

Mysticism: Real or Self-Delusion?

by [Petr Chylek](#) (July 2023)



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Since mysticism has been practiced from early human society till the current times, across all continents and all religions, as well as outside of religions, it is understandable that people can mean many different things by mysticism and that a clear definition of what mysticism is does not exist.

In the Oxford Dictionary, I find two [\[1\]](#) versions of the meaning of the word mysticism, which can be stated as:

Mysticism is a belief that union with the Divine is possible, or a belief that the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect may be attained through concentration and self-surrender,

or a second possibility:

Mysticism is a belief characterized by self-delusion and dreamy confusion of thoughts.

These are rather two different opinions, not really definitions. I would include an enhanced intuition, called in Hebrew Ruach HaKodesh, or Divine Inspiration as a part of mysticism. This is perhaps the lowest part of mystical experience, which is, according to Maimonides (1138-1204), accessible to people of our time. [\[2\]](#)

If I tell you that both of above definitions are true, you may not believe me. But, yes, both are true depending on your worldview.

Many years ago I read a story in the Muslim tradition about Mullah Nasruddin^[3], a simple wise folk hero. He lived in a small village, where each person had to serve as a judge for some time. When Mullah's turn came, two disputing men came to him. When the first explained his case, Mullah Nasruddin listened and said, you are right, the law is on your side. Then the other man explained his side of the case. After listening to him, Mullah proclaimed, you are right the law supports your case. Then the Mullah's scribe objected, but, both of them cannot be right, to which Mullah replied, you are also right. After that I heard the same story adapted to a similar situation in other religions.

In Jewish tradition there are two sages who lived in the first century CE, Hillel and Shammai. Hillel's opinion was generally more liberal, more in line with what people wanted. Shammai was more conservative. The voice from heaven was heard "Both of these are words of living God, but the law is according to Hillel." Rabbis later explained that for now, while mankind is corrupted by selfishness and greed, the law is according to Hillel. In the future, however, when mankind will be righteous (they say when Messiah will come) the law will be according to Shammai.

Mystics of all times encountered suspicion and often animosity of religious as well as civic leaders. An animosity of religious leaders is not difficult to understand, since according to mystics each person can develop his own connection to Divine, without the need of mediator between himself/herself and God. However, the reason for an animosity of civil leaders is little more complicated.

Mysticism is an individual endeavor, not a community affair. It requires an individual effort, which can be best done in quietude of isolation, not in a marketplace. It can be seen as a personal matter, called even a selfish matter by some critics, since it seems to be concerned with you. You are trying to control and change your mind, your behavior, not to

change the world, not to establish the "social justice." Thus, you are apparently someone who does not contribute to the current progress of society. You may be even called irrational, since you are relying on other skills than your rational abilities.

All this is of course not correct. Mystic aims to reach a height. But this is not a goal, it is just a mean. After reaching a high elevation, he comes back to community to let others know what he has discovered, or more correctly, what was revealed to him. Founders of all religions were mystics. In the Old Testament, Moses, before giving people the ten commandments, is invited by Divine to ascend the mountain, to come up (Exodus 19:20). At the same time a warning is given asking that he comes alone. Others, who are not ready, have to stay below. After the interaction with the Divine, Moses is asked to descend and speak to people, proclaiming ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-14), called ten sayings in original Hebrew. This can serve as a model of mystical experience. Unfortunately, soon after the departure of founders of religions, the mystical connection was lost and religions were polluted by inventions, rules, and customs of men.

In the New Testament, Jesus rebukes Pharisaic new inventions in Matthew 15:9 by saying: "And they worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines rules made by men." [\[4\]](#) A similar idea is repeated in Mark 7:8: "For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups; and many other such like things ye do." Thus, Jesus was not advocating against Judaism, just against the Pharisaic innovations, that were not part of original God's instructions given in Old Testament (Torah). Jesus was from a high country (Galilee), while Jerusalem was a center of Pharisaic power.

One of course can criticize Moses that he wasted 40 days on the mountain. Instead he could perform at least 400 good deeds and participated in at least one demonstration for social justice. Similarly Jesus can be accused of wasting 40 days in

desert before delivering his Sermon on the Mount.

To support the high definition of mysticism, we can cite writing of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lutzatto (1707-1746) from one of his books:

Man should naturally be able to teach himself, to understand and to reason with his intellect, and thus gain knowledge from his observation of things and their properties. This is a natural process of human reason. However, there exists another mean of gaining knowledge. This is called Divine Inspiration—Ruach HaKodesh in Hebrew. In this manner one can gain knowledge of things accessible to human reason, however, one can also gain information that could not be gained through natural means. [\[5\]](#)

You may say, this was written a few hundred years ago, and thus, it does not apply to us today, since we are much more advanced to believe in these matters. There are, however, many scientists who got their bright ideas in dreams or in a sudden moment of intuition, apparently bypassing their own intellect. Albert Einstein, although he rejected an idea of personal God who follows your actions, dispenses rewards or punishments, and listens to your prayers, he had, however, a great admiration for mystical experience of awe:

The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the seed of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger ... is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this

knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. [\[6\]](#)

Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), a mystic and founder of Hasidic movement describes in one of his letters an occasion when he was lifted up in spirit to higher spiritual worlds and met a person of high spiritual status who instructed him to spread the Kabbalistic teaching on the earth. After returning to his body he had great energy and enthusiasm to succeed in this task. Today there are thousands of followers in several branches of Hasidism.

I myself had a light contact with unknown in the early high school years in former Czechoslovakia (current Czech Republic). My high school, called in Europe a Gymnasium, participated in Mathematical Olympiad in which students competed in solving really difficult math problems. The first round consisted of take-home problems with the solution being due next morning. The first day I tried hard, but could not find the solution. Finally, I gave up and went to sleep. What happened next is described in recent article: [\[7\]](#)

In a dream I heard a voice saying "Look here," and I saw a piece of paper and a pen writing equations and solving the problem. I thought: "So simple, how come I could not get it myself. When I get up in the morning, I will write it down." Of course, as with so many dreams, when I got up in the morning, I just remembered that I had a dream, but could not remember the solution that I was shown. The next day I was more careful. I put the paper and pen next to the bed just in case the dream would happen again. It did and I scribbled the solution on the paper before falling back to sleep. In the morning I found the solution written down. The same happened for two more nights.

I did not progress to the next round of competition since I “solved” only three out of four problems. But I learned that human mind is a mysterious instrument. I know that some academic experts might present complicated theories how this might work; but I do not know. I remember reading somewhere that some famous scientists got their best ideas in a dream and I believe them.

Sages of all religions tried for thousands of years to find out how to get to the state when you can hear the Divine Inspiration. They all ended up with the path of ethical living and meditation. But this is another story.

[\[1\]](#) The Oxford American College Dictionary, Oxford University Press 2002.

[\[2\]](#) M. Maimonides, *The guide for the perplexed*. Dover publications, New York 1956.

[\[3\]](#) M. Nakosteen, *Mullah’s Donkey and Other Friends*, Este Es Press, Boulder 1974.

[\[4\]](#) King James Version.

[\[5\]](#) Moshe Chaim Lutzatto, *The Way of God*, Feldheim Publishers, New York 1997.

[\[6\]](#) D. Rowe, and R. Schulmann. *Einstein on Politics: His Private Thoughts and Public Stands on Nationalism*. Princeton University Press 2007.

[\[7\]](#) Petr Chylek, 2017. Light scattering, aerosols, clouds, climate, Hendrik van de Hulst, and I. *Journal of Quantitative Spectroscopy and Radiative Transfer* 206, 333-337.

[Table of Contents](#)

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