIFE AND FORM (I SEE)

Case 1. From Payne and Bendit: *The Psychic Sense*, pp. 183-4 (Faber & Faber, 1943).

“I was sitting on the seashore, half-listening to a friend arguing violently about a matter which merely bored me. Unconsciously to myself, I looked at a film of sand I had picked up on my hand, when I suddenly saw the exquisite beauty of every little grain of it: instead of being dull, I saw that each particle was made up on a perfect geometrical pattern, with sharp angles, from each of which a brilliant shaft of light was reflected, while each tiny crystal shone like a rainbow. The rays crossed and recrossed, making exquisite patterns, of such beauty that they left me breathless.

“I was used, at odd intervals, to seeing the invisible counterpart of minute objects, but this was quite unexpected and fascinating. Then, suddenly, my consciousness was lighted up from within and I saw in a vivid way how the whole universe was made up of particles of material which, no matter how dull and lifeless they might seem at first sight, were nevertheless filled with this intense and vital beauty.

“For a second or two, the whole world appeared as a blaze of glory. When it died down, it left with me something I have never forgotten and which constantly reminds me of the beauty locked up in every minute speck of material around me.”

Case 2. From Lady Acland: *Good-bye for the Present*, pp. 162-3 (Hodder & Stoughton, 1935).

“It had been a good day, with that sort of goodness that accounts for the way so many English folk-songs break into runaway choruses of ‘Fol-de-riddle-ido’. We had been out by ourselves gathering

primroses—rather uncommon flowers in our countryside, but we had found them in plenty in the places we remembered from last year. There was nothing going on in Milly's head except a sort of 'Fol-de-riddle-ido' feeling as she let her eyes rove here and there, and saw the oaks in their light dressing of golden-bronze, the ash-trees still obdurately gaunt, the nimble lambs and their muffled-up old mothers, the fields and grey walls, and the path winding up past the stables to her home on the hillside. All at once, quite without prelude, an astonishing radiance welled up on all these familiar things and in the child herself. They were no longer just themselves, separate objects with edges of their own; they were that radiance, and the radiance was unbounded, glorious love. Often Milly had said to herself in vexed perplexity, confronted with the Deity of the church and the little pious books: 'I wish, oh, I wish, I could actually see God, just for one minute, then perhaps I would understand.' Now, quite clearly and unforgettably, without haste or surprise, she said: 'Why, I am seeing God—I could be seeing Him all the time! I am seeing right into God. He is seeing right into me.' Even the little girl Milly was aware that this in-seeing cannot last as an incident in time. For once, a prayer of her very own, not quick with fear, broke out in her heart: 'Please God, don't let me forget.' And she knew that the answer was as real as her prayer; that, even if this in-seeing should never be hers again, the remembrance of it will belong to her for ever."

Case 3. From Mary Austin: *Experiences facing Death*, p. 24 (The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1931).

"I must have been between five and six when this experience happened to me. It was a summer morning, and the child I was had walked down through the orchard alone and come out on the brow of a sloping hill where there was grass and a wind blowing and one tall tree reaching into infinite immensities of blueness. Quite suddenly, after a moment of quietness there, earth and sky and tree and wind-blown grass and the child in the midst of them came alive together with a pulsing light of consciousness. There was a wild foxglove at the child's feet and a bee dozing about it, and to this day I can recall the swift inclusive awareness of each for the whole—I in them and they in me and all of us enclosed in a warm lucent bubble of livingness. I remember the child looking everywhere for the source of this happy wonder, and at last she questioned—'God?'—because it was the only awesome word she knew. Deep inside, like the murmurous swinging of a bell, she heard the answer, 'God, God. . . .'

"How long this ineffable moment lasted I never knew. It broke like a bubble at the sudden singing of a bird, and the wind blew and the world was the same as ever—only never *quite* the same. The experience so initiated has been the one abiding reality of my life, unalterable except in the abounding fullness and frequency of its occurrence."

Case 4. From Richard Jefferies: *The Story of My Heart*, p. 199 (Longmans, Green & Co., 1891). This classic by a nature-mystic is full of passages such as the following:

"I was not more than eighteen when an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all the visible universe, and indefinable aspirations filled me. I found them in the grassy fields, under the trees, on the hill-tops, at sunrise, and in the night. There was a deeper meaning everywhere. The sun burned with it, the broad front of morning beamed with it; a deep feeling entered me while gazing at the sky in the azure noon, and in the star-lit evening.

"I was sensitive to all things, to the earth under, and the star-hollow round about; to the least blade of grass, to the largest oak. They seemed like exterior nerves and veins for the conveyance of feeling to me. Sometimes a very ecstasy of exquisite enjoyment of the entire visible universe filled me." *

Case 5. From John Buchan: *Memory-hold-the-Door*, pp. 120-1 (Hodder & Stoughton, 1940).

"In South Africa I recovered an experience which I had not known since my childhood, moments, even hours, of intense exhilaration, when one seemed to be a happy part of a friendly universe. The cause, no doubt, was largely physical, for my long treks made me very fit in body; but not wholly, for I have had the same experiences much later in life when my health was far from perfect. They came usually in the early morning or at sunset. I seemed to acquire a wonderful clearness of mind and to find harmony in discords and unity in diversity, but to find these things not as conclusions of thought, but in a sudden revelation, as in poetry or music. For a little, beauty peeped from the most unlikely wrappings and everything had a secret purpose of joy. It was the mood for poetry had I been anything of a poet.

"Looking back I find my South African memories studded with those high moments. One especially stands out. I had been ploughing all day in the black dust of the Lichtenburg roads, and had come very late to a place called the eye of Malmani—Malmani Oog—the spring of a river which presently loses itself in the Kalahari. We watered our horses and went supperless to bed. Next morning I bathed in one of the Malmani pools—and icy cold it was—and then basked in the early sunshine while breakfast was cooking. The water made a pleasant music, and near by was a covert of willows filled with singing birds. Then and there came on me the hour of revelation, when, though savagely hungry, I forgot about breakfast. Scents, sights and sounds blended into a harmony so perfect that it transcended human expression, even human thought. It was like a glimpse of the peace of eternity."

* Similar experiences will be found in Elizabeth Myers: *A Well Full of Leaves* (Chapman, 1943). Also see Kenneth Walker: *The Circle of Life*, p. 30 (Jonathan Cape, 1942).

Case 6. From C. F. Andrews : *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 25-6 (George Allen & Unwin, 1923). This experience was described by Rabindranath Tagore to his friend Andrews. He was standing on a verandah watching the sun rise above the trees in Free School Street, Calcutta. He said :

"... as I was watching it, suddenly, in a moment, a veil seemed to be lifted from my eyes. I found the world wrapt in an inexpressible glory with its waves of joy and beauty bursting and breaking on all sides. The thick shroud of sorrow that lay on my heart in many folds was pierced through and through by the light of the world, which was everywhere radiant.

"That very day the poem known as *The Fountain Awakened from its Dream* flowed on like a fountain itself. When it was finished, still the curtain did not fall on that strange vision of beauty and joy. There was nothing and no one whom I did not love at that moment. . . . I stood on the verandah and watched the coolies as they tramped down the road. Their movements, their forms, their countenances seemed to be strangely wonderful to me, as if they were all moving like waves in the great ocean of the world. When one young man placed his hand upon the shoulder of another and passed laughingly by, it was a remarkable event to me. . . . I seemed to witness, in the wholeness of my vision, the movements of the body of all humanity, and to feel the beat of the music and the rhythm of a mystic dance."

This mystic mood lasted for seven or eight days, and when he decided to accompany his brothers to Darjeeling, it was with the hope that he might have an even fuller vision amid the magnificence of the Himalayas. When he got there the vision left him, and he says :

"... That was my mistake. I thought I could get at truth from the outside. But however lofty and imposing the Himalayas might be, they could not put anything real into my hands. But God, the Great Giver, Himself can open the whole Universe to our gaze in the narrow space of a single lane."

Case 7. From C. E. Raven : *Good News of God*, p. 50 (Hodder & Stoughton, 1943).

"The healing came when with the sudden closing in of darkness the perspective became a silhouette, and the wide horizon of the fenland narrowed down to the small circle of the lamp. You know how in that little world every leaf and reed-blade takes on value ; how one becomes aware of ranges of beauty and interest normally ignored. So it was then. But out of the wealth of detail there was for me a drop of water in the axil of a teasle-leaf—a drop of water, and in it all the fullness of God. Our little lives, our fret and pain, so tiny and yet so tremendous. A drop of water and the presence of God."

Case 8. From W. L. Wilmshurst : *Contemplations*, p. 142 (J. M. Watkins). The account of this experience is abbreviated below. It

can only have taken part of a minute of time, for it began in a village church during the singing of the "Te Deum", and when it ended the anthem was still being sung. It is of great interest as showing a progressive development in profundity. The person who experienced it had had no previous psychical or mystical experience, and writes as follows :

"My thought began to contrast the modest praises uttered in this humble place in the outward world, by its crippled organ, the puny voices of this juvenile choir and handful of villagers with the stupendous unimaginable pæans which must needs be heard above when 'all angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers therein'. Whilst thus reflecting I caught sight, in the aisle at my side, of what resembled bluish smoke issuing from the chinks of the stone floor, as though from fire smouldering beneath. Looking more intently I saw it was not smoke, but something finer, more tenuous—a soft impalpable self-luminous haze of violet colour, unlike any physical vapour, and for which there was nothing to suggest a cause. Thinking I experienced some momentary optical defect or delusion, I turned my gaze farther along the aisle, but there too the same delicate haze was present. . . . I perceived the wonderful fact that it extended farther than the walls and roof of the building and was not confined by them. Through these I now could look and could see the landscape beyond. . . . At a single visual act, and without need of glancing from one point to another or from this object to that, the building I stood within and the whole landscape were in view. . . . I saw from all parts of my being simultaneously, not from my eyes only. . . . Yet for all this intensified perceptive power there was as yet no loss of touch with my physical surroundings, no suspension of my faculties of sense. A momentary doubt as to whether I was experiencing faintness or passing out of the body was solved by a grasp at the pew-back before me and by nudging, as if inadvertently, the arm of the person at my side. Thus satisfied of my physical bearings, I gave myself up with a pleasurable curiosity, to await developments. I felt happiness and peace—beyond words.

"Upon the instant the luminous blue haze engulfing me and all around me became transformed into golden glory, into light untellable. . . . The golden light of which the violet haze seemed now to have been as the veil or outer fringe, welled forth from a central immense globe of brilliancy. . . . But the most wonderful thing was that these shafts and waves of light, that vast expanse of photosphere, and even the great central globe itself, were crowded to solidarity with the forms of living creatures . . . a single coherent organism filling all space and place, yet composed of an infinitude of individuated existences . . . I saw moreover that these beings were present in teeming myriads in the church I stood in; that they were intermingled with and were passing unobstructedly through both myself and all my fellow-worshippers. . . . The heavenly hosts drifted through the human congregation as wind passes through a grove of trees; beings of radiant beauty and clothed in shimmering raiment. . . .

" But this vast spectacle of mingled heaven and earth was succeeded by an even richer experience ; one in which everything of time and place and form vanished from my consciousness and only the ineffable eternal things remained. . . . And as the point of a candle-flame leaps suddenly upward when an object is held just above it, so the flame of my consciousness leapt to its utmost limit and passed into the region of the formless and uncreated to tell of which all words fail. . . . For a few moments of mortal time, which are no measure of the intensity of the spirit's experience in the world immortal, all consciousness of my physical surroundings was withdrawn. . . .

" Eventually, while thus rapt, the remembrance of the outer world from which my consciousness had been transported returned to me, like an old half-forgotten memory. This world and my recent surroundings were exhibited to me, but at a most remote distance, as when one looks out upon a scene through a reversed telescope. . . . Without shock or violence the consciousness which had been so highly exalted relapsed and sank to its normal limits and became readjusted to physical conditions ; the spirit was returned to its fleshly sheath as a jewel is replaced in its casket after use and locked away. Once more I was standing in the church, perfectly well and unmoved. I feared lest some physical collapse had occurred and created a scene. Happily no external sign of this terrific visitation had occurred ; no one was aware that anything had happened. Only a few moments could have been occupied by an experience in the spirit, of which the incidents were so vivid and the details so numerous that my memory still fails to exhaust them. The singing of the ' Te Deum ' had not concluded. The words that first fell upon my reawakened ears were those of the moving cry raised for all here exiled in the flesh, ' O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thy heritage. Govern them and lift them up for ever. Make them to be numbered with Thy saints in glory everlasting.' Had those around me who sang those words been lifted up with me, they too would have known that, although a veil was before their face, they were already numbered with the saints in the Eternal Eye ; they would have seen that the everlasting glory was about them at that moment and continually."

It would be possible to enlarge this selection almost indefinitely. Those who are familiar with the Irish poet, artist and mystic George Russell (Æ), know that his writings * are full of visionary beauty. He seemed to have almost constant awareness of a world lying within the garment of Nature which showed to him its secrets. There have, no doubt, been many greater poets than he, but I do not know of any whose poetry sustains so constantly the magical quality of revealing a world of significance not far away and trying to break through. Here are a few lines † of Æ's prose :

" Has not earth been tender towards us ? Are not sunlight, twilight, colour, form, element, melted into meanings so that they

* See especially *The Candle of Vision, Song and its Fountains* and *Collected Poems* (Macmillan & Co.).

† *The Avatars*, p. 147 (Macmillan).

seem but voices out of that ever-living nature? Does not the very air we breathe seem at times to be the Holy Breath? Are we not for ever passing into what we contemplate? Have not solid earth, stone and hill become at times transparent to us? . . . Do we not at times go out from ourselves, our being expanded, so that we seem to mix with the life in nature as if we permeated it and had come together in the infinite yearning of centre and circumference for each other? In that co-mingling of natures the gates of the heart are unbarred for there is nought to defend."

Speaking generally, this describes the kind of experience known to the nature-mystics, and the beauty of the English countryside as seen through the eyes of its poets has made no mean contribution to this treasury. Their standpoint has been the world they know, but at least one veil, and sometimes one veil after another, has fallen away from the light of Reality, and shown to them the Highest irradiating the lowest, expressed through it, created by it, and living in it.

3. EXPERIENCE RECOLLECTED AS THOUGH ON THE LEVEL OF MIND AND BUDDHI (I KNOW)

Sometimes the mystic's vantage-point has not been the world of sense-data but the world of Mind. In some cases the mood has been one of extreme frustration, or desolation, or despair, when suddenly a veil has fallen away and the resulting illumination has changed everything. In other cases the mood has been one of serenity, and like a lightning flash out of a clear blue sky there has come a moment of illumination in which all problems seem to have been resolved. The attempt afterwards made by the mind to formulate what has been known is seldom successful, but for the experient the revelation has indubitable authority, and in some cases has changed the whole course of life, and the subsequent attitude to events.

Case 9. From Vera Brittain: *Testament of Friendship*, p. 325 (Macmillan & Co., 1940). This book is a tribute to the author's friend Winifred Holtby, whom Robert Lynd described as "one of the noblest women of her age". She died at the age of thirty-seven. She had been told at the age of thirty-three by a London specialist that she might not have more than two years to live. Her health had made it necessary for her to lay down her work and take refuge in the country. Her whole spirit was in rebellion against the bodily weakness which made impossible the life of useful activity for which she was otherwise so well equipped. Walking up a hill feeling tired and dispirited, she came to a trough outside a farm-yard. The

surface was frozen over, for it was a cold spring morning, and a number of lambs were gathered round trying in vain to drink.

"She broke the ice for them with her stick, and as she did so she heard a voice within her saying 'Having nothing, yet possessing all things'. It was so distinct that she looked round startled, but she was alone with the lambs on the top of the hill. Suddenly, in a flash, the grief, the bitterness, the sense of frustration disappeared; all desire to possess power and glory for herself vanished away, and never came back. . . . The moment of 'conversion' on the hill of Monks Risborough, she said with tears in her eyes, was the supreme spiritual experience of her life. She always associated it afterwards with the words of Bernard Bosanquet on Salvation:

" 'And now we are saved absolutely, we need not say from what, we are at home in the universe, and, in principle and in the main, feeble and timid creatures as we are, there is nothing anywhere within the world or without it that can make us afraid.' "

The voice—as a voice—is unimportant. The recollecting mind described the vehicle of insight in this way. The essential thing is the experience, which gave her an indubitable glimpse into the nature of reality, capable of changing in an instant despair into confidence and rebellion into acceptance.

For some, music has provided the favouring condition when for a moment the magic door has swung open. William de Morgan has told how in a mood of depression and despair he listened to a symphony of Beethoven and found healing. This music became for him at that moment a vehicle of insight into the real nature of the world, and he said to himself, "If reality is like that, I have no cause to be anxious or afraid." A more recent, and profounder experience is given below.

Case 10. From Warner Allen: *The Timeless Moment*, pp. 31–3 (Faber & Faber, 1946). The experience interpolated itself between two successive notes in Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and involved no conscious hiatus in listening to the music. The writer distinguishes between the mysterious event itself (union with God), the phase of Illumination which immediately followed, and the final phase of Enlightenment in which it is recollected and interpreted afterwards. He describes the recollected experience thus:

" . . . I closed my eyes and watched a silver glow which shaped itself into a circle with a central focus brighter than the rest. The circle became a tunnel of light proceeding from some distant sun in the heart of the Self. Swiftly and smoothly I was borne through the tunnel, and as I went the light turned from silver to gold. There was an impression of drawing strength from a limitless sea of power and a sense of deepening peace. The light grew brighter, but was never dazzling or alarming. I came to a point where time and motion

ceased. In my recollection it took the shape of a flat-topped rock, surrounded by a summer sea, with a sandy pool at its foot. The dream scene vanished and I am absorbed in the Light of the Universe, in Reality glowing like fire with the knowledge of itself, without ceasing to be one and myself, merged like a drop of quicksilver in the Whole, yet still separate as a grain of sand in the desert. The peace that passes all understanding and the pulsating energy of creation are one in the centre in the midst of conditions where all opposites are reconciled."

The stage of Illumination he could only attempt to convey thus :

"Something has happened to me—I am utterly amazed—can this be that? (*That* being the answer to the riddle of life)—but it is too simple—I always knew it—it is remembering an old forgotten secret—like coming home—I am not 'I', not the 'I' I thought—there is no death—peace passing understanding—yet how unworthy I—."

Case 11. From R. M. Bucke: *Cosmic Consciousness*, Introduction and pp. 73-4 (E. P. Dutton & Co.).

Dr. R. M. Bucke (born 1837, died 1902) was a remarkable man. In his youth and early manhood he had five years of thrilling adventure in Canada, which included experiences as a miner and prospector. From one such experience he narrowly escaped with his life, and had to have the whole of one foot and part of the other amputated owing to frost-bite. He graduated with distinction through the McGill Medical School and became one of the foremost psychiatrists in Canada. He was elected President of the Psychological Section of the B.M.A. in 1888, and in 1890 President of the American Medico-Psychological Association. He was a close friend of Whitman, whom he greatly admired. At the age of thirty-five he had the mystical experience which coloured his whole subsequent life and led to the book *Cosmic Consciousness*, published just before his death. In it he develops the theme of mystical experience as corresponding to a new level of consciousness, as far above the self-consciousness of ordinary men as self-consciousness is above the "simple" consciousness of the animal. This work of Dr. Bucke earned the warm praise of William James as "an addition to psychology of first-rate importance". Not the least valuable aspect of his contribution is the challenge it offers to those who are disposed to class the phenomena of mysticism with psychopathic manifestations of the human mind. Bucke was not only Superintendent of the Provincial Asylum for the Insane at Hamilton, Ontario, he was also Professor of Mental and Nervous Diseases at Western University (London, Ontario). It is scarcely to be supposed he would have allowed a personal experience to have profoundly influenced his life and researches for thirty years had he not been

persuaded of its transcendent importance. Here is the account of his experience :

"He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman. They parted at midnight and he had a long drive in a hansom. His mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images, and emotions called up by the reading and talk of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment.

"All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around, as it were, by a flame-coloured cloud. For an instant he thought of fire—some sudden conflagration in the great city. The next [instant] he knew that the light was within himself.

"Directly afterwards, there came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendour which has ever since lightened his life."

As a result of this personal experience and his study of similar experiences of others, he came to believe that the general characteristics were these. The introduction is frequently through a subjective light or haze. There follows an ecstatic emotional state characterised by love, joy, peace and bliss beyond anything previously felt. Then comes an intellectual illumination—which is described thus :

"Like a flash there is presented to his consciousness a clear conception (a vision) in outline of the meaning and drift of the universe. He does not come to believe merely ; but he sees and knows that the cosmos, which to the self-conscious mind seems made up of dead matter, is in fact far otherwise—is in very truth a living presence. . . . He sees that the life which is in man is eternal, as all life is eternal ; that the soul of man is as immortal as God is ; that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all ; that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love, and that the happiness of every individual is in the long run absolutely certain. . . . Especially does he obtain such a conception of *The Whole* or at least of an immense *Whole* as dwarfs all conception, imagination or speculation springing from and belonging to ordinary self-consciousness, such a conception as makes the old attempts to mentally grasp the universe and its meaning petty and ridiculous."

Added to this, or rather as a part of it, is a profound sense of immortality—something which has for the experiencer the same simplicity and certainty as the knowledge "I am".

Case 12. From H. G. Wells : *The Bulpington of Blup*, p. 78 (Hutchinson & Co.). In his book *First and Last Things* (London, Constable, 1909, p. 60), Mr. H. G. Wells writes, "At times, in the

silence of the night and in rare lonely moments, I come upon a sort of communion of myself and something great that is not myself. It is perhaps poverty of mind and language obliges me to say that this universal scheme takes on the effect of a sympathetic person—and my communion a quality of fearless worship. These moments happen, and they are the supreme fact of my religious life to me; they are the crown of my religious experience.” In 1933 he wrote a novel which attributes to one of the characters a moment of mystical experience. This is described with such insight that one is tempted to believe it may have been Wells’ own later experience.

“As he watched these changes the miracle happened. The sunset was there still, but suddenly it was transfigured. The weedy rocks below him, the flaming pools and runlets, the wide bay of the estuary shining responsive to the sky, were transfigured. The universe was transfigured—as though it opened itself out to him, as though it took him into complete communion with itself. The scene was no longer a scene. It was a Being. It was as if it had become alive, quite still, but altogether living, an immense living thing englobing himself. He was at the very centre of the sphere of Being. He was one with it.

“Time ceased. He felt a silence beneath all sounds; he apprehended a beauty that transcends experience.

“He saw his universe clear as crystal and altogether significant and splendid. Everything was utterly lucid, and all was wonder. Wonder was in Theodore’s innermost being and everywhere about him. The sunset and the sky and the visible world and Theodore and Theodore’s mind, were One. . . .

“If time was still passing, it passed unperceived, until Theodore found himself thinking like a faint rivulet on the melting edge of Heaven. This he realised quite clearly was the world when the veil of events and purposes was drawn aside, this was the timeless world in which everything is different and lovely and right. This was Reality.

“The sun sank into the contours of the island, softened in shape as though it were molten, broadened down to an edge of fire and was lost. The sky burned red and grew pale.

“Something was ebbing away from him, receding from him very rapidly, something he would, if he could, have retained for ever. The stupendous moment was passing, had passed and he was back in the world of everyday. He was roused by the mewing of a seagull. . . . He turned his face homeward.

“He felt he had made some profound discovery. He had been initiated. He knew. But did he know? What was it he knew? He had no words for it. . . . The glow remained a living light in his mind for several days, albeit a fading glow, and then it became a memory. It became a memory from which the vividness had faded altogether. He knew that it had been a profound and wonderful perception, but less and less could he recall what precisely it was he had perceived.”

Case 13. From William James: *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902, p. 392 (Longmans, Green & Co.).

In several pages of these famous Gifford Lectures, Professor William James gives examples of mystical experiences obtained under anæsthesia. The subject was a gifted woman to whom ether was administered as an anæsthetic for an operation. The last "dream" before regaining consciousness is described below by this lady, who says it was "most vivid and real" to her.

"A great Being or Power was travelling through the sky, his foot was on a kind of lightning as a wheel is on a rail, it was his pathway. The lightning was made entirely of the spirits of innumerable people close to one another, and I was one of them. He moved in a straight line, and each part of the streak or flash came into its short conscious existence only that he might travel. I seemed to be directly under the foot of God, and I thought he was grinding his own life up out of my pain. Then I saw that what he had been trying with all his might to do was to *change his course*, to *bend* the line of lightning to which he was tied, in the direction in which he wanted to go. I felt my flexibility and helplessness, and knew that he would succeed. He bended me, turning his corner by means of my hurt, hurting me more than I had ever been hurt in my life, and at the acutest point of this, as he passed, I *saw*. I understood for a moment things that I have now forgotten, things that no one could remember while retaining sanity. The angle was an obtuse angle, and I remember thinking as I woke that had he made it a right or acute angle, I should have both suffered and 'seen' still more, and should probably have died.

"He went on and I came to. In that moment the whole of my life passed before me, including each little meaningless piece of distress, and I *understood* them. *This* was what it had all meant, *this* was the piece of work it had all been contributing to do. I did not see God's purpose, I only saw his intentness and his entire relentlessness towards his means. He thought no more of me than a man thinks of hurting a cork when he is opening wine, or hurting a cartridge when he is firing. And yet, on waking, my first feeling was, and it came with tears, 'Domine non sum digna,' for I had been lifted into a position for which I was too small. I realised that in that half hour under ether I had served God more distinctly and purely than I had ever done in my life before, or than I am capable of desiring to do. I was the means of his achieving and revealing something, I know not what or to whom, and that, to the exact extent of my capacity for suffering.

"While regaining consciousness, I wondered why, since I had gone so deep, I had seen nothing of what the saints call the *love* of God, nothing but his relentlessness. And then I heard an answer, which I could only just catch, saying, 'Knowledge and Love are One, and the *measure* is suffering'—I give the words as they came to me. With that I came finally to (into what seemed a dream world compared with the reality of what I was leaving), and I saw that what would be called the 'cause' of my experience was a slight operation

under insufficient ether, in a bed pushed up against a window, a common city window in a common city street. If I had to formulate a few of the things I then caught a glimpse of, they would run somewhat as follows :

“ The eternal necessity of suffering and its eternal vicariousness. The veiled and incommunicable nature of the worst sufferings ;—the passivity of genius, how it is essentially instrumental and defenceless, moved, not moving, it must do what it does ;—the impossibility of discovery without its price ;—finally, the excess of what the suffering ‘ seer ’ or genius pays over what his generation gains. (He seems like one who sweats his life out to earn enough to save a district from famine, and just as he staggers back, dying and satisfied, bringing a lac of rupees to buy grain with, God lifts the lac away, dropping *one* rupee, and says, ‘ That you may give them. That you have earned for them. The rest is for ME.’) I perceived also in a way never to be forgotten, the excess of what we see over what we can demonstrate.”

The first part of the dream experience is characteristic of dreams. The bodily sense of pain is woven into the dream and made the symbolic vehicle of truth. The climax comes when all symbolism is left behind and she is able to say, “ I *understood* . . . this was what it had all meant”. Note the profound sense of significance it had for the dreamer who could say afterwards, “ I realised that in that half-hour under ether I had served God more distinctly and purely than I had ever done in my life before, or than I am capable of desiring to do”.

Case 14. An Arabian mystic. This expression in poetry of a mystical experience has been translated by Sir Cecil Spring-Rice. It shows the same fading away of the sense of separateness into boundless being where the Knower and the Known become one. A voice from Heaven calls to him :

“ Behold I call my creature, even thee
The poor, the frail, the sinful and the sad ;
And with My glory, I will make thee glad ;
Come unto Me, My friend, come unto Me ! ”
Even so the voice from heaven I heard, and came
And veiled my face and plunged into the flame.
Last night I lived a mean and abject thing
Content in bondage, glad and prison-bound,
With greedy fingers blindly groping round
For such brief comfort as the hour might bring.
Today I am the North wind on the wing
And the wide roaring of the clamorous sea,
And the huge heaven’s calm immensity,
And all the bloom and music of the Spring.
I lived and loved. Now is it life or death
Here in this vast world wherein I move ?

How when the winds of heaven are my breath,
 And the great sun the eye whereby I see?
 I live not in myself, only in Thee.
 Last night I loved. This morning I am Love.

4. EXPERIENCE BEYOND EXPRESSION

All mystics have discovered that behind the façade of appearance, behind the world of everyday life, there are worlds of being compared with which the former is unreal and "dead". The experiences already presented clearly indicate the existence of many such worlds or levels of closer approach to reality, and it is difficult to be analytical and say where one world of significance ends and another begins. In terms of our simile of the many screens round the light of Reality, it is as though these screens, beginning with the outermost, gradually become thin and dissolve away in deepening mystical experience. At a certain depth of penetration the Self feels itself "at home" in a world of being rather than of becoming, a world with a timeless and eternal quality about it.

One instant I, an instant, knew
 As God knows all. And it and you
 I, above Time, oh, blind! could see
 In witless immortality.*

It is a state in which the sense of multiplicity and separateness is lost, so that the mystic feels that he has at once discovered his true Self and that he is one with all Selves and with the Divine. Such experiences can seldom be sustained long nor can they be commanded. It is as though the outer man has had access, for a moment only, to the inner citadel of the Self, and seen its glory.

Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
 From the hid battlements of Eternity;
 Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
 Round the half-glimpséd turrets slowly wash again.†

All those who, even for a moment, have glimpsed this ineffable world have longed all their waking days to recapture the experience. We may, I think, surmise that it is a state of being of which full and continuous awareness is the goal and destiny of Man. It is that which Man, the pilgrim, exiled in space and time, may hope someday to attain through his struggle, suffering and seeking.

We have remarked that the profounder mystical states are seldom

* Rupert Brooke's poem, "Dining-room Tea", is a moving example of one such moment of mystical insight.

† Francis Thompson: *The Hound of Heaven*.

long-sustained nor can they be commanded. We should perhaps qualify both statements, for history bears witness to the fact that there have been men on earth who have achieved full Enlightenment. These are men who have a fully conscious knowledge of the unity of their own Self with the Divine Self. They are men who can at will withdraw the veils from the light of Reality which is within themselves. Their retention of these veils is a free choice so that they may help mankind on the level of its greatest need.

5. THE CULTIVATION OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

The cases presented in this chapter have been spontaneous examples of mystical experience. Such experiences in their profounder forms are felt by those who have had them to be the goal of all man's striving—states of being so perfect, exalted and satisfying—that if they could be sustained constantly, the only adequate descriptive term would seem to be "union with God". The Christian mystics use the terms "Unitive Life" and "Beatific Vision". The Hindus use the term "Moksha", the Buddhists speak of "Nirvana", but all are referring to a state of being which no words can express. It is clearly a state of being with which the essence of the higher religions is deeply concerned, for it may be properly regarded as the goal of all such religious aspiration. If a definition of religion be thought necessary, we might perhaps propose that of William James: "The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine."

The question then arises for us: can Man himself *do* anything to achieve mystical experience, or is it some act of grace beyond Man's control or influence? The truest answer would seem to be that while the profounder mystical experiences are certainly beyond ordinary man's willing or commanding, and in that sense are given, nevertheless the fulfilment of certain conditions favours these experiences. It is because of this that the "contemplative life" has always had its place of honour in the religions of the world; for freed from preoccupation with the things of sense, so that certain disciplines of the mind and soul can be followed, it has been generally believed that the aspirant may reach a point where he can receive the supreme vision. The Christian contemplatives have their own description of the Way. They distinguish three stages. (1) Purgation, which is a moral purification. It is the renunciation of greed in all its aspects, whether love of gain, love of fame, or love of pleasure. (2) Proficiency, in which all fear goes, and positive powers and

virtues take possession of the self. (3) Union, the final stage in which ignorance of the nature of the self, of time and of existence departs, and enlightenment or the unitive life is born.

Case 15. The Blessed Angela of Foligno. It is appropriate to close this collection with a few experiences of a Christian mystic of the thirteenth century. She was born in 1248, some twenty-two years after the death of Saint Francis. She became the founder and leader of a group of Franciscan Tertiaries who vowed themselves to poverty and self-knowledge and spent their lives in charitable works. The hard years of progressive renunciation and spiritual search have been described by Evelyn Underhill.* They were years holding much of intense mental and physical agony, and were not without morbid psychological manifestations, but she came through in the last twelve years of her life (dying at the age of sixty-one) to "profound inward peace". All who came into contact with her recognised the spiritual quality of her nature. She was able to write such things as these:

"I beheld the ineffable fullness of God; but I can relate nothing of it, save that I have *seen* the fullness of Divine Wisdom, wherein is all goodness. . . .

"All that I say of this, seems to me to be nothing. I feel as though I offended in speaking of it, for so greatly does the Good exceed all my words that my speech seems to be but blasphemy. . . .

"The eyes of my soul were opened and I beheld the plenitude of God, by which I understood the whole world both here and beyond the sea, the abyss, and all other things. . . . And in this I beheld nothing save the Divine Power, in a way that is utterly indescribable, so that through the greatness of its wonder the soul cried with a loud voice saying, 'The whole world is full of God.' Wherefore I understood that the world is but a little thing; and I saw that the power of God was above all things and the whole world was filled with it. . . .

"After I had seen the power of God, His will and His justice, I was lifted higher still; and then I no longer beheld the power and will as before. But I beheld a *Thing*, as fixed and stable as it was indescribable; and more than this I cannot say, save that I have often said already, namely, that it was all good. And although my soul beheld not love, yet when it saw that indescribable *Thing* it was filled with indescribable joy, so that it was taken out of the state it was in before and placed in this great and ineffable state. . . . But if thou seekest to know that which I beheld, I can tell thee nothing save that I beheld a Fullness and a Clearness. . . . Thus I beheld a beauty so great that I can say nothing of it save that I saw the Supreme Beauty which contains in itself all goodness."

Behind the popular forms of the Eastern religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.—there is a psychological technique known

* Evelyn Underhill: *The Essentials of Mysticism* (J. M. Dent).

as yoga practised by the few. The term yoga comes from a Sanskrit root which is that from which the English word “ yoke ” is derived. It constitutes a discipline by which the lower self (or Ego) is joined to the higher self (or spirit). In other words, it is a technique designed to lead to the conscious union of the human self with the Divine. The methods will be discussed later, in Chapter 17. All that we wish at present to affirm is that there are paths to man’s goal on which, if he wills to do so, he may enter. Radhakrishnan * has expressed it thus :

“ The oldest wisdom in the world tells us that we can consciously unite with the divine while in this body, for this is man really born. If he misses his destiny Nature is not in a hurry ; she will catch him up someday and compel him to fulfil her secret purpose.”

* Radhakrishnan : *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (O.U.P.), p. 26.