# The Unity of Mystical Traditions

The Transformation of Consciousness in Tibetan and German Mysticism

Randall Studstill

BRILL

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by

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For my wife and parents
Krishna Roman
Kenneth and Charlotte Studstill

Neither the mystic nor the philosopher can remain content with an irreducible heterogeneity of mystical experience, the mystic because the ultimate character of the experience implies a universal claim, the philosopher because a diversity of ultimate claims is a challenge not a resting-place. Thus, it is not an uneducated essentialist desire, but religious integrity or philosophical urgency that leads those who no longer find an exclusive claim by any single tradition convincing to seek an underlying unity and to investigate the equivalence of symbols under their diversity.

Charles Davis

CONTENTS

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been more difficult than I care to imagine if I had not been able to refer to the work of Bernard McGinn and M. O'C. Walshe.

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INTRODUCTION: A MYSTICAL PLURALIST THEORY OF MYSTICISM

In all of the world's major religions certain individuals experience—directly and vividly—what they believe is ultimate reality. Depending on the religion, they seem to perceive/know (in some cases, merge with) God, Viṣṇu, *śūnyatā, gzhi*, the Tao, the (Neoplatonic) One, Brahman, etc. These individuals are referred to as 'mystics,' and their apparent encounters with ultimate reality are 'mystical experiences.' The term 'mysticism' encompasses the experiences, traditions, practices, rituals, doctrines, etc. comprising and associated with their various religious paths.[1]

  Mystical experiences pose significant philosophical problems. Are they veridical or delusional? What criteria could be used to adjudicate their veridicality? If they are veridical (or partially veridical), how is this reconciled with their phenomenological[2] heterogeneity?

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[1] In more precise terms, 'mysticism' designates a set of phenomena that comprises (1) 'mystical experiences,' i.e., experiences whose object or content appears to be ultimate reality (religiously conceived) or some aspect of (or approximation to) ultimate reality, and (2) those aspects of religious traditions (doctrines, practices, texts, institutions, etc.) that promote (intentionally or unintentionally) the occurrence of such experiences. Mystical experiences are religious because of the unique nature of their "objects" (i.e., God, Brahman, etc.). The believer seems to perceive not just a thing in the world, but something both ultimately real and 'other' to the world of ordinary experience. A 'mystic' is usually a religious practitioner who deliberately seeks an experience of ultimate reality (as construed by her tradition) and who realizes a non-ordinary experience that seems to the mystic to be an experience of ultimate reality (I say "usually" because mystical experience is not always a deliberate goal but may occur spontaneously).

  I would emphasize that this definition of mystical experience is based on identifying a commonality in the *apparent* epistemic value of a set of religious experiences. It presupposes nothing with regard to the veridicality of those perceptions, the ontological status of any given tradition's 'ultimate reality,' the phenomenological similarity or dissimilarity of mystical experiences across traditions, or the epistemological plausibility of direct, unmediated experience. These are issues best addressed within the context of fully developed theories of mysticism. See Appendix A for an extended discussion of the term, as well as additional remarks on what I mean by 'religious.'

[2] Here and throughout this book, the term 'phenomenological' refers to the perceived content of experience. In other words, the phenomenological content of a

How does the content and/or object(s) of mystical experiences—if they have an object(s)—compare across mystical traditions? What epistemological constraints apply to these experiences? Is unmediated experience possible? To what degree are mystical experiences conditioned by the concepts and expectations of the mystic? How do these experiences occur? What is their psychological and/or spiritual significance? How is one to interpret mystical language given persistent claims (by the mystics) that their experiences are ineffable?

These questions have inspired a sustained and vigorous philosophical discourse. Two competing theoretical orientations dominate this discourse: essentialism[3] and constructivism.[4] Essentialism is associated with a variety of approaches and claims. A strong essentialist thesis asserts that all mystical traditions, doctrines, and/or experiences

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vision of Jesus is the perceived form of Jesus. I use the term in this sense because it has become the convention among scholars of mysticism. This usage, however, is inconsistent with Husserl's philosophical phenomenology and with at least some approaches to the phenomenology of religion (such as Eliade's). Both fields are concerned with identifying background or implicit structures of consciousness. Occasionally I will also use the term 'phenomenal' to emphasize the "*qualitative* [subjective] *feel*" of an experience. David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4, 11.

[3] Other terms that are identified or closely associated with essentialism in the philosophical literature on mysticism are ecumenism (or ecumenicalism), the ecumenical thesis, the perennial philosophy, perennial psychology, non-constructivism, postconstructivism, deconstructivism, and decontextualism.

In defense of essentialism, Steven Pinker has this to say: "in modern academic life 'essentialist' is just about the worst thing you can call someone. In the sciences, essentialism is tantamount to creationism. In the humanities, the label implies that the person subscribes to insane beliefs such as that the sexes are not constructed, there are universal human emotions, a real world exists, and so on. And in the social sciences, 'essentialism' has joined 'reductionism,' 'determinism,' and 'reification' as a term of abuse hurled at anyone who tries to explain human thought and behavior rather than redescribe it. I think it is unfortunate that 'essentialism' has become an epithet, because at heart it is just the ordinary human curiosity to find out what makes natural things work." Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 325–6.

[4] Steven T. Katz—the foremost exponent of constructivism—prefers 'contextualism.' (Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 34.) I use constructivism here because it is more common in the literature and better reflects the epistemological presuppositions of the approach. Denise and John Carmody describe this approach as "empiricist." This implies (quite erroneously, I would argue) that constructivists (compared to essentialists) place more emphasis on the data and less on interpretation. (Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 8.) See Chapter Two, pp. 36–9, for an extended discussion of the *a priori* (i.e., *non*-data based) nature of constructivist epistemology.

share a common substantive characteristic or characteristics. Most essentialists make much weaker claims, e.g., that only the most advanced expressions of mysticism (usually, the most advanced experiences) are identical across traditions. Neither the strong or weak essentialist denies the fact that mystical phenomena and experiences vary widely across mystical traditions, or that the form and meaning of mystical phenomena is to some degree a function of historical, cultural, and religious contexts. But they do insist that within or beyond this variation is a universal or non-contextual dimension— a common element uniting mystical paths. The hermeneutical implication of this claim is that the meaning of any given mystical phenomenon cannot be wholly or even primarily reduced to its historical, cultural, and/or religious context.[5]

How essentialists construe this common mystical essence depends on the type of essentialist analysis: phenomenological, doctrinal, epistemological, cognitive, or therapeutic/soteriological. Briefly, phenomenological essentialism contends that there is some degree of phenomenological identity among mystical experiences across traditions. Usually this identity is limited to one type of mystical experience; few phenomenological essentialists claim that all mystical

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[5] This is a relatively general description of essentialism, in comparison to others found in the scholarly literature. For example, Michael Stoeber and Denise and John Carmody associate essentialism with the claim that all mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical regardless of variations in mystical reports. (Michael Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 21; Carmody and Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West*, 6.) Though this may accurately portray the views of an earlier generation of essentialist scholars, to my knowledge no current essentialist holds this position. Essentialists are more likely to acknowledge that most mystical experiences are indeed phenomenologically heterogeneous, yet also claim that there is a particular type of mystical experience that is identical across traditions.

Essentialist approaches to mysticism are closely related to the typological approaches of such scholars as R.C. Zaehner and Richard Jones. Like essentialists, typologists identify cross-cultural similarities in mystical experiences, but rather than focusing on one, universal mystical experience, they argue that there are distinct types of cross-culturally identical mystical experiences. This view requires typologists to hold epistemological presuppositions similar to those of essentialists. Though typologies of mysticism admit a degree of phenomenological variety in mystical experience, the claim that particular types of mystical experience may occur in different traditions necessarily implies the rejection of a purely contextual approach to mystical phenomena and the acceptance of some trans-contextual factor uniting the experiences. The distinction between essentialist and typological approaches is further blurred given that most essentialists limit their claims to a particular type of mystical experience. See Appendix B, pp. 259–70, for additional remarks on typologies of mystical experience.

experiences are phenomenologically identical. Doctrinal essentialism (more commonly, the perennial philosophy) maintains that all religions/mystical traditions teach a common set of core doctrines. Epistemological essentialism asserts that all mystical experiences are oriented toward (and in some way, know) the same divine reality, which may or may not be experienced differently. Cognitive essentialism refers to the view that mystical doctrines and practices produce identical changes in cognitive/psychological functioning. Therapeutic (or soteriological) essentialism is an extension of cognitive essentialism—mystical paths not only initiate identical changes in the consciousness of mystics, but these changes are therapeutic or salvational in character. In other words, all mystical paths effect processes of transformation associated with greater knowledge of reality and enhanced psychological/affective well-being.

None of these types of essentialism are mutually exclusive. In practice, two or more are often combined within the framework of broader essentialist theories of mysticism. For example, presentations of the perennial philosophy (doctrinal essentialism) often include forms of phenomenological essentialism since common doctrines are claimed to be derived from common experiences. Likewise, epistemological essentialism tends to overlap both doctrinal and phenomenological essentialism since an encounter with a common object (whether mediated or not) would naturally tend to coincide with similar experiences and similar doctrines.

In contrast to these essentialist approaches, constructivists emphasize the contextuality of mystical phenomena. For the constructivist, a mystical phenomenon is a product of its historical, cultural, and religious context. Mystical experiences in particular are constructed according to such contexts. There is nothing universal about mystical traditions, paths, or experiences—they are as varied as the contexts in which they occur. The implication of this view—whether explicitly stated or not—is that the meaning of a mystical phenomenon is likewise determined by its particular historical, cultural, and religious contexts. (I will have much more to say about constructivism in Chapter Two.)

Philosophical discourse on mysticism has evolved (or better, *de*volved) into what appears to be an irresolvable debate between these two approaches. This debate has focused on relatively narrow issues such as the phenomenological content of mystical experiences (i.e., is mystical experience necessarily constructed or is an unconditioned expe-

rience possible?) as well as the much broader and more important problem: *What is the meaning of mysticism?* Is the significance of any particular mystical datum a function of its particular social, historical, cultural context, or is the meaning of mysticism in some way relatable to a trans-contextual, non-contextual, or universal factor? The opposition between constructivist and essentialist answers to these questions has polarized the discourse. Constructivists critique essentialists, and vice versa. But while the scholarly output on both sides has been considerable, no one has been able to formulate an argument sufficiently compelling to persuade anyone but the already-converted. The study of mysticism is at an impasse.[6]

The Mystical Pluralist Thesis

The purpose of this book is to present and support an essentialist theory of mysticism sophisticated enough to break the impasse in the philosophical study of mysticism. I call this theory *mystical pluralism*[7] because of its similarity to John Hick's pluralist interpretation of religion. The theory is essentialist in both the therapeutic and epistemological senses described above. Its thesis is that mystical traditions initiate common transformative processes in the consciousness[8]

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[6] This impasse has been noted by a number of scholars, e.g., Michael Stoeber and Bernard McGinn. (Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 15; see Joseph Thometz's comments on McGinn in his *Speaking With and Away: A Buddhist-Christian Meta-Dialogue* (Ph.D. thesis, The Graduate Theological Union, 2002), 210.) The impasse itself is poignantly reflected in an exchange between Steven Katz, Huston Smith, and Sallie King in "On Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56/4 (1988): 751–61. For an extended discussion and analysis of the perennialist-constructivist debate, see Thometz, *Speaking With and Away*, 191ff.

[7] Throughout this book, I use the term 'pluralism' in John Hick's sense, i.e., a theory of religion that affirms that religious traditions are different yet equally transformational and equally oriented toward the Real. This contrasts with how the term is often used in the philosophical literature on mysticism, where 'pluralism' or the 'pluralist thesis' is identified with the claim that the content of mystical experiences varies across mystical traditions.

Mystical pluralism may be distinguished from what Michael Stoeber refers to as a "mystic pluralism," by which he seems to mean any theory of mysticism that (1) constructs a coherent framework relating the variety of mystical experiences, and (2) validates the spiritual authenticity of all those experiences without "dogmatically" privileging any "particular religious theology of philosophy." See Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 40. See also 37, 41.

[8] The issues that surround the meaning of such terms as 'consciousness,' 'awareness,' 'mind,' etc. are too complex to be addressed here. 'Consciousness' alone has

of mystics. Though mystical doctrines and practices may be quite different across traditions, they nevertheless function in parallel ways—they disrupt the processes of mind that maintain ordinary, egocentric experience and induce a structural transformation of consciousness.

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been construed in many different ways, even within specific disciplines like cognitive science. See Harry T. Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness: Cognitive, Phenomenological, and Transpersonal Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 13ff.; Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere, eds., *The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 8–9. To get a sense of the unique problems raised by the philosophical study of consciousness, see Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, xi–xii; 3ff.

Among cognitive scientists consciousness is variously described as (1) non-existent, (2) "an incidental by-product of computational capacity," or (3) "a formal system or capacity involving the direction, choice, and synthesis of nonconscious processes." (On consciousness as non-existent, see John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 4–5, 7. The quotations are from Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 26; see also 59.) Hunt defines consciousness as (among other things) "a capacity for sensitive attunement to a surround" (Ibid., xiii) while for Pinker the real problem of consciousness is the fact of immediate sentience or subjective awareness. (Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 135) Echoing Pinker, Allan Combs describes consciousness as "perfect transparent *subjectivity*" that is (almost) always intentional. Allan Combs, *The Radiance of Being: Complexity, Chaos and the Evolution of Consciousness* (Edinburgh, UK: Floris Books, 1995), 19–20.

My own use of the term comes closest to Pinker's and Combs', i.e., consciousness as sentience or phenomenal, subjective experience, though I think it is helpful to distinguish sentience-as-such—"awareness" as "primary and irreducible" (Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 51)—and sentience as it is expressed according to specific sensory, neural, cognitive, and environmentally conditioned constraints ('consciousness'). In other words, consciousness refers to a specific mode of awareness, supported by an interdependent constellation of factors (the cognitive system). For example, awareness as ordinary consciousness is marked by dualism and the ontic reification of 'self' and external 'object' or 'other.' This state of consciousness is in turn supported by a system of mutually reinforcing factors (such as externally-oriented attention, unconsciously held beliefs and conditions of worth, attachment, emotional upset, etc.). I would emphasize that consciousness in this sense includes but is not reducible to the moment-by-moment content of experience. Ordinary waking life is an unchanging, dualistic state of consciousness, even though the phenomenal content of experience continuously fluctuates.

Hunt claims that "consciousness is not a 'mechanism' to be 'explained' cognitively or neurophysiologically, but a categorical 'primitive' that defines the level of analysis that is psychology." (Ibid., xiii) I agree, though I consider this statement to more properly apply to awareness. It is sentience-as-such that is the true mystery—as Pinker puts it, "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." (Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 60) On the other hand, the forms that sentience takes as consciousness can, to some degree, be "explained" by the particular factors that support and maintain them.

'Mind' I will use in the broad sense (more or less synonymously with 'cognitive system') to refer to both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality/ego, encompassing "all those inner processes and conditions that shape and color consciousness, producing the unique landscapes of experience that characterize each moment of our lives." Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 23.

The essential characteristic of this transformation is an increasingly sensitized awareness/knowledge of Reality[9] that manifests as (among other things) an enhanced sense of emotional well-being, an expanded locus of concern engendering greater compassion for others, an enhanced capacity to creatively negotiate one's environment, and a greater capacity for aesthetic appreciation.[10]

Mystical pluralism is essentialist[11] in the sense that it shares the same orientation to mystical phenomena as other essentialist approaches,

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[9] I capitalize the 'R' (in 'the Real' or 'Reality') simply to draw a distinction between 'what is actually real' (i.e., the Real) and what appears to be real from the perspective of ordinary experience. This distinction by itself assumes no specific position on the nature of the Real (beyond the claim that it is not what ordinarily appears to be real). In other words, the Real remains open to a variety of religious, philosophical, and/or scientific interpretations. For the purposes of the thesis of this book, it is not necessary to specify the Real's nature beyond its non-identity with ordinary appearances, though I do make some speculative suggestions in Chapter Three (see pp. 108–9) regarding a monist understanding of Reality.

This usage of 'the Real' may be contrasted with the explicitly religious meaning John Hick gives the term. As Hick states, the Real refers to "the putative transcendent reality which is affirmed when the different traditions speak of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or of the Holy Trinity, or Allah, or Vishnu, or Brahman, or the Dharmakaya/Nirvana/Sunyata, and so on." (John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 10.) Hick is able to justify positing a single Reality as the referent for all these terms (which in some cases reflect quite different conceptions of what is real) based on the distinction between the Real *an sich* and the Real as experienced by human beings. He argues that the Real is never encountered 'in itself' but always from the perspective of conditioned human experience, which necessarily introduces variation in how It is conceived. From this perspective, the Real *an sich* is by definition inaccessible to human experience and therefore unknowable.

The distinction between the Real vs. the contingently real or non-real ("reality" ordinarily construed) raises the question of how best to understand the nature of this distinction: is it ontological or epistemological? I take the epistemological view. From this perspective, 'the Real' and 'the real' (from a religious perspective, 'the sacred' and 'the profane') constitute different modes of apprehending the single, ontological Real. The former (the Real/sacred) encompasses relatively transparent modes of apprehension of the ontological Real (in other words, epistemology and ontology collapse), as opposed to the more opaque (and therefore deluded) modes associated with 'the real.'

[10] This transformative process resonates with John Hick's definition of salvation/liberation: "the transformation of our human situation from a state of alienation from the true structure of reality to a radically better state in harmony with reality," expressed as "compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life," peace, and/or "radiant joy." Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 10, 301–2. See also 36.

[11] Hick's religious pluralism as well as the mystical pluralist thesis advocated here are both essentialist, even though they include a constructivist element and a concomitant recognition of mystical heterogeneity (more on constructivism below). Hick, for example, makes the strong constructivist claim that all mystical experiences are

i.e., the affirmation that mystical traditions, doctrines, and/or experiences share some type of common characteristic. As noted above, however, this essentialism is specifically therapeutic and epistemological in nature. The common characteristic posited by mystical pluralism is not a universally shared doctrine(s) (the thesis of doctrinal essentialism) or a universally identical experience (as phenomenological essentialists would maintain), but common transformative processes. These processes may be initiated by different doctrines and practices and may manifest in phenomenologically different forms. In this respect, mystical pluralism is fully compatible with the heterogeneity of mystical doctrines, practices, and experiences.

I emphasize this point because the most common critique leveled against essentialist theories of mysticism is that mystical doctrines, practices, and experiences are different across traditions. While it is true that most mystical doctrines, etc. are indeed different, the point is irrelevant to the mystical pluralist position because common transformative processes do not necessarily imply common doctrines[12] or phenomenologically identical experiences. The universal processes posited by mystical pluralism *are* often reflected in cross-culturally similar doctrines, practices, and experiences, but mystical pluralism does not depend on such similarities. On the doctrinal level, it does not need to since it maintains that different doctrines may have common transformative effects,[13] while on the experiential level it acknowl-

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mediated by the concepts, images, symbols, etc. brought to the experience by the mystic and are therefore phenomenologically varied. (Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 173, 295) However, his thesis that different paths bring about common processes of transformation in the consciousness of the believer in relation to a common transcendent Reality is a strong essentialist claim and far outweighs the constructivist element of the theory, which is limited to explaining the phenomenological content of experience. In addition, pluralism may take forms in which the constructivist element is relatively weak or deemphasized. For example, one may agree that most forms of mystical experience are constructed yet also maintain (as I do) that some forms are free of construction and that this non-constructed experience constitutes a direct encounter with the Real.

[12] As Keith Ward suggests, given the fact of conflicting truth claims any form of essentialism that asserts the soteriological efficacy of different traditions has to abandon the search for common, true doctrines or the idea that salvation depends on true doctrinal beliefs. As he puts it, "the hard pluralist must . . . assert that [doctrinal truth] is irrelevant both to knowledge of the Real itself and to the completion of the salvific process of moving from selfish egoism to the limitlessly better state of 'Reality-centredness.'" Keith Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 5.

[13] Steven Katz would dispute this, since he insists that there is a direct correlation between the mystic's beliefs and her experience. Katz, however, fails to realize

edges that 'mystical experience' covers a wide range of experiences that are (with the exception of the most advanced stage of mystical realization) more or less mediated by the conceptual belief system of the mystic. Most mystical experiences will be phenomenologically different since most vary according to (1) level of realization and (2) the cultural and religious belief system of the individual mystic.

   Though mystical pluralism does not depend on universal doctrines and/or experiences, it does affirm the epistemological essentialist thesis, i.e., the claim that phenomenologically different mystical experiences are nevertheless oriented toward a common Reality.[14] If this is the case, this Reality must inform the content of experience to some degree, which implies that there must also be some level of phenomenological commonality shared by all mystical experiences. As Steven Katz points out, epistemological essentialism requires that one "have a sufficiently delimiting list of corresponding and agreed predicates that the experienced object possessed in both (or more) cases . . . being compared."[15] So even though mystical pluralism does not depend on identical experiences, there *do* have to be at least some common aspects of mystical experiences across mystical traditions if the theory is true. Constructivist scholars maintain that no such commonalities exist (Katz being the most notable example). Mystical pluralists maintain they do exist, though not necessarily at the level of explicit, formal content (which is the level generally focused on by scholars). For example, a vision of Kṛṣṇa is phenomenologically distinct from a vision of Jesus. Nevertheless, both experiences may have a similar feeling tone (the sense of being unconditionally loved) that communicates common information about the Real (i.e., the Real is unconditionally nurturing). In general, the comparison of mystical experiences requires a nuanced analysis that not

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that the relationship between beliefs and experience can be analyzed on both phenomenological and cognitive levels. Beliefs may shape the phenomenological content of mystical experiences (Katz's emphasis), but they may also affect a qualitative shift in the structure and processing of the cognitive system. See also pp. 53–4 below.

   [14] As Peter Byrne points out, if we take mystical accounts seriously at all, "there is no conceptual room for these varying experiences to yield knowledge of *different* objects." Peter Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism: A Debate Reviewed," *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion* 16 (1984): 241. See also Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 249.

   [15] Quoted in Charles Davis, review of *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, by Steven T. Katz, ed., in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 8/1 (1979): 332–3. See also Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 240.

only addresses phenomenological content but also considers (1) the
semantic implications of the symbolic content of mystical experiences,
and (2) the ways varied symbolic content may represent common
information.[16]

The Method: A Systems Approach To Mind

Since mystical pluralists claim that mystical traditions are, on some
level, essentially alike, showing that this is the case naturally requires
a comparative analysis of the practices, doctrines, and experiential
reports associated with mystical traditions.[17] Given the immense range
and scope of the mystical data, such an analysis will tend to be selec-
tive, relying either on small samplings of material from a variety of
traditions or more in-depth discussions of two or three. Here I have
taken the second approach by focusing on two mystical traditions:
the Dzogchen (*rdzogs-chen*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism[18] and the

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[16] Hick's remarks on the potential veridicality of symbolic, even hallucinatory,
experiences are relevant to this type of analysis. See Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*,
167–8.

[17] It also requires a critique of constructivism, since constructivism poses a direct
and serious challenge to the mystical pluralist thesis. This critique is the subject of
Chapter Two.

[18] Dzogchen, usually translated 'Great Perfection,' is a quasi-tantric tradition of
Tibet, considered at least by the Nyingma School to embody the most advanced
teachings of Buddhism. Practitioners claim it originated in India while Western
scholars tend to locate its origins in 8th–9th century Tibet. Though it has evolved
considerably over the centuries, it is still practiced today. It is not exclusively Buddhist,
being important in Tibetan Bon as well. Only Buddhist Dzogchen will be exam-
ined here.

Some scholars would reject the claim that either Dzogchen or German mysti-
cism is a mystical tradition. According to David Kalupahana, Robert Gimello, and
Richard Payne (the latter by personal communication) Buddhism is not mystical
because *nirvāṇā*, the goal of Buddhism, is not an experience but an insight into the
nature of reality. On the other hand, scholars such as Ninian Smart, William
Wainwright, and Rupert Gethin all describe Buddhism as mystical. On Kalupahana's
position, see William J. Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value
and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 122. For
Wainwright's own position on this issue, see Ibid., 34–5. See also Robert M. Gimello,
"Mysticism in its Contexts," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 78; Ninian Smart, "Interpretation and
Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 1 (1966): 81; R.M.L. Gethin, *The Buddhist Path
to Awakening: A Study of the Bodhi-Pakkhiyā Dhammā* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 4.

Is Buddhism essentially concerned with insight (and hence, non-mystical) or an
experience (and therefore mystical)? The question may be mute since insight into
the Real may have profound experiential consequences. Granting the distinction for

medieval German mysticism of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, and John Tauler. The comparative analysis of these two traditions provides strong support for mystical pluralism as well as a useful context for illustrating its explanatory power.

Because the meaning of mystical data is ambiguous, an analysis of mysticism must include an additional element in its methodology: an explicitly formulated theory, model, or set of presuppositions through which the data is interpreted.[19] A concern with mystical

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the moment, however, it seems safe to say that given the complexity and variety of Buddhist traditions both tendencies may be found to varying degrees in the different schools of Buddhism. In the case of Dzogchen, with its strong tantric component, the issue is less ambiguous. The tradition itself places supreme value on experience, and certainly, some of the practices engaged (such as *prāṇayama*) alter one's state of consciousness. Per Kvaerne, for one, takes for granted the mystical nature of Dzogchen. See Per Kvaerne, "'The Great Perfection' in the Tradition of the Bonpos," in *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, ed. Whalen Lai and Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1983), 367, 385. Though the article is specifically on Dzogchen in Bon, the similarities between Bon and Buddhist Dzogchen make many of his comments on Bon applicable to Buddhist Dzogchen as well. In addition, some of his remarks are intended as general observations on Dzogchen inclusive of both traditions (367).

Some scholars have also questioned the existence of a mystical element in Christianity, either by claiming that the qualities of Christian religious experience are not "mystical" (as that term is commonly understood), or by denying any type of experiential concern in the traditions associated with so-called Christian "mystics." Two arguments are made to support the second point: (1) the caution Christian "mystics" often express toward visionary-type experiences, and (2) the claim by some Christian "mystics" that they are not seeking an experience at all. See Jure Kristo, "The Interpretation of Religious Experience: What Do Mystics Intend When They Talk about Their Experiences?" *The Journal of Religion* 62 (1982): 33–5; Grace M. Jantzen, "Could There Be A Mystical Core of Religion?" *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 70; Grace M. Jantzen, "Mysticism and Experience," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 302–8. See also Thometz on Denys Turner's critique of modern interpretations of Christian apophatic traditions as "mystical" (i.e., concerned with experience). Thometz, *Speaking With and Away*, 29–30.

These arguments are unconvincing. Regarding the first, even the most superficial review of Christian mystical literature shows that Christian mystical experience is felt to be profoundly unique and revelatory by the mystic herself. Regarding the two arguments for the second point, both describe views *about* experience and have nothing to do with whether or not mystical experiences actually occur. The fact that some Christians report having visionary and/or introvertive theistic mystical experiences (e.g., Henry Suso's visionary accounts) demonstrates that there is a mystical aspect of Christianity, regardless of how the tradition may evaluate those experiences. I would add that giving up attachment to or desire for 'an experience' is not necessarily evidence against a mystical component, since such 'letting go' may in fact be the precipitating occasion for the occurrence of mystical experience.

[19] In the context of ordinary experience, meaning is constructed according to broader, often unconsciously held, world views or belief systems. The interpretive framework used by the scholar, then, simply makes explicit an epistemological factor present in all ordinary experience. See Hans H. Penner, "The Mystical Illusion,"

experience in particular requires a model that is epistemological or psychological in nature. As Bruce Garside observes, "it is necessary to have some general model of experience in order to discuss mystical experience in particular."[20] This is perhaps even more the case here, since this book focuses on transformative processes of the mind, effected through the influence of a tradition's doctrines and practices on consciousness. Assessing how a practice might impact consciousness necessarily requires some prior idea of what consciousness is.

The psychological model that I will rely on here is based on systems theory. What is systems theory and what constitutes a systems understanding of consciousness? (Since these questions will be addressed in detail in Chapter Three my remarks below are brief.) On the most general level, systems theory refers to those theoretical principles characterized by a common orientation to the study and interpretation of phenomena *as systems*. It is primarily an umbrella term, encompassing more specialized fields such as cybernetics, chaos theory, and Ilya Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures. A systems approach tends to focus on the holistic, non-summative properties of phenomena, with particular emphasis on structure and process. Structural analysis centers on the organization of system constituents while 'process' refers to how those constituents function and interact to maintain and evolve system structure. Systems theory also focuses on the correlation between system evolution, perturbations (or fluctuations), and boundary conditions. More specifically, perturbations (if exceeding a critical threshold) may degrade a system's structure, which may in turn effect an 'opening up' of its boundaries. This 'opening up' increases the level of matter, energy, and/or information penetration into the system, prompting its evolution toward more complex levels of organization. This systems approach

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in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 93.
[20] Bruce Garside, "Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 3 (1972): 93. See also Sallie B. King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56/2 (1988): 270; Richard Woods Introduction to *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), 4; Fritz Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 198; Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 32; Anthony N. Perovich Jr., "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 238.

has been specifically applied to mind, and used as a guiding metaphor[21] in the development of psychological and cognitive theory. While systems-based approaches to mind are a minority position within the field of psychology and cognitive science as a whole, they are being viewed with increasing seriousness by cognitive researchers (especially as problems with the computational model of cognition become more apparent). A systems interpretation of mind has become a viable alternative to mainstream psychological approaches.

Because systems theory encompasses a wide range of sub-fields and theories, a systems theory of mind may take a variety of forms on at least three different levels: neurophysiological, cognitive, and phenomenological. In other words, there is not one systems theory of mind but many. The model I will be using here addresses both cognitive and phenomenological levels and emphasizes an understanding of mind as an interdependent network of cognitive factors/events that constrain awareness and determine an individual's experiential attunement to her environment and, ultimately, the Real. These factors/events constitute a system that may itself evolve (or devolve) dependent on the system's boundary conditions (i.e., one's experiential openness to the environment). The evolution of the cognitive system experientially manifests as non-ordinary states of consciousness characterized by increasingly sensitized levels of epistemic/affective appreciation of life.

This model has suggestive implications for understanding mysticism. It indicates that mystical paths may constitute means of breaking down the system of factors stabilizing ordinary dualistic consciousness, thereby 'opening up' the system (consciousness) and prompting its evolution toward 'higher' (more environmentally sensitive and adaptive) states of consciousness. The analysis of Dzogchen and German mysticism below will show how the doctrines and practices

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[21] The metaphoric character of a systems approach to mind has been discussed in detail by Linda Olds. Among other things, Olds argues that metaphors are an essential component to creative intellectual activity. (Linda E. Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness: Toward a Systems Theory of Psychology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 19ff.) Furthermore, because cognitive phenomena cannot be directly observed (at least not in a laboratory setting), most psychological theory tends to rely on metaphors to guide research and model building. For mainstream cognitive science, the guiding metaphor has been the computational processes of the computer. More recently the adequacy of this metaphor has been called into question, and new metaphors proposed in its place—one of which is the dynamical system. See Chapter Three, pp. 97, 103–5, for additional remarks on these issues.

of both traditions function in parallel ways to disrupt the cognitive
system and initiate common processes of transformation.

A systems approach to mystical experience is well outside main-
stream, philosophical discourse on mysticism. What specifically is the
justification for interpreting mysticism from a systems perspective?
The fact that a significant number of psychologists and cognitive sci-
entists have adopted a systems approach to mind may be justification
enough. Given the current impasse in the study of mysticism, any
serious approach that offers a new perspective on the data merits
consideration by scholars. But are there more specific reasons for
using systems theory to interpret mysticism, as opposed to con-
structivist or other types of essentialist theories? This turns out to be
a problematic question because it raises another, more general ques-
tion: how does one adjudicate among psychological/epistemological
theories at all? This question is problematic for two reasons. First,
the nature of consciousness itself is problematic. Many of the fun-
damental questions regarding experience, consciousness, and the lim-
its of human knowing are open.[22] There may be strong opinion and
even suggestive research favoring certain theories, but the nature of
consciousness remains controversial, especially in the case of mysti-
cal forms of consciousness—the research that has been done is often
based on experimental and/or philosophical studies that rely on the
data of ordinary experience. Such studies may be irrelevant to mys-
tical experience, given that mystical experience is often considered
(by mystics as well as by a significant number of scholars) funda-
mentally different from ordinary experience.

Second, the process of interpretation tends to be hermeneutically
circular. Applying theoretical models to mystical data (which any
interpretation of the data necessarily requires) entails that what one

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[22] See Block, Flanagan, and Güzeldere, *The Nature of Consciousness*, 2; Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 3ff. Cognitive scientists make a useful distinction between 'information processing' and consciousness or subjectivity. Though cognitive research has apparently clarified a great deal regarding how the mind processes informa-
tion, consciousness itself remains a mystery. (Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 60, 131ff.)
Even with regard to information processing, experimental methods have to trian-
gulate on what are completely unobserved phenomena (since one cannot 'see' infor-
mation being processed in the brain). For this reason, psychological and cognitive
theory tends to be heavily dependent on metaphor. The one exception is behav-
iorism, which avoids metaphor through its exclusive concern with observable behav-
ior, and consequently loses explanatory power.

"discovers" is usually[23] what one already assumes to be true.[24] As the systems theorist Ervin Laszlo puts it, "we perceive what we know, rather than know what we perceive."[25] A corollary to this point is that one will tend to choose the model that when applied to the data will confirm one's presuppositions. This means that data generally fails to adjudicate theories of mysticism—a point confirmed by reviewing the flood of books and articles comprising the constructivist-essentialist debate. Both sides cite extensive amounts of data (in some cases, the same data) to support their own claims, but these data are never convincing as evidence because they mean different things depending on epistemological or psychological presuppositions.[26] And because these presuppositions are not subject to being proved or disproved, neither side is able to persuade the other—hence the impasse in the philosophical study of mysticism.

I raise these issues to show that adjudicating psychological theories—in particular systems theory as opposed to some other approach—is problematic. Because the hermeneutical circle is not completely closed, the texts may still be considered evidence. This evidence, however, is unpersuasive by itself. Adjudicating theories of mysticism requires other criteria. There seem to me to be two criteria that are helpful at this point: (1) the overall logical consistency of a theory, and (2) the range of data a theory is able to accommodate.[27] The

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[23] I do not consider the hermeneutical circle entirely closed. It *is* possible to learn new things from the data. But the homeostatic tendencies of consciousness tend to dampen this possibility. See Chapter Three, pp. 114–21, for more on this topic.

[24] See Russell H. Hvolbek, *Mysticism and Experience* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 18; Donald Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 193–4.

[25] Ervin Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy: Toward a New Paradigm of Contemporary Thought* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1972), 199.

[26] See Huston Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" in *Revisioning Philosophy*, ed. James Ogilvy (Albany: SUNY Press), 251.

[27] Some scholars cite as well the evidence of their own mystical experiences. (See L. Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63/4 (1995): 660.) Clearly, if one has such experiences they cannot help but influence one's understanding of mysticism. But because of its subjective nature, such evidence is unhelpful in resolving issues among scholars, even while it may completely resolve the issues for the individual who has the experience. On this point it might be added that some scholars maintain that the *only* way to understand mysticism is through personal experience. (See Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 9, 123ff., 150–4, 198; D. Green, "Unity in Diversity," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 3/1 (1982): 51; Roger Walsh, "Phenomenological Mapping and Comparisons of Shamanic, Buddhist, Yogic, and Schizophrenic Experiences," *Journal*

first criterion insists, for example, that whatever epistemological con-
straints are assumed to apply to the mystic's own experience must
apply equally to the scholar's experience (in particular, the scholar's
interpretation of mystical texts). The second criterion highlights the
fact that the more a theory can account for the better. These cri-
teria, in conjunction with the data, show that constructivism—the
most serious theoretical challenge to mystical pluralism—is inade-
quate.[28] It is philosophically incoherent and too limited and simplis-
tic in its account of the mystical data. More importantly, these criteria
help answer the question raised above: why systems theory?

A systems approach to mysticism is superior to the alternatives
because it is both philosophically consistent and able to account for
a broader range of the data. A systems-based model of mind goes
beyond single epistemological claims[29] to present a comprehensive
theory of consciousness emphasizing the cognitive processes involved
in the maintenance of ordinary, egocentric experience as well as
those involved in the evolution (or devolution) of the cognitive sys-
tem into non-ordinary states of consciousness. Because it is more
comprehensive, a systems approach is able to account for both the
differences and similarities among mystical phenomena, as well as
other neglected issues: the veridicality of mystical experiences (par-
ticularly when those experiences conflict), the role of ethical behav-
ior as both a precursor and outcome of mystical experience,[30] the

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of the American Academy of Religions 61 (1993): 740–1, 748.) This is certainly the con-
tention of many mystics, and it is one I am sympathetic to myself. But again, resolv-
ing issues among scholars, most of whom have probably not had such experiences,
requires recourse to less subjective evidence.

   [28] See Chapter Two for a critique of constructivism. See Appendix B, pp. 255–8,
for a discussion of problems with conventional essentialist approaches.

   [29] An example is Katz's view that "There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experi-
ences." Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26.

   [30] In three overlapping essays, Katz does discuss the relationship between
ethics/morality and mysticism. His goals are threefold: (1) showing that morality is
an essential component of mystical traditions; (2) showing how mystical traditions
understand morality to function on the mystical path (as a means of realizing the
mystical goal) and as an outcome of mystical experience; and (3) showing how mys-
tical traditions' understanding of morality is an extension of the larger religious
belief system in which the mystical tradition is embedded (supporting Katz's insis-
tence on the conservative character of mystical traditions and experience). This
important analysis, however, fails to take into account the existence of a universal
level of cognitive functioning and the ways in which ethical attitudes and actions
may affect the mind at this cognitive level (independently of the traditions' self-
understanding). See Steven T. Katz, "Ethics and Mysticism," in *Foundations of Ethics*,
ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983),

relationship between visionary and introvertive experiences,[31] and perhaps most importantly for this book, the manner in which practices and doctrines affect and transform consciousness. In general, systems theory supplies a more sophisticated and nuanced basis for interpreting the nature of mystical experience as well as the processes leading up to that experience.

Adjudicating epistemological/psychological models raises an additional problem. Mystical traditions often have psychological theories of their own. It might be argued that the interpretation of mysticism is better founded on the traditions' own explanations of what mystical transformation and experience involve. A religious tradition's own psychology may be quite sophisticated, and it may even be right—Patañjaliś explanation of meditation may also be the most accurate explanation of meditation. However, the concern here is general theory about mysticism. Approaching mysticism from a sectarian, confessional perspective is difficult to reconcile with such a concern. According to Wesley Wildman and Leslie Brothers, sectarian accounts are "too narrow in scope, limited by the usually unexamined convictions of the group, uninformed by outside experts, and oblivious to neurological consideration."[32] I would emphasize that the very attempt to understand mystical transformation across traditions indicates the need for an explanatory framework outside the traditions themselves.[33]

184–202; Steven T. Katz, "Ethics and Mysticism in Eastern Mystical Traditions," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 253–67; Steven T. Katz, "Mysticism and Ethics in Western Mystical Traditions," *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 407–423.

[31] One way of avoiding this issue is simply to limit the term mysticism to a specific type of experience. This strategy may be necessary at a preliminary stage of investigation, but it is ultimately unsatisfactory because it leaves unexplained a wide range of phenomena that are clearly mystical in nature.

[32] Wesley J. Wildman and Leslie A. Brothers, "A Neuropsychological-Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences," in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, Theo C. Meyering, and Michael A. Arbib (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory; Berkeley: Center for Theology and Natural Science, Graduate Theological Union, 1999), 396. See also Agehananda Bharati, *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, Inc., 1976), 114–5.

[33] Of course, it is possible to interpret all traditions according to the belief system of one of them (e.g., using Buddhism to interpret Christian mysticism or vice versa), but such an approach would still be subject to the problems raised by Wildman and Brothers.

These comments do not necessarily apply to explanations of mysticism that are merely theologically inspired, i.e., explanations that use a tradition's own theological

Sectarian/theological explanations of mysticism pose an additional problem. A religious tradition's own theories are of limited usefulness because the evolutionary pressure operative within mystical traditions selects for what is soteriologically effective over what is true. This does not mean that mystical explanations are necessarily wrong. Rather, it means that their veridical status becomes more problematic because, on the level that matters (i.e., transformative value), it is irrelevant. This is not contradicted by the fact that believers themselves maintain that the doctrines of their traditions are true. Ironically, soteriological effectiveness is enhanced (at least up to a certain point) if this is the case, i.e., if the believer *really* believes the doctrines, cosmologies, etc. of her tradition are literal fact. Part of the soteriological effectiveness of doctrines depends on them not being seen as merely soteriologically effective.[34]

In the context of modern, Western culture, sectarian explanations may be of limited value at the spiritual level as well. Though mystical experience may ultimately transcend historical and cultural context, mystical doctrine in its traditional form is often couched in archaic language that tends to presume a religious worldview historically and culturally foreign to the modern person. Accessing these traditions as sources of spiritual guidance and inspiration therefore becomes problematic. Soteriological effectiveness may turn out to depend on translating the traditions into more modern—and therefore intelligible—language and concepts. Harry Hunt seems to be saying much the same thing when he states that

> if the higher spiritual traditions of humanity might actually refer to something important and thus need to be preserved and carried forward in some fashion within our predominantly scientific and utilitarian civilization, then some sort of account of how they could occur as an expression of the structure of the human mind will be necessary.[35]

and/or soteriological self-understanding as a resource for theorizing about mysticism but translate the tradition's terminology and concepts into more generic, nonconfessional language. Two examples are Robert Forman's interpretation of mystical awakening as a process of "forgetting" (based on Eckhart) and Sallie King's "Buddhist-phenomenological" approach that sees "mystical experience . . . [as] a form of awareness in which the experiential sense of a separate subject and object is not present." King, "Two Epistemological Models," 273. See 270ff. for her full presentation of this theory.

[34] At more advanced stages on the path this is not the case. At some point, knowing the Real requires transcending all doctrinal formulations, simply because the Real itself transcends them.

[35] Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 219.

I would add, "human mind" as understood from a modern scientific perspective, since it is "science [that] provides the voice of authority in our culture to an extent that is matched by no other human practice and institution."[36]

Systems theory is valuable as a theoretical tool because it addresses these problems. It bridges the gap between worldviews by making spiritually intelligible the doctrines and practices of mystical traditions in the context of a modern, scientific discourse. It addresses the question: how do mystical doctrines and practices actually function to change people, and by extension, why are such doctrines/practices necessary for psychological and spiritual maturation? Exploring these questions from a systems perspective has direct implications for anyone trying to integrate mystical values and practices into their lives.

Mystical Pluralism Compared to other Essentialist
Approaches to Mysticism

The mystical pluralist thesis outlined here is in many ways a refinement or elaboration of the theories of other scholars. The idea that mystical traditions are similar in some essential and important way is obviously not new, and neither is the description of this commonality in terms of common transformative processes. In the latter case, however, a theorist's concern with process is not necessarily elaborated into a general theory of mysticism or related to a close analysis of mystical sources.[37] This book contributes to the discourse, then, not only by depicting the commonality of mystical traditions in terms of common transformative processes, but by (1) developing this idea into a comprehensive theory of mysticism, (2) supporting and illustrating the theory through a close analysis of two mystical traditions, and (3) situating the theory within the broader philosophical discourse on mysticism.[38] That said, a brief discussion of related, essen-

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[36] Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), xvii.

[37] Daniel Brown's work is a notable exception to this remark. See his essay "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Transformations of Consciousness: Traditional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, Ken Wilber, J. Engler, and D.P. Brown (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 219–84.

[38] Much of the theory on the transformative nature of mystical processes has

tialist approaches is helpful in order to illustrate some of the specific
ways a systems-based mystical pluralism diverges from those approaches
and/or extends, refines, or corrects their interpretations of mysticism.

Mystical Pluralism and Epistemological Essentialist Approaches

The central epistemological contention of mystical pluralism is that
mystical experiences are encounters with the Real. In most cases,
these encounters are conceptually mediated. Mystical pluralism, then,
combines epistemological essentialism with a moderate form of con-
structivism ("moderate" because I would argue that unmediated expe-
rience is possible and in some cases realized). Mystical experiences
have an object that impacts the mystic's consciousness and that con-
veys information. This epistemological claim plays a central role in
explaining the mystical data. The constructivist element of mystical
pluralism explains the heterogeneity of mystical experiences. Episte-
mological essentialism, on the other hand, accounts for aspects of
mystical experiences that pure constructivism is unable to explain:
phenomenological similarities across mystical traditions, novelty, and
the perception of epistemic and soteriological value.[39] If mystical
experiences have a common referent (the Real) then phenomeno-
logical similarity, novelty, etc. make sense. Though the experience
of this object may be (and usually is) mediated, it still conveys infor-
mation (in most cases, symbolically represented) to the mystic.

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been developed by transpersonal psychologists and consequently ignored by philoso-
phers of mysticism.

[39] Some scholars (constructivists in particular) would reject the contention that
mystical experiences are ever similar across traditions or that the content of mys-
tical experiences ever includes novel aspects. Subsequent chapters, however, will
provide persuasive evidence that the data from mystical traditions supports both
claims. Regarding the last two aspects of the data in the list above—veridicality
and soteriological value in mystical experiences—it is a fact that mystics at least
claim that their experiences have value in both these senses. In other words, the
content of mystical experiences is perceived as conveying a deeper understanding
of the true nature of things. (See Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity, and Realism," 241;
Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, xii–xiii.) A sense of salvational value is often asso-
ciated with the experiences as well (though for Christian mystics, this sense conflicts
with orthodox Christian theology). Sometimes those around the mystic come to the
same conclusion (either consciously or unconsciously) about the value of the mys-
tic's experiences, i.e., the mystic's behavior seems to indicate she has some type of
'privileged access' to the Real as construed by the tradition. (See Hick, *Interpretation
of Religion*, 301–2.) The impression of veridicality and soteriological value may be
false, but it is still an aspect of the data to be taken seriously and explained.

A number of scholars (e.g., John Hick, Michael Stoeber, and Peter Byrne)[40] more or less share the same epistemological outlook. Hick, Stoeber, Byrne and myself agree that mystical experiences are encounters with the Real. Beyond this basic and most important point, our epistemological views vary somewhat. While I would argue that unmediated experiences are experientially possible (however rare they may be), Hick and Stoeber maintain that the mystic's encounter with the Real is always mediated.[41] Stoeber would make the additional argument that information conveyed by the Real influences the form of the concepts mediating the mystic's experiences. In other words, even though the mystic's experiences are always mediated by concepts, those concepts are partially formed based on information from the Real (and not just from the mystic's cultural and religious conditioning). From this perspective, the epistemic value of mystical experiences derives *from* conceptual mediation, not in spite of it.

Both Hick's theory and Stoeber's are discussed in detail below.[42] Here it need only be noted that a common epistemological thesis may be elaborated into somewhat different theories. For example, though Hick, Stoeber, and myself share important epistemological views, we come to significantly different conclusions regarding the individual's experiential potential and (in the case of Stoeber) the developmental relationship between theistic and monistic experiences. In addition, the mystical pluralist theory advocated here shows in more explicit terms (compared to Hick and Stoeber's approaches) how mystical doctrines and practices bring about mystical states of consciousness.

Mystical Pluralism and Process-oriented Approaches

The mystical pluralist analysis of mysticism emphasizes transformative processes (as opposed to just doctrines and/or the phenomenological

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[40] Michael Stoeber, "Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision," *Religious Studies* 28/1 (1992): 108, 114; Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity, and Realism," 240–1. See also Donald Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do? A Critique of Steven Katz," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 58–9; James Price, "The Objectivity of Mystical Truth Claims," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 97.

[41] Byrne agrees, though he does not stress the point. His primary concern is to show that an ecumenical interpretation of mysticism does not require the claim that the experiential content of mystical experiences is universally identical (especially since, according to him, this phenomenological essentialist thesis is wrong).

[42] See Appendix B, pp. 263–6, for additional information on Stoeber's approach to mysticism.

content of experiences) and compares mystical traditions in terms of these processes. A concern with process is to some degree reflected in the approaches of both Hick and Stoeber.[43] For Hick, salvation is a process (i.e., a transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness) common to diverse religious traditions. An explicit emphasis on process is also reflected in the philosophical analyses of James Price, John Apczyski, and Robert Forman. Price presents a theory of mysticism based on Bernard Lonergan's concept of interiority that shifts the focus of analysis away from "the *object* or *content* of consciousness" to "the *operations* of consciousness."[44] According to Price, "this shift . . . is what makes possible a critically grounded, cross-cultural analysis of mysticism."[45] Inspired by Polanyi, Apczyski describes mysticism as a "breaking out" from ordinary "human integrative powers" toward realizing "the tacit ground of all our knowledge."[46] Forman emphasizes process in the context of a comparative/typological approach to mysticism. He argues that diverse mystical traditions promote a type of "forgetting" or "emptying" of consciousness potentially leading to a "pure consciousness event" (PCE)[47] and/or the "dualistic mystical state" (DMS).[48] The PCE in particular is unconditioned, contentless,[49] and phenomenologically identical across mystical traditions.[50]

A process-oriented approach is also central to transpersonal analyses of mystical experience. Theorists such as Daniel Brown, Arthur

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[43] Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 60.

[44] James Price, "Typologies and the Cross-Cultural Analysis of Mysticism: A Critique," in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, eds. Timothy P. Fallon, S.J. and Philip Boo Riley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 185.

[45] Ibid.

[46] John V. Apczyski, "Mysticism and Epistemology," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 14/2 (1985): 202.

[47] Robert K.C. Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8–9.

[48] Robert K.C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 150–1.

[49] In philosophical discourse on mysticism, the term 'contentless' is not used in an absolute sense (a *completely* contentless experience is no longer an experience), but to indicate that the experience is empty of thought, conceptual activity, sensory impressions, and discriminated objects of attention. The experience still retains some form of awareness.

[50] Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 39; L. Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," 660.

Deikman, Ken Wilber, Charles Tart, and Allan Combs all under-
stand mysticism as means of deconstructing ordinary cognitive struc-
tures in order to provoke cognitive transformation.[51] Wilber, Tart,
and Combs explicitly relate this view to systems theory. As Combs
explains (using the terminology of chaos theory),

> if a large enough portion of the elements which form either a state
> or structure of consciousness are altered, the entire system can be up-
> ended and sent looking for a new attractor—a new stable pattern.
> Here in a nutshell is the process that underlies many techniques for
> personal and spiritual growth.[52]

This same theme is reflected in Combs' discussion of catabolic pro-
cesses, as well as Deikman's description of cognitive deautomization
and the cultivation of a "receptive mode" of consciousness through
meditative practice.[53]

These approaches share with mystical pluralism an emphasis on
analyzing and comparing mystical traditions in terms of transfor-
mative processes and the assertion that mystical processes are simi-
lar across traditions. Beyond these common themes, however,
process-oriented theories of mysticism may vary considerably, depend-
ing on how each answers (or ignores) questions like: What is the
nature of mystical processes? What is the nature of the state(s) of
consciousness these processes lead to? What is the cognitive status
of that state? How do mystical doctrines and practices function to
generate such processes? Mystical pluralist responses to these ques-
tions are in some cases quite distinct from those of other process-
oriented approaches.

Mystical pluralism is most similar to the systems approaches of
certain transpersonal psychologists. However, it tends to go beyond

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[51] See Charles T. Tart, *States of Consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.,
1975), 70ff.; Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 250–1. See also John Collins, *Mysticism
and New Paradigm Psychology* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.,
1991), 238.
[52] Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 61. See also Allan Combs, "The Evolution of
Consciousness: A Theory of Historical and Personal Transformation," *World Futures*
38 (1993): 57.
[53] Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 228–32, 251; Combs, "Evolution of Consciousness,"
57–8; Arthur J. Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," in
Understanding Mysticism, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980),
247–8, 256, 258–9. On Deikman's understanding of the "action mode" vs. "recep-
tive mode" of consciousness, see Paul D. Tyson, "A General Systems Theory
Approach to Consciousness, Attention, and Meditation," *The Psychological Record* 32
(1982): 492.

transpersonal analyses by specifying in precise terms how mystical
doctrines and practices of mystical traditions function to effect change.
For example, I agree with Wilber that growth involves the "letting
go" or "breaking-up" of an old structure.[54] But what is the nature
of this structure? How is it maintained and reinforced in the con-
text of ordinary experience, and how exactly do mystical practices
"break it up"? The systems analysis in this book refines this insight
by explaining in more explicit terms how mystical paths destabilize
cognitive structures and by relating this analysis to issues raised in
current philosophical discussions of mysticism.

Mystical Pluralism and John Hick's Pluralism

As indicated above, mystical pluralism parallels John Hick's plural-
ist interpretation of religion in several important respects. First, like
Hick's pluralism, mystical pluralism affirms that mystical traditions
are therapeutically transformative; mystical traditions function to elicit
an experiential encounter with the Real.[55] Second, Hick's theory, like
my own, is essentialist in both the epistemological and the thera-
peutic/soteriological sense. On the epistemological level, Hick main-
tains that there is one Real that is experienced differently depending
on the mediating effects of the believer's tradition and historical/cul-
tural context.[56] On the soteriological level, Hick asserts that each tra-
dition engages transformative processes marked by a decrease in
self-centeredness and an existential attunement to the Real. Hick
considers such transformation to be in fact the "function" of religion.[57]

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[54] See Ken Wilber, "The Spectrum of Development," in *Transformations of Conscious-
ness: Traditional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, Ken Wilber, J. Engler, and
D.P. Brown (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 80–1, 154.

[55] The systems approach presented here does privilege the veridical status of cer-
tain doctrinal systems over others. However, it also maintains that doctrines mat-
ter only to the extent that they support transformation, not according to how
accurately they describe Reality. From a systems perspective, the sole criterion for
evaluating traditions is therapeutic/soteriological. Of course, this may provide grounds
for arguing that some traditions (or maybe even one tradition) are more therapeu-
tic than others. However, with respect to Dzogchen and German mysticism (and,
I suspect, mystical traditions in general) it supports an inclusivist conclusion: different
systems of belief and practice are equally transformative. For Hick's reflections on
the comparative soteriological value of religious traditions, see Hick, *Interpretation of
Religion*, 301–7.

[56] Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 14–5, 245.

[57] Ibid., 14. See also 240.

Third, the criterion Hick uses for evaluating traditions is transformative/soteriological. Since, according to Hick, no substantive predications can legitimately be applied to the noumenal, ineffable Real,[58] the truthfulness of a tradition cannot be gauged by the correspondence of its doctrines with Reality. Rather, "the 'truthfulness' of each tradition is shown by its soteriological effectiveness."[59] This of course implies that soteriological effectiveness is independent of the veridicality of doctrinal claims (a point Hick makes explicitly in the context of myth).[60] It is not, however, independent of behavior. For Hick, a soteriological "efficacy in leading humans from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness [is] most readily observable by growth in love and compassion."[61]

Given these correspondences, the central claims of Hick's pluralist theory of religions and mystical pluralism are for the most part identical. For both Hick and myself, mystical traditions (or in Hick's case, religious traditions) are authentic responses to Reality, and the essence of this response is the dissolution of self-centeredness expressed as spontaneous, compassionate behavior toward others. A systems-based mystical pluralism may be distinguished from Hick's approach in the sense that it makes possible a more explicit account of how the dissolution of self/ego takes place. In this respect, systems theory fills a gap in Hick's pluralism. However, the purpose of this systems approach is to support the pluralist thesis. From this perspective, mystical pluralism may be viewed as a refinement and elaboration of Hick's interpretation of religions. One of the few specific points of disagreement between Hick and myself concerns his insistence that the Real *an sich* is always and necessarily unknowable. Like Steven Katz,[62] Hick maintains that "we always perceive the transcendent through the lens of a particular religious culture with its distinctive set of concepts, myths, historical exemplars and devotional or

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[58] Ibid., 239, 246–7.

[59] Ibid., 248. See also 14; Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," 11.

[60] Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 248. Ward disagrees, but his arguments are unconvincing. See Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," 14.

[61] Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," 11. See Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 14.

[62] In fact, the agreement is partial. Both Hick and Katz maintain that mystical experience is conditioned. Hick, however, makes the additional claim that this conditioned experience has as its "object" the transcendent Real. Katz implies that mystical experiences do have an object(s), but avoids the problem of the ontological status or nature of this object.

meditational techniques."[63] While I agree that this is true for most experience, even most mystical experience, a systems approach suggests that the transformative processes initiated by mystical practices may culminate in an unconditioned, unmediated experience of the Real. Contra Hick, the noumenal Real can be known.[64]

Robert Forman's Perennial Psychology

In comparing mystical pluralism with other essentialist approaches to mysticism, the problematic nature of some forms of essentialism deserves emphasis. These problems reinforce the need for essentialist theories of mysticism that are more refined and sophisticated in their formulation of interpretive frameworks and in their analyses of mystical data. Here I turn to a closer examination of Robert Forman's work on mysticism in order to illustrate some of these problems.[65] I focus on Forman not because his approach is significantly more problematic than others, but because he has become one of the strongest voices in current philosophical discourse on mysticism.

Forman's analysis of mysticism is primarily concerned with the PCE (pure consciousness event), though in his more recent work he has broadened his analysis to include the DMS (dualistic mystical state). As its name suggests, the PCE is a state of pure awareness or consciousness:[66] a momentary experience of empty, interiorized awareness with no sensory, affective, or epistemic content beyond the knowledge of being aware itself.[67] Its lack of content entails that it is also meaningless. According to Forman, whatever meaning the

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[63] Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 8. See also 166.

[64] Hick's insistence that the noumenal Real is unknowable may be partially based on the concern that direct knowledge/experience of the Real would constitute normative criteria for evaluating the veridicality of religious doctrines, which would in turn undermine pluralism's inclusivism. However, I would argue that we can admit that some religious doctrinal systems are more true than others without contradicting the thesis that all traditions are, potentially at least, equally soteriologically effective.

[65] See Appendix B, pp. 255–8, for a discussion of the problems with other essentialist approaches.

[66] Robert K.C. Forman, "*Samādhi* and Peter Wimsey: Mysticism, Reading and Bruce Janz," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 25/2 (1996): 202, 206–7.

[67] Forman describes this as "knowledge-by-identity," as opposed to William James' "knowledge-by-acquaintance" and "knowledge-about." See Robert K.C. Forman, "Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology," in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20–2.

PCE has is derived solely from "sociolinguistic factors" imposed on the experience after it has occurred.[68] Forman's DMS is dualistic in the sense that two distinct cognitive modes are maintained simultaneously. On the one hand, the intentional processes and experiences of ordinary consciousness continue unchanged. At the same time, ordinary experience is accompanied by an unchanging and permanent interior silence—a "witness" consciousness of pure awareness that remains detached and uninvolved with the sensations, perceptions, and thoughts of intentional consciousness. Forman is careful to emphasize that his discussion of the PCE and DMS is not intended to exhaust the full range of experiences that may be considered mystical. The PCE in particular he considers a rudimentary form of mystical experience, though he suggests it may "indicate certain features of other more complex (perhaps more advanced) mystical phenomena."[69] Rudimentary or not, Forman believes that both the PCE and DMS are properly mystical and that his analysis of both plays an important role in understanding mysticism.

Forman's typology is problematic. Specifically, the phenomenological content of the PCE and DMS does not seem to match the descriptions of mystical experiences in mystical texts. The PCE and DMS are nothing like the ecstatic, meaning-filled, and life-transforming experiences described by mystics.[70] Forman describes his own experience of a PCE as so "unremarkable" that it was hardly noticeable.[71] His ongoing experience of the DMS seems to have had only subtle effects on his intellectual and emotional life or the quality of his overall state of being.[72] Reading Forman's descriptions of both experiences, one can't help but wonder: what's the point?[73] The PCE and DMS experiences seem trivial; mystical experiences as described in traditional sources appear anything but trivial.

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[68] Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," 670.

[69] Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 8–9.

[70] See, for example, Stoeber's description of monistic mystical experiences in his *Theo-Monistic Mysticism* (24). W.T. Stace likewise argues that mystical experiences are characterized by both positive qualities (such as creativity, activity, and even personality) and negative qualities (impersonality, inactivity, stasis). See Philip Almond's remarks on this aspect of Stace's thought, in Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine: An Investigation of the Study of Mysticism in World Religions* (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 76.

[71] Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 28.

[72] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 144–5.

[73] This comment does not necessarily apply to the passages he quotes from traditional mystical sources.

Forman does attempt to support his classifications with concrete evidence. He cites specific passages from important mystical sources. In addition, he describes his own experience of the PCE and DMS as well as the experiences of several persons he has interviewed. Forman's experiences, and the experiences of those he interviews, seem to confirm that there are experiences that phenomenologically correspond with Forman's descriptions of the PCE and DMS. The problem, however, is the continued discrepancy between the PCE and DMS and the mystical experiences described in traditional, authoritative sources. Mystical texts may refer to "pure consciousness"[74] experiences, but it is by no means clear that the "pure consciousness" of the texts is identical to the "pure consciousness" of a PCE. Forman, for example, associates the pure awareness of the DMS with the *ātman*,[75] but in the Upaniṣads *ātman* is also identified with Brahman, i.e., absolute Being, Consciousness, and Bliss (*sat-cit-ananda*). In other words, "pure awareness" in the Upaniṣads[76] is the experience of *ātman*/Brahman or Being/Consciousness/Bliss and clearly has affective and semantic dimensions far removed from either the DMS or the PCE.[77] This interpretation is supported by the fact that the tradition itself views pure consciousness as a solution to fundamental problems of the human predicament. *Samādhi*, at least in Advaita Vedanta, is associated with realizing/knowing the ontological Real as the foundation and source of the illusory, phenomenal world (not just the self). It involves experientially understanding the illusory nature and source of all phenomenal appearances, freedom from all forms of attachment, states of bliss, etc. Ultimately, according to the tradition, it frees one from endless cycles of painful rebirth in *saṃsāra*. Regardless of the veridicality of such claims, they suggest that the experience of *samādhi* is far richer and more profound than

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[74] Forman, "*Samādhi*," 202.

[75] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 144. Elsewhere Forman identifies an "innate capacity" for PCEs with consciousness itself and the *ātman*. See Forman, "Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology," 8, 13.

[76] Strictly speaking, I should say "some passages" in the Upaniṣads. Though certain themes stand out as central to Upaniṣadic thought, the philosophy of the Upaniṣads is neither consistent nor systematic.

[77] Forman could argue that the identification of *ātman* with Brahman reflects post-experiential interpretation with no correspondence to the phenomenological content of the experience. This interpretation, however, would seem inconsistent with his hermeneutical approach in other contexts (and designed more to confirm his presuppositions than do justice to the data).

Forman's PCE. Forman might argue that the PCE is a preparatory stage of experience on the way to this more advanced Upaniṣadic experience. This may be true, but if so, it needs to be emphasized that it is *very* rudimenatary and not equatable with *ātman*/Brahman. Similar problems are raised by Forman's identification of the PCE and the buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*).[78] In East Asian sources especially, the buddha-nature is identified with Ultimate Reality itself (the *dharmakāya*) and constitutes the essence or true nature of phenomena. Whatever advanced mystical state may be associated with experiencing the buddha-nature, it seems far removed from the localized, intrinsically meaningless PCE.

Forman's use of Buddhist sources is problematic in other ways. One of Forman's informants refers to the *Heart Sūtra*'s account of emptiness as an example of a PCE.[79] Forman apparently agrees. From this perspective, the negations listed in the text are considered negations of the contents of consciousness, describing a state of consciousness empty of all content. Understanding the concept of emptiness—quintessentially expressed in the *Heart Sūtra*—has been a problem for both Buddhists and scholars. (From the Mahāyāna perspective, to truly understand emptiness is to be enlightened, so it may be that almost no one understands it.) The difficulties notwithstanding, it is unlikely that the text is describing an interiorized state of pure consciousness. Though emptiness does correspond with a non-conceptual state of consciousness, this state is characterized by insight into the true nature of phenomena (i.e., phenomena are known as lacking inherent existence) and automatic, unconditional compassion for all sentient beings. In other words, the realization of emptiness has an epistemic and ethical value and that the PCE lacks. The problems with Forman's understanding of emptiness are compounded by a consideration of Mahāyāna Buddhism's historical emergence. Mahāyāna Buddhism partially originated as a reaction against the Nikāya schools of Buddhism. Its central philosophical teaching of emptiness arose as a soteriological corrective to the dualism inherent in the Buddhist paths of the Nikāya schools. In Nikāya, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇā* are distinct and polarized. The path is essentially defined

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[78] This is implied by Forman's identification of the "innate capacity" (pure consciousness) with the buddha-nature. See Forman, "Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology," 9–10.

[79] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 29–30.

as escaping *saṃsāra* in order to realize *nirvāṇā*. To reach the goal
the practitioner has to renounce the *duḥkha*-pervaded world. Reacting
against this approach, emptiness expresses the insight that the dual-
ism inherent in Nikāya Buddhism negates the possibility of experi-
encing the goal—'pushing away' anything in order to be free is itself
a form of bondage. Because *nirvāṇā* is nondual (a state in which
there is no one going anywhere), the conceptual framework of '*saṃsāra*
vs. *nirvāṇā*' and 'practitioner' on the way to a 'goal' thematizes expe-
rience in a way that makes *nirvāṇā* impossible to realize. And while
this may indeed be non-conceptual (Nāgārjuna insists as much), it
has nothing to do with the presence or absence of sensation or a
lack of involvement in the world. From the perspective of the out-
side observer, the bodhisattva "coursing in the perfection of wisdom"
(i.e., cognizing emptiness) is still "in the world" and actively engaged
in spontaneous and uncontrived compassionate service. For the bod-
hisattva herself, however, there is no "self," "world," or "service"
being conceptualized—there is no one going anywhere doing any-
thing at all.[80] Emptiness in Forman's sense is conditioned, limited to
an interior and momentary state of consciousness, and so is funda-
mentally incommensurable with the Mahāyāna understanding of
emptiness.

Forman's identification of the DMS with the experience of *samādhi*
in Hui Neng's Ch'an involves similar discrepancies. Again, the sim-
ilarities between the accounts are outweighed by the fact that—unlike
the DMS—Hui Neng's *samādhi* effects a radical shift in the practi-
tioner's state of being. According to Hui Neng, *samādhi is liberation*:[81]
the end of attachment and suffering. The effects of the DMS on
consciousness are insignificant in comparison.

If the PCE and DMS are that different from the mystical expe-
riences described in the texts, is it legitimate to consider them mys-
tical? Forman would say yes, emphasizing that the PCE is only one
type of mystical experience, less complex because of its rudimentary
nature. Forman might also argue that the apparent differences between
the PCE, the DMS, and the experiences described in the texts reflect

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[80] This description could be reconciled to Forman's DMS, and Forman himself
suggests a connection between the DMS and *śūnyatā*. (Ibid., 144) But again, the
DMS lacks the epistemic and ethical dimensions associated with the realization of
emptiness.

[81] See Forman's own reference, in Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 161.

post-experience interpretation; the experiences themselves are really phenomenologically identical. The argument is weak. Even if mystical reports are shaped by some post-experience interpretation (and no doubt they are), the overwhelming weight of the evidence does not support the identification of the PCE or DMS with experiences reported in mystical texts. Forman's emphasis on the apophatic nature of mystical practice (many practices do involve the emptying of consciousness) is inadequate, since the experiences themselves are described as anything but a state of mere emptiness. If the experiences described by the authors of the Upaniṣads and by Hui Neng are mystical, it does not make sense to include the PCE and DMS in the same category.

One of the problems with Forman's theorizing about mysticism is that it is based on a container metaphor of mind. From this perspective, the 'container' (mind) is conditioned by its content (thoughts, concepts, sensations, etc.) and de-conditioned when emptied of content. Applying this metaphor to mysticism, mystical practice/transformation is the process of 'emptying the container,' and mystical experience (or at least one type of mystical experience) is the state achieved once this emptying has been completed.

There is significant mystical data that supports this forgetting model of mystical transformation.[82] Some of this data is even cited in subsequent chapters of this book—statements may be found in both Dzogchen and German mystical sources that seem to identify emptying with mystical realization. However, the discrepancy between the PCE and DMS and mystical experiences as described in mystical texts justifies some suspicion when interpreting this data. Since 'forgetting' leads to empty awareness, and mystical experiences are more than empty awareness, mystical transformation must involve more than forgetting concepts. Two possibilities suggest themselves: (1) Concepts are experientially and cognitively operative at multiple levels, from the superficial 'voice' of the internal narrative to much more subtle and/or unconscious levels of cognitive processing. If Forman is right and forgetting is the key process in mystical transformation, then it must involve a much deeper form of forgetting than Forman discusses—a forgetting profound enough to potentially yield an experience qualitatively distinct from ordinary experience.

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[82] See, for example, Forman, "Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology," 8–9.

(2) A state of emptiness (Forman's PCE) creates a condition that makes transformation possible. An empty mind is not itself a mystical experience, but it initiates the processes that lead to mystical experience. Chaos theory provides a possible metaphor for understanding this transformation. Concepts (in combination with other factors) generate a "field" that magnetizes awareness within the "phase portrait" associated with ordinary, dualistic experience. Sustained and repeated periods of mental cessation (the PCE) upset this field and allow a phase transition to occur, experientially manifested as a new state of consciousness. From this perspective, mystical sources that seem to identify 'forgetting' with mystical realization reflect the fact that there is a necessary connection between the initial cause (emptying) and the end state (mystical realization) experienced as a result of the processes initiated by that cause. Quieting and/or concentrating the mind is one of the definitive achievements of the mystical journey, not because it is identical with mystical experience but because it sets in motion a naturally unfolding series of processes leading to mystical experience.

Either of these possibilities suggests that Forman's analysis of mystical transformation is overly simplistic. Emptying the mind is an important and essential aspect of many mystical paths. But by itself this is not adequate to explain whatever processes link ordinary, dualistic experience to the experience the writers of the Upaniṣads identify with 'Brahman.' Neither is mystical experience simply what remains once the mind has been emptied. Whatever happens to consciousness in the shift from ordinary experience to mystical experience is more complex than simply emptying out its contents, and whatever state is ultimately realized is more profound than a PCE.

Some of the research Forman cites on the effects of repetitive sensory stimuli on consciousness does seem helpful in terms of understanding how meditative practices may produce a contentless state.[83] He misses the full implications of this research, however, by failing to understand that the contentless state is pre-mystical. As Forman notes, the PCE is rudimentary. I would argue it is so rudimentary that it is not properly mystical. Contentless states as Forman understands them are best viewed as pre-mystical or quasi-mystical, i.e., as states that *lead* to mystical experience rather than being equivalent to it.

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[83] See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 36–7.

Additional problems with Forman's approach include its failure to (1) explain how the PCE relates to the overall transformation of the person, (2) provide an account of visionary mystical experience,[84] and (3) appreciate the potentially transformative effects of mystical doctrines and values, focusing on meditative/contemplative practice alone. Mystical pluralism (combined with systems theory) addresses all three of these areas. It explains how mystical practice *and* doctrine function as means of realizing the Real, yet also recognizes that mystical realization may be symbolically represented through visionary-type experiences or may transcend form altogether. Either way, the experience itself is inherently epistemic and profoundly meaningful, not merely interpreted as such after the fact.

Overview of the Book

To both sum up and look ahead, the purpose of this book is to present and support a mystical pluralist interpretation of mysticism. Through the application of a systems-based understanding of mind to Dzogchen and German mysticism, I will show that the doctrines and practices of these two mystical traditions (and by implication, mystical traditions in general) bring about common transformative processes in the consciousness of the mystic, experientially realized as a deepening attunement to the Real. The mystical pluralist thesis has close affinities to a number of other essentialist and transpersonal approaches to mysticism (particularly those of Forman, Combs, and Hick). Mystical pluralism, Forman's perennial psychology, Combs' systems approach, etc. share the same core thesis: mystical paths function in similar ways to decondition structures of ordinary consciousness. Mystical pluralism, however, goes beyond this basic idea by addressing in more precise terms how mystical doctrines and practices cause transformation and what this transformation involves. It also addresses areas of the mystical data often ignored or left unexplained by essentialist, constructivist, and transpersonal theories: the

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[84] See Robert K.C. Forman, "The Construction of Mystical Experience," *Faith and Philosophy* 5/3 (1988): 254. For Forman, mysticism by definition excludes visionary experience. Though Smart takes the same stance, the close and apparently interconnected relationship between visionary and apophatic experience in the lives of certain mystics (Henry Suso, for example) suggests that visionary experience is an important—perhaps the most important—category of mystical phenomena.

nature of visionary mystical experiences and their relation to contentless, unmediated mystical states, the role of doctrine and ethics in generating mystical transformation, and the intrinsic epistemic value of mystical experiences.

Mystical pluralism is justified on two levels. First, it is justified by the fundamental inadequacy of constructivism. Demonstrating this inadequacy is the topic of the next chapter. Specifically, I argue that constructivism is (1) inadequate in its account of the mystical data, and (2) both philosophically and psychologically problematic. The problems with constructivism support the case for alternative theories of mysticism. The remainder of the book is concerned to present a positive justification for mystical pluralism, based on its own philosophical, epistemological, and psychological merits, as well as its ability to account for the data. Chapter Three explains what a systems approach to consciousness and mysticism involves. It reviews some of the general principles of systems theory and discusses how such principles may be applied to consciousness or mind. Chapters Four and Five present the mystical data through overviews of two mystical traditions: Dzogchen and German mysticism respectively. Using the systems-based model of consciousness discussed in Chapter Three, my interpretation of these traditions focuses on the issue of therapeutic efficacy: how they might transform the consciousness of the practitioner who internalizes them and lives them. Chapter Six concludes the book by comparing the traditions from a systems perspective. This systems approach shows how both Dzogchen and German mysticism function to elicit common transformative processes and thereby supports a mystical pluralist interpretation of mystical traditions.

A CRITIQUE OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

For the most part, this book presents positive arguments in support of mystical pluralism. Doctrines and practices from two traditions are discussed and used as evidence to support the mystical pluralist thesis. Mystical pluralism, however, may also be supported in a negative sense, based on the inadequacy of its primary theoretical competitor, constructivism. The purpose of this chapter is to present and critique the constructivist approach, and thereby provide indirect support for alternative theories of mysticism (essentialist theories in particular). Constructivism has already been extensively critiqued in the philosophical literature on mysticism, and much of the content of this chapter reiterates previous work. Drawing upon the insights of diverse scholars, I consolidate the arguments against constructivism and in some cases, develop those arguments in new ways. Below I begin with an overview of the constructivist position, followed by a discussion of constructivism's inherent epistemological flaws and its failure to account for important aspects of the mystical data.

Constructivism: An Outline

Constructivism is marked by two core presuppositions. First, constructivists claim that there are no pure or unmediated experiences. From this perspective, mystical experiences, like all experiences, are in some way shaped, mediated, constructed, and/or created by the concepts, beliefs, and expectations brought to the experience by the mystic (concepts, etc. deriving from the mystic's culture and religious tradition). The second core constructivist claim stems directly from the first: all mystical experiences, because they are conditioned by different cultural and religious contexts, are necessarily phenomenologically different as well. There is no universal mystical experience.[1]

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[1] Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 63.

On these two points all constructivists seem to agree, even if they
disagree over certain (sometimes significant) details.

   The thesis that mystical experience is fundamentally constructed
is not new (Philip Almond traces it as far back as 1909 to the work
of Rufus Jones).[2] It was not until the 1970s, however, that con-
structivism began to assume its place as the view of mysticism most
endorsed by scholars. Well-known constructivists include Bruce Garside,
Wayne Proudfoot, Robert Gimello, and Hans Penner, but the con-
structivist scholar who has most "captured scholarly attention"[3] is
Steven T. Katz. As Almond puts it, "Katz . . . stands quite firmly as
the leading proponent of [constructivism]."[4] In particular, it is Katz's
essay "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism"[5] that has become
the quintessential statement of the constructivist position, provoking
an extraordinary number of responses by scholars, both for and
against. Regardless of the cogency of Katz's arguments, his work has
inspired more academic discussion of mysticism than that of any
other scholar. Because of Katz's importance, my presentation of the
constructivist position will be based primarily on three of his essays
on mysticism, supplemented by the sometimes diverging views of
other constructivists in order to give a more complete account of
the constructivist approach.

Constructivism as a priori

Constructivism encompasses—along with its specific epistemological
and substantive claims—a general methodological orientation to the
mystical data. Basic to this orientation is the claim to approach the
data without any strong biases or presuppositions.[6] Katz presents
himself as a neutral observer, simply letting the data speak for itself.[7]

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[2] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 163.
[3] Apczynski, "Mysticism and Epistemology," 193.
[4] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 164. See also Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism,
Constructivism, and Forgetting," 9; Bruce Janz, "Mysticism and Understanding:
Steven Katz and his Critics," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 24/1 (1995): 78.
[5] In Steven Katz, ed. *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1978): 22–74.
[6] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 65.
[7] Steven T. Katz, Huston Smith, and Sallie King, "On Mysticism," *Journal of the
American Academy of Religion* 56/4 (1988): 757; Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology,"
166.

Unlike essentialists and perennialists who rely on "*a priori* metaphysical and theological requirements," the constructivist approach is (according to Katz) data-based and open to disconfirmation.[8] When Katz remarks that he is "uncomfortable with the tendency . . . to substitute a priori and nondisconfirmable intuitions for reasoned, defendable theories or generalizations,"[9] he implies by contrast that his theories are in fact "reasoned" and "defensible." Hans Penner makes a similar point: "classical" scholars of mysticism simply interpreted mystical reports according to *a priori* concepts about the nature of mystical experience, as opposed to Penner himself who bases his conclusions on the data itself, i.e., the actual language of mystical reports.[10]

These claims notwithstanding, constructivism is itself based on an *a priori*, epistemological thesis. As Katz puts it, "*there are* NO *pure* (i.e. *unmediated*) *experiences*."[11] Katz thinks the mystical data supports this

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[8] Steven T. Katz, editor's introduction to *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1.

[9] Steven T. Katz, "Review Article: Recent Work on Mysticism," *History of Religions* 25 (1985–86): 79.

[10] Penner, "Mystical Illusion," 90–1. See also Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 86. Unlike other scholars, Gimello is the one doing the "sound scholarship."

[11] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26. See also Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 41; Katz, "Mystical Speech," 5; Penner, "Mystical Illusion," 89; Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?" 53. In "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" (30) Katz describes the idea of "raw" experience distinct from the interpretation of experience as "naïve." Elsewhere he admits such experience may be possible, though only at the most infantile, sensate level (a level which Katz apparently considers irrelevant to the content of mystical experience). (Katz, "Review Article," 77–8) For additional remarks on this issue, see my comments on Garside below (pp. 43–4).

Katz's rejection of "pure" experience is based on a more basic epistemological stand: experience reflects the reciprocal relation of set and setting, i.e., it arises through the interaction of an object (the 'setting') and the constraints inherent in the sensory and cognitive processing of that object (the 'set'). (Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 64) Katz does not use the terms 'set' and 'setting,' though they are consistent with his remarks in "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" (64). The terminology of 'set' and 'setting' is from Garside. See Bruce Garside, "Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 3 (1972): 93–4. See also Wainwright's comments on Garside in *Mysticism: A Study*, 18.

This more balanced epistemological claim (i.e., that experience is a product of both set and setting) plays almost no role in Katz's interpretation of mystical experience. His primary concern is to counter the tendency among some essentialist scholars to neglect the mediating role of a mystic's beliefs on her experience, and because of this concern his explanation of mystical experience becomes almost exclusively focused on 'set': what the mystic brings to experience as opposed to what the 'object' brings. Hence the reciprocal nature of experience is more or less ignored

claim.[12] But he presents the claim not as a conclusion based on the
data. Rather, the impossibility of unmediated experience is assumed
to be a self-evident fact, independent of the mystical data. According
to Katz, "in order to understand mysticism it is *not* just a question
of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but
of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in
which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings
to, and which shape, his experience."[13] Elsewhere Katz explains,

> the question I tried to answer was: 'Why are mystical experiences the
> experiences they are?' And in order to begin to answer this query, I
> adopted as a working hypothesis the epistemic thesis that there are *no*
> pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.[14]

In spite of Katz's use of the term "hypothesis," elsewhere he con-
siders his "epistemic thesis" a "fact" that "seems . . . true, because of
the sorts of beings we are."[15]

The *a priori* nature of Katz's epistemology becomes particularly
apparent whenever the data seem to contradict it. Regardless of what
the data may appear to indicate, they are always interpreted in such
a way that they confirm constructivist epistemology. In no instance
do the data ever challenge constructivist assumptions. As Almond
explains, "the advocate of the necessary truth of [constructivism] will
argue that the contents of [mystical] experiences *must* reflect some
incorporated interpretation," making constructivism immune to "empir-
ical falsification."[16] For example, mystics who claim to have had
"contentless" or "unconditioned" experiences in reality had "con-

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in favor of an epistemological emphasis on cultural/religious conditioning and the
impossibility of pure experience.
    [12] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 4; Gimello, "Mysticism
in its Contexts," 62. See Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a
Mistake?" 240; Richard H. Jones, *Mysticism Examined: Philosophical Inquiries into Mysticism*
(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 90.
    [13] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26.
    [14] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 4.
    [15] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26.
    [16] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 169. As Jones also points out, "it would, of course,
be circular for constructivists to argue that these reports must be false on the ground
that no experience in principle can be free of content. Such a ploy would be an
admission that the constructivist proposal is merely an *a priori* assumption and not
a conclusion from empirical research at all." (Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 9–10) Yet
this is in fact how constructivists argue, without admitting the *a priori* assumption
implicit in the approach.

tentful," thoroughly conditioned experiences;[17] mystical paths that claim to de-condition consciousness in reality only *re*condition it.[18] In other words, Katz, like those he criticizes, ignores the data when it suits him, based on an *a priori* presupposition.[19] Katz is "neutral" in one sense only: the non-discriminating way he applies his epistemological thesis to every mystical report.[20]

Katz, then, relies on *a priori* presuppositions as much as any essentialist. I emphasize this point not because presuppositions or *a priori* claims are necessarily problematic. To be able to interpret data at all requires them, and Katz notes (on two occasions at least) that his approach is defined by an interpretive framework.[21] The problem is Katz's condescending pretense to objectivity,[22] his failure to acknowledge that he is in the same 'hermeneutical boat' as everyone else. This failure is particularly ironic given the constructivist claim that all experience is mediated. Since Katz also rejects "assign[ing] percentages to mediation,"[23] his insistence that he is "more objective" than essentialist scholars appears nonsensical. Katz's interpretation of the mystical data—according to his own presuppositions—is just as mediated as the interpretation of any essentialist scholar.

Constructivism and the Phenomenological Content of Mystical Experience

Katz's approach to mysticism is intended to address one central problem: "why the various mystical experiences are the experiences they are."[24] In other words, his concern is to explain the phenomenological content of mystical experience, specifically, the causes of that

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[17] See Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 180.

[18] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 57. Katz's suspicion of such mystical reports is all the more peculiar given his "emphasis on the need for faithfulness to the mystical sources." Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 248.

[19] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 9; Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?" 53.

[20] See Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 182.

[21] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 65; Katz, "Mystical Speech," 4.

[22] Katz insists that "at some point reality must be allowed to count." (Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 754) Apparently, Katz is the scholar who does let "reality count" in the formulation of his theories, while essentialists distort the data due to the mediating influence of their own theological biases.

[23] Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 756.

[24] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 25.

content.[25] It is unclear whether he is also concerned with the cause(s) of the experience itself (why the experience occurs at all is a different issue than why it has a certain type of phenomenological content), or whether he even recognizes a distinction between these two issues (generative causation vs. phenomenological causation). Katz does mention "investigat[ing] . . . the specific conditions of religious/mystical experience"[26]—"conditions" that may be causal in the generative sense. If his intention is to explain the content *and* cause of mystical experiences,[27] it follows that he explains both in the same way (since his analysis of mysticism focuses exclusively on the mediating role of concepts).[28] In other words, doctrinal conditioning both causes a mystical experience to occur and simultaneously informs the content of that experience.

For Katz, explaining the content (and perhaps cause) of mystical experience begins by taking an epistemological stand: the emphatic denial of the possibility of unmediated experience. All experience, including mystical experience, is shaped, mediated, and even created by culturally defined concepts and expectations.[29] Mystical experience in particular is mediated not only by the concepts associated

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[25] Ibid., 40.

[26] Ibid., 32.

[27] Any theory of mysticism that does not address the cause of mystical experience has quite limited explanatory usefulness.

[28] Katz indicates that he does think mystical experiences have objects. Katz, however, never explains the occurrence or content of mystical experience with reference to an object, even though such an object would function as a causal factor in the generation and phenomenological shaping of a mystical experience. See pp. 54–60 below.

[29] Both Katz and Garside consider this view to be basically Kantian. See Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 757; Garside, "Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience," 94; Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 238. The claim is problematic given that Katz's "epistemology" can hardly be considered an epistemology at all. Epistemology (Kantian and otherwise) is concerned with knowledge. Katz, however, never seriously discusses mystical experiences as potential sources of knowledge.

Several scholars have questioned the Kantian influence on Katz in another sense. For Katz, mediating structures are not universally identical (as Kant would maintain) but culturally defined. (See King's remarks in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 760–1; J. William Forgie, "Hyper-Kantianism in Recent Discussions of Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 208, 215.) King considers Wittgenstein to be the primary inspiration for constructivist epistemology. (See King, "Two Epistemological Models," 259; Janz, "Mysticism and Understanding," 82.) For more on the historical/philosophical roots of Katz's epistemology, see Donald H. Bishop, ed. *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience. East and West* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 26.

with the general culture, but also by the doctrines of a religious/mystical
tradition, which both inform the phenomenological content of mys-
tical experience and set "structured and limiting parameters on what
the experience will be[,] . . . rul[ing] out in advance what is 'inex-
perienceable' in the particular, given, concrete context."[30] Constructivists
also emphasize the importance of mystical practice in shaping/medi-
ating mystical experience.[31] Of course, no one disputes that the occur-
rence and content of mystical experience is in some way dependent
on mystical practice. The question is: *how* is it dependent? From the
constructivist perspective, practice shapes mystical experience in the
same way that beliefs shape the experience: not by bringing about
any kind of cognitive transformation or de-conditioning of con-
sciousness, but by shaping experiential content or reinforcing the
mediating effects of beliefs.[32]

What marks the constructivist thesis is not so much the idea of
mediation itself. Essentialists would agree that ordinary experience is
pervasively conditioned and mediated. Most would agree with John
Hick's assertion that "the mind's own positive contribution to the
character of its perceived environment . . . has been massively con-
firmed as an empirical thesis by modern work in cognitive and social

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Michael Stoeber has formulated a more sophisticated constructivist epistemology
that he calls "experiential constructivism." According to Stoeber, mystical experi-
ences are shaped by the mystic's concepts, but these concepts are not exclusively
formed through the conditioning influence of the mystic's cultural and religious con-
text. Rather, these concepts are formed through the reciprocal interaction of con-
text and information gained through encounter with the Real. Mediating concepts,
then, construct an experience that expresses to varying degrees the combined influence
of the mystic's own tradition and actual apprehension of the Real. (Stoeber, *Theo-
Monistic Mysticism*, 16, 39) To my knowledge, the value of Stoeber's more nuanced
constructivist epistemology has yet to be appreciated within the philosophical dis-
course on mysticism.

[30] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 5. See also Ibid., 40;
Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26; Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious
Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 121.

[31] See Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 63–4.

[32] Ibid., 66–7. Katz would agree, though neither Gimello nor Katz is entirely
consistent or clear on this issue. For example, Gimello's discussion of Abhidharma
and the depersonalization of consciousness would seem to assert real, cognitive trans-
formation (not just shuffling phenomenological content). (Ibid., 74–5) Certain com-
ments in Katz's "Mystical Speech" also seem to indicate that he may have softened
his position over time, in the sense that he considers Zen meditation and the Zen
koan to in some way open and transform consciousness. (Katz, "Mystical Speech," 6)
But since Katz does not develop these comments it is difficult to know exactly what
he means by them. What is clear is that he never presents later views as a change
or revision of earlier claims.

psychology and in the sociology of knowledge."[33] Likewise, few would argue with Katz's claim that "pre-experiential conditioning effects the nature of the experience one actually has,"[34] at least with regard to most mystical experiences. What is significant—and for essentialists, controversial—is the claim that *all* mystical experiences are mediated, based on the view that mystical experience is in no significant way different from ordinary experience. For constructivists, the same epistemological constraints apply to both ordinary and mystical experience,[35] and in fact have to apply to both since (according to at least some constructivists) the very possibility of intelligible experience requires mediation.[36]

Katz's understanding of mediation is not only presented in terms of cultural/religious conditioning. Mystical experience also depends on the "synthetic operations of the mind" which "are in fact the fundamental conditions under which, and under which alone, mystical experience, as all experience, takes place. These constructive conditions of consciousness produce the grounds on which mystical experience is possible at all."[37] Unfortunately, what Katz means by these statements is never elaborated or clarified. Are these "synthetic operations of the mind" simply the medium through which culture is able to influence experience? Are they Kant's *a priori* categories of the mind? Or is Katz referring to the mediation of experience through the innate and universal cognitive processes and capacities posited by cognitive science? Katz may mean all of the above, though he emphasizes cultural/religious conditioning and seems to ignore the universal forms of conditioning posited by Kantian epistemology and cognitive science. This emphasis is consistent with the constructivist thesis of mystical heterogeneity. Both Kant and cognitive science affirm the mediated nature of experience, but they also claim that at least some aspects or levels of cognitive processing are uni-

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[33] Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 240.

[34] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 35.

[35] Peter Moore, "Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 108. See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 11–12.

[36] See Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 59. Gimello goes so far as to claim that were mystical experience stripped of all conceptual mediating factors it "would be mere hedonic tone, a pattern of psychosomatic or neural impulses signifying nothing." Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 62.

[37] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 62–3.

versal. From this perspective, mediation does not necessarily imply that mystical experiences from different traditions are phenomenologically distinct. The universality of certain mediating factors supports instead the possibility of identical mystical experiences (or aspect of experience) across traditions.[38] Since this is not Katz's position, his understanding of cognitive processes would seem wholly subsumed to the influence of culture and tradition. As Katz puts it,

> as a result of . . . intellectual acculturation in its broadest sense, the mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols, and values which shape as well as colour the experience he eventually and actually has.[39]

In contrast to Katz who presents mediation as an unchanging, self-evident fact, Bruce Garside presents a slightly more nuanced form of constructivism. Garside argues that mediation varies depending on attention: the further we move way from raw sensation the greater the role concepts play in shaping experience.[40] Since he assumes that mystical experience represents a particularly abstract form of experience—a form of experience "about as far removed from the ordinary perception of physical objects as possible"—it follows that concepts would then play the maximum role in shaping its content.[41] I would tend to agree with the epistemological premise that the more abstracted experience is the more subject it is to conceptual construction.[42] The problem is where Garside locates mystical experience on this spectrum. Whether it is introvertive or extrovertive, at least some types of mystical experience are radical states of 'being present' that negate (to greater or lesser degrees depending on the experience) the mediating influence of conceptual construction. Garside does acknowledge this as a possibility—specifically, the view that mystical experience is a form of regressive, primitive, or "child-like" experience[43]—but considers it untenable because "it does violence to

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[38] For an extended discussion of this point, see Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," 661ff.

[39] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 46.

[40] Garside, "Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience," 94.

[41] Ibid.

[42] I argue in the next chapter that this may be one reason human beings spend so much time in daydream-like states—it is much easier in such states to shape the mind's internal narrative to match fantasies, desires and self-image than it is to make change in the real world 'out there.' See pp. 118–9 below.

[43] Garside, "Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience," 94–5.

the usual descriptions of mystical experience" and because "it is
impossible to perceive the world directly with no intervention of an
interpretive framework."[44] Both points are weaker than Garside sup-
poses. States of non-conceptual presence may indeed "do violence"
to many descriptions of mystical experiences (e.g., visionary experi-
ences). But at the same time, such states have psychological and epis-
temic significance that Garside fails to appreciate (as indicated by
terms like "primitive" and "child-like"). This significance means that
unmediated sensory experiences or contentless, introvertive experi-
ences may constitute types of mystical experiences. Regarding Garside's
second point, he is correct: perceiving a "world" does require an
interpretive framework since it is the framework that constructs the
perception. But this does not necessarily entail that meaningful, direct
perception is impossible. There may exist non-conceptual dimensions
of meaning, accessible through unmediated experience, that are in
fact much richer than the constructed perception of "things" in a
"world." Garside makes the additional point that "regressive expe-
rience [in adults] is itself highly socialized experience."[45] Again, this
may be true, but it does not negate the possibility that non-con-
ceptual experience has epistemic potential.

Regardless of exactly how constructivism is presented, the idea
that culture and tradition mediate experience naturally entails that
the meaning of mysticism is fundamentally defined by context.[46] Not
only is there nothing cognitively unique about mysticism, there is
nothing unique about mysticism in its relation to broader religious
traditions. As Robert Gimello puts it, mysticism does not represent
an "autonomous and self-contained realm of human experience . . .
essentially separate from the contexts of culture, history, tradition,
and discipline" and "possessed of its own independent rules, values,
and truths."[47] Rather, it is an essentially "conservative" phenomenon,
confirming tradition rather than challenging it. In order to under-

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[44] Ibid., 95.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 84. Penner's interpretation of Indian
mysticism in the context of caste is a good illustration of the approach. See Penner,
"Mystical Illusion," 89–116.

[47] Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 61. See also Ibid., 85–6; Penner, "Mystical
Illusion," 97ff. For opposing views see Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, xxiii, 4, 173, 189;
Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 140; Parviz Morewedge, "Critical Observations on Some
Philosophies of Mysticism," *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion* 7 (1976): 409.

stand mystical experiences, then, constructivists focus on the "content of the beliefs and the expectations" brought to the experience[48] and the historical and cultural context of those beliefs and expectations that determine their meaning.[49] The conservative nature of mysticism in turn confirms the constructivist thesis of mystical heterogeneity. If mystical experience is constructed according to religious traditions that are different, the phenomenological content of those experiences will necessarily be different as well.[50] As Gimello puts it, there is no "essential sameness of mysticism."[51]

Mystical Experience and Mystical Language

Both essentialist and constructivist approaches to mysticism entail distinct positions on the relationship of mystical language to mystical experience. Both positions manifest the circularity of our hermenuetical situation: certain presuppositions establish a specific view on the meaning of language, and then language (in this case, the language of mystical texts) is interpreted to confirm the presuppositions. According to essentialists, mystical experience transcends language and concepts; mystical experience is fundamentally ineffable, and so the relationship between mystical language and mystical experience is contingent. From the essentialist perspective, this gap between language and experience has to be taken into account when using mystical reports as data for drawing conclusions about the phenomenological content of mystical experiences—mystical utterances cannot be construed as literal description. Some essentialists (e.g., W.T. Stace and Ninian Smart) have also emphasized the role of interpretation after the mystical experience, influencing the mystical report and so distorting it as an indicator of the experience's phenomenological content.

Constructivists take a different approach to mystical language. Katz's claim that experience is fundamentally shaped by language/doctrine means that expressing the nature of the experience with language is

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[48] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 121.
[49] See Rothberg's comments on Proudfoot in Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 188–9.
[50] Garside, "Language and the Interpretation of Mystical Experience," 99; Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 40. Forman calls this the "pluralism thesis." See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 10.
[51] Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 61.

unproblematic.[52] While Katz does accept (following Smart) that post-experience interpretation occurs,[53] he considers it negligible. For Katz, mystical experience is constituted by cultural/religious interpretive frameworks—interpretation is intrinsic to the experience rather than following after it. And since mystical experience is constructed by language, there is nothing problematic about language describing it. Mystical reports may be taken as more or less literal description of experiential content. The various terms used by traditions to designate ultimate reality are not mere labels for what is actually an identical experience or object. Rather, such terms imply specific philosophical commitments that inhere in the experience itself.[54] For the constructivist, mystical language usually means just what it says.[55]

This view of mystical language entails that any attempt to distinguish experience from interpretation or to identify a "pure experience" behind mystical language is misguided.[56] It is also one of the foundations for the thesis of mystical heterogeneity. Since mystical reports are reliable indicators of the phenomenological content of mystical experience, differences among mystical reports are reliable evidence for corresponding differences among mystical experiences.

Katz does make two exceptions to his literalist approach to mystical language. First, Katz emphasizes that similar-sounding language from different traditions does not necessarily signify any real similarity. Terms may appear to mean the same thing (especially in translation) while in their original contexts have quite different meanings.[57] Second,

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[52] The circularity here is acute: the language of a mystical report is used as the 'data' to prove a point of view, but the validity of the point of view has already been assumed in order to interpret the language in such a way as to support the point of view. However, my critique of Katz is not aimed at this circularity. As I have indicated above, it would seem to be intrinsic to human knowing. Regarding circularity, the only point where Katz deserves censure is his refusal to acknowledge it in his own approach.

[53] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 23, 26.

[54] Ibid., 56.

[55] Moore, "Mystical Experience," 102–7. See Davis, review of *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 332. This account of Katz's approach to the interpretation of mystical language is based on an examination of Katz's actual analysis of mystical reports, and not necessarily on what he perceives his methodology to be. Katz insists that he does not reduce experience to doctrine. (See, for example, Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 756–7.) On the other hand, his analyses of the content of mystical experiences reflect a straightforward identification of experience and the language of mystical reports. For additional remarks on this topic, see pp. 49–51 below.

[56] See Katz's comments on Stace in Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 28.

[57] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 52.

Katz points out that some of the language used to describe mystical experience is in fact not descriptive at all. Saying that a mystical experience is ineffable and paradoxical reveals nothing about the phenomenological content of experience—phenomenologically different experiences can be equally "described" as ineffable and paradoxical. Furthermore, ineffability (if interpreted in the strong sense) makes describing and comparing mystical experiences impossible.[58]

Both points are valid, but they may not be as strong as Katz thinks. Though it is true that the appearance of similarity may be misleading, similarities in mystical language occur far too often for them to be entirely without significance. In addition, as Peter Byrne points out, "if we have a priori reasons for thinking there could be an identity of reference between theories or traditions, such similarities could be very significant indeed and cannot be so easily set aside."[59] For example, one might posit an "identity of reference" based on the logical impossibility of multiple 'Ultimate Realities.' Furthermore, if mystics in different traditions perform similar types of practices and have similar types of values and then describe their experiences as "ineffable," it seems reasonable to conclude that "ineffability" may indicate some degree of phenomenological similarity. Finally, Katz's suspicion of similar-sounding language and his warning not to mistake non-phenomenological terms for phenomenological description, while valid in themselves, have methodologically problematic implications. For Katz, when language indicates phenomenological difference, it may be interpreted literally. On the other hand, when it indicates similarity he suddenly assumes a hermeneutically suspicious stance. Though this suspicion may be justified in some cases, what Katz effectively does is establish an approach that allows him to always interpret the data to confirm his constructivist presuppositions.

Katz's approach to mystical language becomes somewhat more sophisticated in his later work on mysticism. In contrast to his earlier essays, in "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning" he takes a less literal approach to mystical language. According to Katz, "the psychometaphysics of meditation . . . [is] not overtly linguistic."[60]

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[58] Ibid., 55.
[59] Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 243.
[60] Katz, "Mystical Speech," 9.

Elsewhere he states that the transcendence of words is possible.[61]
Katz also seems to acknowledge the soteriological (as opposed to
descriptive) use of language in mystical contexts.[62] As he points out,
language may be used as a means to critique language itself[63] as
well as to transform consciousness. According to Katz,

> much classical mystical language and many mystical linguistic forms
> have other purposes [than referential], an essential one being the trans-
> formation of consciousness. . . . It is the ability of language to induce
> 'breakthroughs' of consciousness by being employed 'nonsensically' . . . that
> is fundamental to the traversal of the mystical path, to the movement
> from consciousness A to consciousness B.[64]

Katz goes on to claim that through such transformative use of lan-
guage new forms of "knowing and being" are created, "enabling
[mystics] to understand/experience that which presently transcends
[their] understanding/experience."[65]

Katz's later views on mystical language seem to represent a
significant departure from his earlier, literalist approach: not only is
mystical language more than descriptive, it may also serve a soteri-
ological function by effecting a qualitative shift in consciousness. From
Katz's perspective, however, neither point in any way undermines
the constructivist thesis. When Katz states that the transcendence of
words is possible,[66] he is careful to emphasize that such a state is
only achieved through words.[67] For Katz, this qualification implies
a straightforward confirmation of the constructivist thesis—an erro-
neous conclusion on Katz's part since the assertion that language is
involved in the creation of mystical experience (without further expla-
nation of what that means) neither confirms nor contradicts con-
structivism. The issue at stake is the nature of the experience itself.
A "non-linguistic" mystical experience would necessarily represent an
unexplained anomaly and contradiction in the constructivist approach,
regardless of whether it is caused by words or not caused by words.

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[61] Ibid., 10.
[62] Ibid., 7.
[63] As Katz explains, mystical language in certain contexts "corrects the errors of
propositional and descriptive language that lead the mind to false ontic commit-
ments." Katz, "Mystical Speech," 6.
[64] Katz, "Mystical Speech," 6, 7. See also 8.
[65] Katz, "Mystical Speech," 8.
[66] Ibid., 10.
[67] Ibid., 9–10.

Katz's remarks on the transformative power of language are also misleading. Language may help transform consciousness from "consciousness A" to "consciousness B," but Katz does not consider there to be any fundamental difference (other than phenomenological content) between these two states. Katz emphasizes that even nonsensical mystical language communicates implicit doctrinal positions that condition and mediate consciousness[68] while reiterating his view that all experience is mediated.[69] In other words, there is no significant departure from the constructivist thesis. Appearances notwithstanding, Katz rejects the possibility of fundamentally transformed experience. Katz's discussion of the soteriological use of language and transformation is simply a more nuanced elaboration of his constructivist epistemology.

In general, Katz's understanding of the relationship between language/doctrine and experience is weak. Three issues are at stake: (1) the extent to which language is able to express the content of an experience; (2) the extent to which language creates the phenomenological content of mystical experience; and (3) the extent to which language causes mystical experiences to occur. Below I address each topic in turn.

Katz's literalist approach to the meaning of mystical language has been extensively critiqued by Sallie King. King attempts to show that essentialists are right: there is a wide gap between the phenomenological content of mystical experience and the terms used to label or describe that experience. Her argument is based on two points: (1) in the context of ordinary experience, words can not begin to exhaust the phenomenological richness of experience;[70] and (2) "the mystics *themselves* distinguish between their experiences and their accounts of their experiences, and report dissatisfaction with the adequacy and accuracy of those accounts."[71] From this perspective, Katz's interpretation of mystical experience (as contextually constructed) is fundamentally flawed because it is based on a literal reading of the mystical report. Such a reading conflates experience and doctrine to the point where experience becomes indistinguishable from doctrine.[72] As King puts it, Katz

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[68] Ibid., 6.
[69] Ibid., 5.
[70] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 265–6. See Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 149.
[71] King in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 761.
[72] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 260, 269.

effectively empties experience of all content which does not simply
reproduce what is given in the doctrine of the mystic's tradition. Hence,
while [Katz acknowledges that] an experience does occur, its content
would be non-differentiable from received doctrinal teachings. In this
sense, the content of the experience reduces to those teachings.[73]

Katz emphatically denies the charge, insisting that he does "not
reduce . . . [mystical] experience to doctrine."[74] To support this claim
he explains that his analysis is based on the concept of *mediation*. In
other words, the phenomenological content of a mystical experience
is informed by information communicated to the experiencer through
an encounter with an object. If this is indeed Katz's view, then King
must be mistaken—he does not reduce experience to doctrine.[75]
King's critique, however, is based on Katz's actual methodological
performance, and Katz's claims notwithstanding, he does approach
mystical statements as straightforward description.[76] His analyses of
the content of mystical experiences consistently reflect an identification
of experience and the language of mystical reports. He draws con-
clusions about mystical experience based on mystical language as if
there is an unproblematic correspondence between language and
experience. Mystical language presents no particular hermeneutical
problem for Katz; there is no need to qualify the meaning of mys-
tical language or consider (in most cases) any meaning beyond the
literal. As King points out, Katz approaches "mystical language as
if the latter were plainly literal and referential despite the continual
insistence of mystics that they have difficulty expressing themselves."[77]

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[73] King in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 760.

[74] Katz, in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 755. See also 756–7.

[75] In Katz's direct rebuttal to King (explaining what he means by "mediation"),
he states: "in a sophisticated way I acknowledge the rich and fecund mixture of
tradition and experience in experience." (Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism,"
755) Rephrased, he is saying that mystical experience is a mixture of tradition and
experience—in other words (eliminating the statement's redundancy), mystical expe-
rience is tradition. Given that Katz's explanation confirms King's critique, I assume
this is not what Katz means to say. As discussed below (pp. 55–6), other remarks
by Katz indicate that for him mystical experience is mediated in the sense that it
combines the influences of concepts derived from a tradition and the apprehension
of an object(s).

[76] This is clearly demonstrated in Katz's "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism"
and "The "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience." (See, for example,
p. 6 of the latter essay. See also King, "Two Epistemological Models," 267ff.;
Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, 5, n. 13.) As noted above, in Katz's more
recent essay "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," he does acknowledge the
diverse ways language can be used in mystical contexts, though his basic approach
to mystical language remains unchanged.

[77] King in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 761.

Furthermore, Katz considers any attempt to distinguish theory and experience naïve.[78] Apparently Katz thinks there is nothing about experience that exceeds the conditioning influence of linguistically-defined theory. As I have noted above, Katz does recognize that mystical language may have functions other than referential, but he does not present this view as a departure or revision of the literalist approach to mystical language that dominates his analyses.

Katz's approach to mystical language seems to represent a reaction against the emphasis of some scholars on ineffability. Katz notes that to consider mystical language ineffable (in the strong sense) renders any discussion of mystical experience based on mystical reports impossible. He reasonably rejects this view, asserting that mystical language does mean something. However, given what mystics themselves say about the inadequacy of language to express their experiences, the meaning of mystical language and its correspondence with experience must still be considered problematic. Even though mystical language means something, a simple, literalist approach to interpreting it is inadequate.

King's critique, then, is valid. Regardless of what Katz may claim, his actual approach reflects a denial of the gap between language and experience, a reduction of experience to language, and therefore an inadequate understanding of the nature of mystical experience. On the other hand, her critique fails in the sense that it does not significantly undermine the thesis of mystical heterogeneity. For King, the ineffability of mystical experience means that differing mystical reports, by themselves, prove nothing regarding the phenomenological differences between mystical experiences. In other words, different reports can point to an identical experience. This argument, however, is inadequate because mystical experiences are not ineffable in the strong sense. It *is* possible to use language to make intelligible distinctions between different mystical experiences and between mystical experience and ordinary experience based on analogous qualities between ordinary experience and mystical experience. So, even though there is no way for me to comprehend the bliss experienced by a mystic, I nevertheless know that her experience is nothing like tasting gasoline. In other words, mystical language is meaningful enough to show that experiences are different.

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[78] Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 755.

King admits that mystical reports do "convey certain amounts of information" about the experience, but insists that "what is said is radically inadequate."[79] I agree—but not so inadequate that the thesis of phenomenological heterogeneity can be questioned, at least with regard to the vast majority of mystical experiences. Granted that mystical experience is to some degree ineffable, it is still methodologically sounder to assume that mystics mean what they say, barring some compelling reason to think otherwise. Of course, various arguments have been raised to justify thinking otherwise,[80] and though these reasons have merit, they would not seem strong enough to justify a radical revision of the mystics' own testimony. To the extent, then, that demonstrating the phenomenological diversity of mystical experiences is Katz's intent (and to a large degree it is), his view of language and experience is adequate. On the other hand, mystical experience *is* ineffable in the weak sense, which means that the relationship between mystical experience and mystical language is more problematic than Katz allows. If experience cannot be reduced to training, conditioning, and context, then it is incumbent on Katz "to recognize the aspects of experience which are unmediated by such factors as language and doctrine."[81] But as King notes, "this Katz does not do: instead he writes as if an account of mediated aspects of experience is a sufficient and adequate accounting of experience as such, in its fullness."[82] His conflation of language and experience renders inadequate his analysis of the content of mystical experiences in a general sense.

The relationship between mystical language and mystical experience raises another issue (the second in the list above): can language create (or even significantly inform) the phenomenological content of mystical experiences? Katz would say yes, but here the gap between language and experience does make his position problematic. The incommensurability of language and experience not only means that language cannot express an experience, it also means that language (or any linguistic construction, such as a doctrine) cannot, by itself, provide the substance of phenomenological experience. As King points out, no matter how much I might learn about coffee, it will never

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[79] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 264. See also 267.
[80] See Appendix B, p. 256.
[81] King in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 760.
[82] Ibid.

give me the experience of tasting it. Since "what is said [about mystical experience] is radically inadequate . . . it is impossible for the tradition . . . to produce or cause the experience in its fullness."[83] The only way to have the experience is to encounter the object. Mediation may still play a role, but it is relatively insignificant given the full richness of immediate phenomenological experience.[84]

A third issue raised by the relationship between mystical language and experience concerns the capacity of language (primarily in the form of mystical doctrine) to cause mystical experiences. Robert Forman describes a form of constructivism he calls "causal constructivism"—the claim that mystical language (as doctrine) not only shapes the phenomenological content of mystical experiences but also causes the experiences to occur.[85] As noted above, it is unclear whether Katz's constructivism includes this causal constructivist thesis (though Gimello does seem to advocate it). If it does, the thesis is clearly contradicted by the data: many learn the linguistic, conceptual systems of their religious/mystical traditions and may deeply study such systems their entire lives yet never become mystics. William Wainwright and Robert Forman (following Wainwright) have also emphasized the logical fallacy of assuming that the congruency between mystical language and mystical experience means that language causes mystical experience. Forman cites Wainwright's analogy to illustrate the point: because French and Eskimo cultures are different,

> probably their gastrointestinal experiences will differ. Probably, too, their expectations about those feelings and sensations will be highly correlatable with their cultures. But that does not mean that either their culture or their expectations *caused* those experiences.[86]

While it is clear that language by itself does not cause mystical experiences to occur, I would argue that language (along with other aspects of mystical paths and traditions) does play an important role in generating mystical experience. However, the claim that language or doctrine helps cause an experience has nothing to do with whether or not it phenomenologically informs that experience. Mystical traditions may emphasize doctrine because of its potential to bring

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[83] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 264–5.
[84] Ibid., 265.
[85] Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 42–3.
[86] Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 19.

about real cognitive transformation, which may be associated with an experience that wholly transcends doctrine itself. Forman makes a similar point when he remarks that "the generative problems and meditative techniques may serve as a catalyst for the experience but not play an epistemologically heavy role in shaping its actual character."[87] For example, the role of discourse in promoting or shaping mystical experience may be less about providing phenomenological content and more about shaping a certain existential stance toward life (such as detachment) that helps transform consciousness. If this is the case, constructivist assertions of mystical heterogeneity are undermined, since at this existential level it is certainly possible that different doctrines can have similar transformative effects. Contemplating the First Noble Truth and devoting oneself to a transcendent God may equally encourage an attitude of withdrawal and detachment from the world with similar cognitive repercussions.

Constructivists spend a good deal of time trying to show, as Gimello puts it, that there is a "deep and necessary connection between discourse and experience,"[88] apparently assuming that demonstrating such a relationship proves the constructivist thesis, either by constructing the phenomenological content of mystical experience or by causing such a phenomenologically-constructed experience to occur. This is an unwarranted assumption, however, given the incommensurability of language and experience and the fact that the causal relationship between language and experience may have nothing to do with constructing an experience's phenomenological content.

Constructivism and the 'Object' of Mystical Experience

What is the constructivist position on the object of mystical experience? Katz's almost exclusive emphasis on cultural/religious context to explain the phenomenological content of mystical experience would seem to imply that for him there is no object. As Anthony Perovich puts it,

> to whatever extent the intellectual structure of the religious tradition is depicted as the source of experiential content, to that degree the

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[87] Ibid., 14.
[88] Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 77. See also 64–79.

notion of an independent 'given' that requires shaping and structur-
ing (in different ways by different conceptual frameworks) is rendered
vacuous.[89]

Appearances notwithstanding, Katz does think mystical experiences
have objects.[90] For Katz, experiential construction is synonymous
with experiential mediation.[91] The claim that experience is mediated
implies the existence of an external object—something 'out there'
being mediated. Various remarks by Katz confirm this impression,[92]
particularly his discussion of Manet's misperception of a cathedral
arch (seeing it as Gothic rather than Romanesque) due to the medi-
ating effects of concepts and expectations.[93] In this example, Manet
encounters a real object, however distorted his perception of that
object might be.[94] In addition, Katz makes it clear that he does not
consider mystical claims reducible to "mumbo-jumbo . . . given the
wide variety of such claims by men of genius and/or intense reli-
gious sensitivity over the centuries as well as across all cultural divi-
sions."[95] Katz therefore rejects the reduction of "these multiple and
variegated claims to mere projected 'psychological states.'"[96] As Katz
remarks in one of his later essays,

> to engage scripture, as the mystical adept engages it, is not only to
> participate in an intense dialogue with texts but also, and far more
> important, to reach out to, and sometimes even to feel and to
> touch . . . those powers that lie at their origin.[97]

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[89] Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 243.
[90] Or as Forman would put it, he is an "incomplete constructivist" rather than
"complete constructivist." See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism,
and Forgetting," 13.
[91] Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 754.
[92] See Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 4, 16; Katz,
"Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 23, 59, 64. See also Perovich, "Does
the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 241; Jerry H. Gill, "Mysticism
and Mediation," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 114.
[93] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 30.
[94] This implies an objective frame of reference by which different experiences
can be adjudicated as more or less veridical. Such adjudication, however, would
seem to contradict Katz's constructivist thesis, i.e., if all experience is mediated,
who is in a position to be objective? See my remarks on pp. 71–2 below.
[95] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 23.
[96] Ibid. See also Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 753.
[97] Steven T. Katz, "Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," in
Mysticism and Sacred Scripture, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press,
2000), 57.

Katz states that "*models* . . . contribute heavily to the . . . *creation* of experience."[98] While this places strong emphasis on the role of conceptual models in constructing experience, it simultaneously implies that experience is not entirely reducible to models. Concepts create the content of experience in conjunction with something external to the experiencer.

If mystical experience is not hallucinatory—if mystics are experiencing something—this raises an obvious question: *what* are they experiencing? For Katz, mediation logically suggests a direct relationship between mystical language and the phenomenological content of experience. The phenomenological content of an experience of Brahman is *not* the same thing as the experience of God. On the other hand, mediation also suggests that the experience of the object is distorted. In Katz's Manet example, mediating concepts distort perception of what is really there. The implication is that the perceived object does not necessarily correspond with the actual object. This in turn admits the possibility that phenomenologically different experiences could refer to the same object (this is Hick's position). In other words, constructivism is compatible with epistemological essentialism (as well as mystical pluralism). Furthermore, the nature of mystical claims encourages such a conclusion (assuming we want to avoid considering mystics delusional). As Peter Byrne explains, if mystical reports are at all accurate regarding the nature of the ultimate "objects" encountered, "there is no conceptual room for these varying experiences to yield knowledge of *different* objects." Byrne elaborates by pointing out that "if anything remotely answers to the essential characteristics of Brahman/Atman, it could not exist alongside anything remotely answering to Eckhart's description of . . . God."[99] Katz's constructivism, while it denies the possibility of phenomenological commonality, potentially supports epistemological essentialism.

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[98] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 51. See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 15; Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 258.

[99] Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 241. See also Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 249; Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," 6–7; Hendrik M. Vroom, "Do All Religious Traditions Worship the same God?" *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 85; R.L. Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation in Mysticism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 293; Karel Werner, "On Unity and Diversity in the Interpretation of Mysticism," review of *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, by Steven T. Katz, ed., In *Religious Traditions* 4/1 (1981): 71.

Katz seems to admit this as a possibility, but points out that epistemological essentialism still requires that mystical experiences share some common, phenomenological characteristics.[100] And since Katz argues that there is no shared content, he takes the position that mystics are likely experiencing different objects (the only other option is that mystical experience is hallucination, a position Katz rejects).[101] The ultimacy of mystical claims makes this position somewhat problematic. As Hick points out, "there cannot be a plurality of ultimates."[102] Perhaps Katz would argue that mystics—though they experience something—do not experience *the* Ultimate. At most, mystics may be experiencing different aspects of the ultimately Real. Again, the issue at stake in terms of resolving this question is how different or similar mystical experiences actually are: an open question, in spite of Katz's claims to the contrary. As discussed below, many scholars see significant similarities among mystical experiences (enough to justify epistemological essentialism and mystical pluralism). However, since Katz maintains there are no phenomenological commonalities among mystical experiences, he must infer a multiplicity of mystical objects.[103]

Regardless of whether mystical experiences have one object or many, if mystics are experiencing something it necessarily follows that explaining the content of the experience requires some attention to the nature of that 'something.' As Katz points out,

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[100] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 52.

[101] Ibid., 50, 52. See also Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation in Mysticism," 292.

[102] Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 249.

[103] When Katz makes the argument that mystics are experiencing different objects ("Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 52), his interpretation of mystical reports is purely literal. Not only does the mystic's language directly correspond with the phenomenological content of experience, it corresponds with the object. Yet according to Katz, concepts mediate and distort the experience of the object. This mediation is not weak or negligible: concepts play a strong, active role in the construction of mystical experience. This strong constructivist thesis should render any claims about the nature of the object based on (constructed/mediated) experience much more problematic than Katz recognizes. In general, the thesis that there is a strong correspondence between the phenomenological content of an experience and a linguistic report about that experience (because the experience is mediated by language) is inconsistent with the claim that it is possible to draw definite conclusions about the object of experience based either on the content of experience or language about experience. This line of reasoning supports arguments for the unknowability of the noumenal Real.

students of mysticism have to recognize that mystical experience is not (putatively) solely the product of the conditioned act of experience as constituted from the side of the experiencer, but is also constituted and conditioned by what the *object* or 'state of affairs' is that the mystic (believes he) 'encounters' or experiences.[104]

This would seem particularly important given that context may be only "partially . . . regulative and determinative of the content of the experience."[105] Katz, however, does not follow through with his own recommendation. His specific accounts of mystical experiences always explain the content of those experiences through reference to the conditioning influence of particular traditions.[106] As Katz himself admits, "we have concentrated on the active role of the knowing self."[107] When he does finally address the question of the object, his brief discussion amounts to little more than a reassertion of his thesis—he simply reiterates that there is an object, but that it is constituted according to prior concepts and expectations.[108] In other words, he entirely avoids the issue of how the object might inform the phenomenological content of mystical experience.[109] Katz, then, admits that mystical experiences have objects that contribute to the content of the experience but fails to address what that contribution is.

This methodological blind spot seems to stem from Katz's attempt to simultaneously honor mystics and assert that their experiences are mediated/distorted[110] (which, from the perspective of at least some mystics, would invalidate their own claims concerning the nature of their experiences,[111] in particular, the claim that those experiences reflect actual contact with Reality). Katz wants to straddle the fence, so to speak, and the result (at least in terms of logical consistency) is worse than if he took a definite position on the epistemic status

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[104] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 64.

[105] Ibid., 65.

[106] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 263.

[107] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 64.

[108] Ibid., 64–5.

[109] See Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?" 58.

[110] Penner seems to do much the same, reducing the meaning of mysticism to purely contextual factors yet at the same asserting that mystical claims are not necessarily "unreal or illusory." Penner, "Mystical Illusion," 89.

[111] As King puts it, "the assumption that there are no unmediated experiences . . . negates the very foundation of yoga, most of Buddhism, large segments of Hinduism, and philosophical Taoism." King, "Two Epistemological Models," 263.

of mystical experience: either mystics are really experiencing something(s) (and so we must incorporate a non-constructivist perspective in the interpretation of their experiences) or they are not, in which case their experiences can legitimately be reduced to some other level of explanation (such as pure mental construction) without creating conflict with other premises. Hence, other constructivist scholars who make no pretense to validate mystics and consider mystical experience to be hallucinatory present a more coherent form of constructivism than Katz.[112] This would seem to be Gimello's approach when he describes mystical experience as nothing more than the intensification of a concept to the point of "vivid and immediate experience"[113] or "the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values."[114] A similar view is echoed by Penner, who reduces the meaning of mystical experience to sociolinguistic, contextual factors.[115] According to Penner,

> mystical languages cannot be thought of as referring to the same Reality because Reality is relative to a language system. Different mystical languages, therefore, represent or express different mystical worlds.[116]

In other words, the content of the mystic's experience does not refer to a real object or even distorted experience of a real object. It is

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[112] Forman refers to this as "complete constructivism." (Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 13) By describing this form of constructivism as "more coherent," I am specifically referring to the internal consistency of its propositions. No form of constructivism—"complete" or otherwise—is coherent in relation to the mystical data.

[113] Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 66.

[114] Ibid., 85. Paradoxically, Gimello also claims that mystics arrive at "new knowledge," that in some way goes beyond an "intellectual understanding of religious doctrine," although he then asserts this knowledge always confirms the mystic's belief system. (Ibid., 62–3; see also 75–6) It is difficult to make sense of these statements in light of Gimello's other views, but it would seem that this kind of reasoning reflects the similar tendency in Katz to want to avoid dismissing mystical experience as mere hallucination yet at the same time constructing a theory in which mystical experience becomes little more than hallucination.

Gimello's specific claim that mystical experience is "the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values" (Ibid., 85) seems to be specifically contradicted by certain findings in cognitive science (at least in the case of visionary mystical experience). According to Daniel Dennett, the brain simply does not have the information processing capacity to sustain any type of hallucination beyond the most rudimentary, suggesting that visionary experiences like those of Suso can only occur in relation to an encountered object. See Daniel Clement Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), 3ff.

[115] Penner, "Mystical Illusion," 89.

[116] Ibid., 93.

the pure construction of a linguistic system.[117] While I would argue that such reductionism is untenable given the data, in some ways it is less problematic than Katz's conflicted attempt to practice the same form of reductionism while maintaining that mystics really are experiencing something.

If experience is created through the reciprocal relation of 'set' and 'setting,' as Katz maintains, mystical experience must have both culture-dependent and culture-independent components. The appropriate "approach to these experiences, therefore, is to attempts to isolate and distinguish, as far as possible [each set of components]."[118] Katz never does this. He explains the phenomenological content of experience through conditioning alone, an approach that seems to deny the possibility that "the mystic encounters a reality which conveys any new or creative information."[119] Stace may be mistaken to look for what the mystic "actually experienced"[120] in a phenomenological sense,[121] but if mystical experiences have objects, addressing the nature of those objects is both legitimate and necessary to an understanding of those experiences.

Rationales for Constructivist Epistemology

Four explicit or implicit arguments underlie the constructivist claim that all mystical experience is mediated: (1) the overwhelming weight of scholarly opinion favors constructivist epistemology; (2) experiential mediation is an epistemological necessity; (3) the mediation of all experience is demonstrated by empirical research in psychology and cognitive science; and (4) the mediation of all experience is

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[117] Compare Agehananda Bharati's view. He would agree that there is "no ontological reference" to mystical experience yet would also maintain that the experience occurs completely independently of any religious doctrinal system. (Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 79) As he puts it, "no ideology *ought* to be viewed as generating . . . the zero-experience." (Ibid., 74) Apparently, the experience occurs through practices or drugs that exercise their effects independently of any kind of belief system that may be associated with them (regardless of what the practitioner herself might think).

[118] Jonathan Shear, "Mystical Experience, Hermeneutics, and Rationality," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30/4 (1990): 400.

[119] Stoeber, "Constructivist Epistemologies," 113; see also 108.

[120] In Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 28.

[121] According to Katz, there is nothing to look for: the mystical report *is* what was actually experienced.

demonstrated by the evidence of the mystical data. Below I will discuss each of these in turn and show why all four fail to provide compelling support for constructivist epistemology.

Philosophical Precedent

According to Richard Jones, "the only justification for constructivism is that it reflects the position most commonly accepted by philosophers concerning consciousness in nonmystical experiences."[122] Though in fact this is not the "only" justification for constructivism, it is one of the strongest. Most scholars in the humanities and social sciences do advocate some type of constructivist understanding of experience, which is itself a persuasive argument in favor of constructivism.[123] Applied to mysticism, however, this argument turns out to be weak. The history of philosophical reflection and analysis that underlies the constructivist position is largely, if not completely, derived from investigations of ordinary consciousness. As Jones points out, "constructivism was developed from nonmystical experiences without serious consideration of mystical experiences."[124] The claim that constructivist epistemology is relevant to mysticism therefore depends on the presupposition that there is no significant difference between ordinary experience and mystical experience. For Katz, mystical experience does not involve any significant change in the nature or functioning of consciousness. All mystical paths do is introduce into the mind a set of concepts and doctrines that affect experience in the same way that any conceptual content does, i.e., by shaping or mediating experience.

This presupposition, however, is problematic given the number of scholars who argue that the two types of experience are quite different. According to John Collins, "the mystical data certainly supports the claim that mystic consciousness is radically different from ordinary consciousness."[125] W.T. Stace and William James consider mystical

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[122] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 9. See also Ibid., 23–4; Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 45, n. 39; Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," 112; Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 167; Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 20.
[123] See Forman, "*Samādhi*," 202–3.
[124] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 9.
[125] Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, 233. See also Ibid., 235; Anthony N. Perovich, Jr., "Mysticism and Mediation: A Response to Gill," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 183; Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 246–7, 250.

experience to be in some fundamental way cognitively unique,[126] and Jones and Deikman argue that mystical paths bring about real cognitive transformation. For Jones, the nature-mystical experience effects a gradual "de-structuring" of sensory experience.[127] Deikman describes at least some forms of mystical experience as being beyond sensation, images, conceptualization, etc., bringing about a qualitative shift in perception toward a state of pure immediacy.[128] According to Jack Engler, *vipassanā* may reverse the ordinary cognitive processes that construct the experience of 'self' and 'object.'[129] Daniel Brown argues that *vipassanā*, yoga, and Mahamudra all lead to the cessation of the ordinary cognitive/perceptual activity upon which ordinary perception and experience are based.[130] In general, the meditative practices of these three traditions do not simply provide experience with new phenomenological content, but directly affect and change cognitive/perceptual capacities and processes.[131]

Constructivists would dispute this analysis. For example, Gimello argues (based on the example of Zen) that there is nothing special about mysticism, including mystical experience.[132] Gimello, however, seems to commit the very fallacy Katz warns us about: taking doctrines out of context and so failing to understand what they really mean. The 'nothing special' teaching of Zen is situated within a context of the 'ultimate specialness' of the Buddha-nature. In Zen, 'faith' is explained as holding to this view of ultimacy in the face of ordinary, mundane experience that fails to recognize it.[133] Juxtaposing and identifying the mundane with the ultimate is not intended to trivialize the Buddha-nature by reducing it to the mundane.[134] Rather,

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[126] See Forman, "*Samādhi*," 195–6; Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 195; Morewedge, "Critical Observations," 413.

[127] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 20–1, 23. See Green, "Unity in Diversity," 54.

[128] Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 242–4, 249–50.

[129] Jack Engler, "Therapeutic Aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation," in *Transformations of Consciousness: Traditional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, Ken Wilber, J. Engler, and D.P. Brown (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 42–3.

[130] Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 239; see Engler, "Therapeutic Aims," 49.

[131] Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 260.

[132] Gimello, "Mysticism in its Contexts," 83.

[133] See Hakuun Yasutani's remarks on faith in Zen in Philip Kapleau, ed., *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 58–9.

[134] It seems to be a common human tendency to reduce the sublime to 'the known' as construed by one's own state of consciousness (perhaps because it gives the illusion of understanding).

identifying the two creates a cognitive tension with specific transformative implications. It creates a context in which the only practice is an opening to what is here and now, leading to a radical form of transformation that is anything but ordinary.[135]

Given the possibility that there is a significant difference between ordinary and mystical experience, it seems premature to presuppose that claims about the nature of ordinary experience are automatically applicable to mystical experience. The broad acceptance of constructivist epistemology therefore fails to justify constructivist interpretations of mystical experience. The 'constructivist consensus' is derived from studies of ordinary consciousness, yet the possible uniqueness of mystical experience means that any claims about ordinary experience may not be applicable to mystical experience, or at least not to all forms of mystical experience.[136] As Perovich points out, "no presuppositions about the mediated, shaped, conceptualized character of 'human experience' . . . are relevant to the sorts of 'nonhuman experience' being reported by such mystics."[137] There is no compelling reason why scholarly opinion about ordinary experience should demonstrate anything conclusive about mystical experience.

Mediation as Epistemological Necessity

Some constructivists argue that mystical experience is necessarily mediated because any form of higher-order, meaningful experience must, as an epistemological necessity, be mediated. Since mediation is what makes meaningful experience possible, mystical experience *must* be mediated. The claim by some constructivists that the mediation

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[135] The same dynamic is generated by Dzogchen belief and practice. See Chapter Four below, especially pp. 170–1.

[136] See Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 264; Forman, "*Samādhi*," 195–6; Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation in Mysticism," 291. The systems-based theory of mind presented in Chapter Three of this book (see pp. 105–24) suggests that different cognitive structures may set different constraints on consciousness. In other words, what is true of one state of consciousness is not necessarily true of another.

[137] Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 247. On the cognitive uniqueness of mystical experience, Perovich points out that Kant considered "mystical cognition" so fundamentally different from ordinary cognition that he concluded it was impossible (at least "in this life"). (Ibid., 244–6) For Perovich, that Kant himself considered mystical experience unique is a clear point against Katz (especially since Katz claims his approach is Kantian). It seems to me that Kant's position merely confirms Katz's. Kant may have considered (in opposition to Katz) mystical experience unique, but the fact that he considered it impossible (as some type of epistemologically unique event) is Katz's exact point.

of mystical experience is self-evident seems to be based on this rea-
soning. The argument is intuitively plausible. Raw sensation is com-
monly understood as inherently chaotic and meaningless, becoming
meaningful only through the mind's constructive/mediating activity.
An example from ordinary experience illustrates the point: turning
on the radio and experiencing the few seconds of noise before the
mind imposes a meaningful pattern on the input and noise suddenly
becomes music.

The thesis that the mediation of mystical experience is an episte-
mological necessity may be countered by at least two arguments.
The first accepts the basic premise that any form of meaningful or
cognitive experience is mediated, but then argues that at least one
type of mystical experience has no semantic content and is therefore
not necessarily mediated. This is Robert Forman's argument regard-
ing 'pure consciousness events' (PCEs). PCEs are states of pure expe-
riential 'blankness' that gain meaning only after the experience. If
mystical experience is not meaningful, then the constructivist argu-
ment that it is necessarily mediated loses its persuasiveness. I consider
Forman's position problematic, however. Not only does it trivialize
the existential significance of mystical experience, the claim that mys-
tical experience is meaningless is contradicted by the mystical data.
Mystical reports indicate that mystical experience is profoundly mean-
ingful and life transforming. Experiential 'blankness' is neither.

The constructivist claim that mystical experience is necessarily
mediated may be critiqued on different grounds. Rather than doubt
mystical experience's meaningfulness, one may instead question the
underlying premise that intelligible experience must be mediated.
The connection between concept and meaning does not demonstrate
that concepts cause meaning. It may be that the objectifying influence
of concepts construct a particular level of semantic appreciation that
is relatively limited and impoverished compared to the meaningful-
ness potentially available through non-conceptual experience. Meaning
may not be dependent on conceptual schemas, but be inherent in
the "objects" of experience and accessed through non-linguistic, non-
conceptual experience.

This second possibility is not only a credible alternative to con-
structivist epistemology, it has the advantage of reconciling two impor-
tant aspects of the mystical data. While constructivism's emphasis on
linguistic/conceptual construction fails to account for the apophatic,

'emptying' function of mystical practices[138] and Forman's approach fails to account for its meaningfulness, the alternative epistemology presented above construes the two as mutually interdependent: emptying is linked to enhanced meaningfulness. While this epistemological claim may be wrong, its plausibility and ability to account for the data further erodes the supposed self-evidence of constructivist epistemology. This is especially true given the fact that a significant number of researchers consider unmediated mystical experience a real possibility. Norman Prigge, Mark Kessler, and Mark Woodhouse all "argue . . . that despite common philosophical presuppositions to the contrary, claims that one can be conscious, or awake—though without content—make sense and are plausible."[139]

Empirical Evidence and Constructivism

Some constructivists argue that the mediation of mystical experience is proven by research in psychology and cognitive science. This research, however, is limited to studies of ordinary experience; though it may indeed show that ordinary experience is a complex, mediated construction, this finding has no necessary or self-evident connection to mystical experience. Cognitive science, for example, is particularly concerned with the problem of how the mind processes sensory input. At this level, mediation is inherent and unavoidable. As Short points out, "our eyes themselves are a mediating factor"[140]— the first step in the complex chain of neural/cognitive processes through which the mind processes sense data. There is no necessary reason why any of this should apply to mystical experiences, especially to introvertive, contentless experiences that seem to bypass the senses and cognitive processes associated with information processing.

Again, using cognitive research as justification for a constructivist interpretation of mysticism depends on the assumption that there is no significant difference between ordinary experience and mystical experience. This may be the case. But given that a number of scholars interpret the evidence quite differently (claiming that mystical reports point to significant differences between the two forms of experience),

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[138] See pp. 73–4, 78 below for more on this issue.
[139] Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 21.
[140] Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," 664.

to assume at the outset of an investigation that there is no difference is premature. As Perovich notes, constructivist epistemology "must be put to the test *by* each new type of experience analyzed, not imported into the analysis from without."[141] Because there is no *a priori* reason to assume that what is true of ordinary experience is also true of mystical experience, psychological and cognitive research provides no grounds for ruling out the possibility of unconditioned/ unmediated mystical experience.[142]

Ironically, if the cognitive research on mediation does turn out to be applicable to mystical experience, this would undermine one of constructivism's central claims about mystical experience: the thesis of mystical heterogeneity. Katz presents mediation as essentially socio-linguistic in nature. As Short points out, however, (based on Wittgenstein and Kant) there are "pre-linguistic," "categorical," and (I would add) cognitive levels of mediation that are universal and that underlie the linguistic.[143] Cognitive scientists would agree with constructivists that experience is mediated, but would emphasize non-cultural, universal forms of mediation. This suggests a phenomenological component(s) to experience that is likewise universal. It also suggests that "by turning off language, we remove the sociolinguistic from the equation and are left with a non-linguistically mediated common core of being in the world without language."[144] The point is that mediation and phenomenological commonality are not mutually exclusive as Katz assumes. In opposition to Short, I would also argue (along with Forman) that even the more subtle, universal forms of mediation can be "forgotten" at advanced stages of mystical practice.

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[141] Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 245.

[142] See Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 11. See also Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 174; Forman, "*Samādhi*," 195; King, "Two Epistemological Models," 269; Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?" 54; Shear, "Mystical Experience, Hermeneutics, and Rationality," 394; Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation in Mysticism," 291; Mark B. Woodhouse, "On the Possibility of Pure Consciousness," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 254ff.

[143] Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," 664. See also Janz, "Mysticism and Understanding," 80; Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" 252–3; Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 71, 97.

[144] Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," 668.

The Data

Three justifications for the constructivist interpretation of mystical experience have been presented: (1) the overwhelming weight of scholarly opinion favors constructivist epistemology; (2) experiential mediation is an epistemological necessity; (3) the mediation of all experience is demonstrated by empirical research in psychology and cognitive science. Independent of the mystical data, constructivists consider each of these points *a priori* grounds for the claim that mystical experience is mediated. As shown above, all three are weak. Mystical experience may be mediated, but none of these arguments is sufficiently strong to justify such a claim before the data has been investigated. The constructivist *a priori* rejection of the possibility of unconditioned mystical experience is unwarranted.

The constructivist may not find these arguments persuasive (even if she admitted they were valid) since from the constructivist perspective the mystical data constitutes unambiguous, definitive evidence that mystical experiences are mediated. Specifically (constructivists claim), the data supports constructivist epistemology in two ways. First, it indicates (through the absence of any countervening evidence) that mystical experience is subject to the same epistemological constraints as ordinary experience. Whatever seems true about ordinary experience can therefore be applied to mystical experience. Second, constructivists maintain that the data supplies direct, positive evidence that mystical experience is mediated.

Given that constructivists like Katz assume constructivist epistemology to be true before their investigation of the data, their interpretation of the data as evidence for constructivism become immediately problematic. According to constructivism, concepts and expectations necessarily shape and mediate experience. How persuasive, then, is Katz's reading of the data, when he begins by assuming that all experience is mediated? Katz's interpretation of the texts—based on his own constructivist presuppositions—simply invites a repetition of the question: so what do the texts *actually* indicate? Below I will suggest a few possibilities. Like Katz, my reading of the texts is colored by my biases and preconceptions. Unlike him, these biases do not preclude the possibility of less mediated (and ultimately non-mediated) experience. As difficult as interpreting the texts is (for both of us), an undistorted encounter with the sources is at least (given my anti-constructivist presuppositions) a theoretical possibility.

Does the data validate Katz's claims? Specifically, does the data indicate that (1) mystical experience is epistemologically the same as ordinary experience, and (2) unconditioned/unmediated experience is impossible? The first point has already been addressed above. To sum up my previous comments, some scholars argue that the data provides evidence that ordinary experience and mystical experience are quite different. Given the apparent ambiguity of the sources, the question remains open regarding how similar or dissimilar ordinary and mystical experiences actually are. Constructivist claims on this point are far from conclusive. In addition, the possibility that mystical experience is epistemologically unique undermines the heterogeneity thesis. Katz's view that mystical paths simply condition phenomenological content naturally implies that mystical experiences will be different (since the paths are different).[145] But if mystical paths generate real cognitive transformation this logic does not necessarily apply: different paths or contexts may lead to common results.[146]

What does the data indicate regarding the occurrence of unmediated, unconditioned experiences? Again, the evidence does not seem to support constructivist claims. Some mystical accounts provide strong evidence that unconditioned, pure, and/or contentless experiences occur. Not only are the experiences sometimes described as such, but at least some mystical paths/practices seem to de-condition consciousness or empty consciousness of all content.[147] In some cases, such 'emptying' or 'forgetting' is the exact process necessary for mystical experience to occur at all.[148] Katz maintains that "neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated."[149] It is difficult to understand what Katz means by this comment, at least with respect to the mystical data. Mystics *do* claim to

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[145] See King, "Two Epistemological Models," 260.
[146] See Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 173. See also Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 243.
[147] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 177–8; Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 37; Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 30ff.; Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 184, 206; Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation in Mysticism," 291; Daniel Barbiero, review of *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, by Robert K.C. Forman, ed., In *Philosophy East & West* 43/4 (1993): 768.
[148] Forman, "*Samādhi*," 196.
[149] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26; see also Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 4.

have direct, nonconceptual experiences of ultimate reality (however that might be construed), and this would certainly seem to be an "indication" that such experiences occur. The indication is so strong that Jones concludes that "the reports of certain mystical experiences . . . is *prima facie* evidence that an experience occurs in which there is no conceptual or other content present."[150] This indication may turn out to be misleading, but it seems strange to deny that it exists. I would argue that even ordinary experience provides some grounds for the possibility of unmediated experience. A little attention to the experience of listening to music reveals that perceptual mediation fluctuates from moment to moment.[151] This suggests that mediation may vary along a spectrum from strong to weak, implying the possibility of the cessation of mediation at the weak end of the spectrum. The evidence for unconditioned experience not only counters Katz's epistemology but the heterogeneity thesis as well. If there are unconditioned experiences then logically there is at least one type of experience that is identical across traditions.[152]

The above arguments notwithstanding, constructivists are to a large extent right: much, if not most, reports of mystical experience confirm constructivist epistemology. Most mystical experiences, as described by the mystics, seem to be mediated by the mystic's concepts, expectations, etc. The mystical data, however, also seems to indicate that mediation fluctuates, that there are different stages of mystical

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[150] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 11. See also Ibid., 9; Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 174; Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 239; Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 48; Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 7; Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 257; Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 21; Shear, "Mystical Experience, Hermeneutics, and Rationality," 392–4; Horne, "Pure Mysticism," 7; King, "Two Epistemological Models," 276–7; Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation in Mysticism," 295; Ninian Smart, "The Purification of Consciousness and the Negative Path," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 117.

According to McLaughlin, there is also experimental evidence supporting the view that "pure consciousness events" occur. (Michael C. McLaughlin, "The Linguistic Subject and the Conscious Subject in Mysticism Studies," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 25/2 (1996): 185.) See as well Forman's discussion of subjects exposed to a Ganzfeld: "under conditions of unchanging visual stimulation, one comes to lose or 'forget' the projected image or, in a *Ganzfeld*, the sense of vision altogether. These, then, may be viewed as techniques that bring about something like a complete forgetting of ocular input and function." Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 36.

[151] See King, "Two Epistemological Model," 277.

[152] Shear, "Mystical Experience, Hermeneutics, and Rationality," 396.

development, and that in at least one type of mystical experience mediation ceases. Given the totalizing nature of the constructivist position ("unmediated experience *never* occurs"), a single credible indicator of the occurrence of an unconditioned experience is sufficient to disprove constructivism as a whole. Katz might argue that the evidence is misleading—that appearances to the contrary, there is no fundamental difference between mystical and ordinary experience. But then it is incumbent on him to provide some type of developed analysis or argument to defend his uncompromising constructivism. Katz does not provide it. His method—citing examples from mystical texts that seem to support constructivism—is inadequate since such examples fail to explain why mystical reports of unmediated experiences are misleading. To sum up, the four justifications for applying constructivist epistemology to mysticism are questionable. There is no conclusive or compelling evidence that mystical experiences are necessarily and always constructed or mediated.

Katz's Manet Example

In order to clarify what he means by mediation, Katz uses the example of Manet's apparent misperception of Notre Dame. According to Katz, Manet's preconceptions caused him to see Gothic archways while looking at what were in fact Romanesque archways. Katz is claiming that Manet's preconceptions created an experience of something that was not there.[153] Is this plausible? If Manet had *really looked* at the archways, regardless of his preconceptions, would he have seen Gothic instead of Romanesque archways? The answer is no. Manet's preconceptions simply caused him not to pay attention to the archways at all since he already assumed he knew what was there.[154] Manet's experience (at least at the level Katz addresses) does not support constructivism. Rather, it simply shows how concepts can inhibit attention.

What is remarkable is that even Katz's critics tend to accept the basic premise of this example, though they may use it to draw different conclusions than Katz. Forman, for example, accepts that Manet's concept of 'Gothicness' mediated his experience and caused

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[153] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 30.
[154] Another obvious possibility is that Manet was simply taking artistic liberties— he knew the archways were Romanesque but preferred to paint them as Gothic.

him to perceive 'Gothicness' where there was none. He then goes on to argue that mysticism may be understood as "forgetting Gothicness," with the qualification that while "Manet [having forgotten Gothicness] would trade schemata," mysticism involves "dropping [schemata] . . . altogether."[155] This is a valid extension of the analogy toward a more accurate understanding of mysticism. Mystical awakening does involve "forgetting" concepts since this is what makes less mediated (ultimately, non-mediated) experience of Reality possible. Its flaw is in accepting the claim that the concept of Gothicness creates an experience when it in fact functions to distract attention from immediate sensation.

Constructivism is Self-contradictory

Katz's epistemology is self-contradictory. The claim that all experience is mediated denies the possibility of objective truth claims. Yet at the same time, Katz's epistemological thesis that all experience is mediated entails "a certain kind of objectivity," as well as the ability "to suspend or go beyond at least some of the limits of one's own original personal and cultural constructions."[156] As Price explains,

> the performance of [such a] judgement [i.e., the claim that all experience is mediated] itself indicates the possibility . . . of transcending the limitations of personal and cultural mediations to grasp what is in fact the case. . . . Indeed, Katz's entire essay is the record of a cognitional performance attempting to supply good reasons and sufficient evidence for why others should judge . . . that his interpretation of mystical experience . . . is the correct one. Here there is no relativism, no pluralism. Instead, there is a strong claim for objectivity.[157]

In other words, the statement "all experience is mediated" is nonsensical. It is a judgement by Katz regarding what he considers to be an objective state of affairs, but the claim itself denies that such judgements are possible. If the statement "all experience is mediated" is true, one would never be in a position to make any claim about the nature of reality at all, including "all experience is mediated."

The fact that Katz does make the claim, however, indicates that he considers himself exempt from an epistemological condition that

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[155] Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 261.
[156] Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 182.
[157] Price, "Objectivity of Mystical Truth Claims," 90–1.

is otherwise universal. As Donald Rothberg points out, inherent in
Katz's affirmation that "all viewpoints are situated and mediated" is
the additional affirmation that "his own approach is an exception."[158]
Apparently, only constructivists enjoy such a privileged perspective,
beyond the distorting influences of context and conditioning. The
mystics themselves can never accomplish what the constructivist her-
self claims to accomplish. Katz does acknowledge that his experi-
ence is subject to interpretive constraints,[159] yet this is not reflected
in his actual approach. Throughout his discussion he expresses no
doubt that his fundamental epistemological assumption is objec-
tively true. Such a claim, however, is fundamentally "incoherent with-
out some account of how . . . [it is] possible, given constructivist
emphases."[160]

Constructivism is Epistemologically Vague

Even if we admit that mystical experience is mediated/constructed,
this claim by itself leaves so many unanswered questions that con-
structivism (at least in its current forms) begins to look less and less
like a viable theory of mysticism. John Apczyski asks a number of
questions that point to constructivism's vagueness: "To what extent
do the antecedent conditions shape the experience? Are they neces-
sary or sufficient conditions of the experience? . . . [D]o 'the ultimate
objects of concern with which mystics have intercourse' [quoting
Katz] shape their experiences only to the extent that they are given
in the tradition?"[161] Forman raises more questions: Is Katz con-
tending that *all* concepts affect or shape experience, as he seems to
(implausibly) imply?[162] And if not, what kind of mechanisms are
involved in selecting or adjusting the influence of particular con-
cepts? In general, Katz makes no attempt to distinguish the relative
effects of different factors on experience. For example, how does the
practice of detachment affect experience and how does that com-

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[158] Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 182.
[159] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 65; Katz, "Mystical Speech," 4.
[160] Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 182.
[161] Apczyski, "Mysticism and Epistemology," 196. See also Smith, in Katz, Smith,
and King, "On Mysticism," 758–9.
[162] Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 16–7. See
also Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 257.

pare with the mediating role of a tradition's doctrines? Is it possible that what mystics *do* has as much an impact on the content of experience as what they believe? To elaborate, mystics often engage in behaviors with no clear doctrinal ramifications[163] (paying attention to the breath, for example). What role do such practices play in generating and informing the content of mystical experience relative to the mediating role of doctrine? What role might ethical behavior play on the mystical path, either as precursor to mystical experience or as its outcome?[164] Furthermore, Katz presents mediation as a completely static phenomenon. He does not deny outright that it may fluctuate, but he seems to consider the possibility unimportant (as he puts it, "I do not assign percentages to mediation"),[165] a position hard to understand since fluctuating mediation would have direct phenomenological ramifications.[166] These unanswered questions reinforce Apczyski's point that "there is no epistemologically developed view within Katz's writings informing us about how [mediation] . . . is to be understood."[167]

Mystical Traditions Undermine their own Doctrines

The problems with constructivist epistemology are exacerbated by a consideration of some additional aspects of the mystical data. For Katz and for constructivists in general, the decisive factor in shaping mystical experience (and it would also seem an important precursor

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[163] This issue should not be confused with the fact that practice is justified and explained with reference to a doctrinal system.

[164] As mentioned above (see p. 16, n. 30), Katz does discuss ethics and mysticism in a number of essays, but his concern is descriptive, i.e., focused on how ethical attitudes and behaviors are integrated within the traditions' own self-understandings. This ignores the issue of how ethics may function psychologically.

[165] Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 756.

[166] Though cognitive anthropology is beyond the scope of this book, Pascal Boyer has shown the theoretical vagueness and inadequacy of the idea that we simply absorb and are conditioned by culture. (See Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), ix–x, 22–5.) This point would seem equally applicable to Katz's epistemology, which takes for granted that the mystic somehow absorbs doctrines from her culture and tradition without ever addressing the issue of how this takes place (though he acknowledges it is a "complex" process). See Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26. See also McLaughlin, "Linguistic Subject," 190–1.

[167] Apczyski, "Mysticism and Epistemology," 196. See also Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology," 174; Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 243; Smith in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 758–9.

to the experience) is the concepts, beliefs, etc. of a mystical tradi-
tion. And yet some mystical traditions claim that mystical experi-
ence occurs only when conceptual activity ceases.[168] Such traditions
may (1) advocate the complete 'forgetting' or letting go of all con-
cepts (even the tradition's own doctrines)[169] and/or (2) explicitly reject
the capacity of any concept to express Truth or Reality (even going
so far as claiming that attachment to any concept is an obstacle on
the path). As Forman points out, "when a tradition uses techniques
which effect a forgetting, then automatization and concepts may not
play the 'heavy' formative role Katz gives them."[170] This would also
seem true when traditions undermine doctrine altogether. Extreme
examples of such 'undermining' can be found in certain forms of
Ch'an. According to Huang Po, "if you students of the Way wish
to become Buddhas, you need study no doctrines whatever, but learn
only how to avoid seeking for and attaching yourselves to anything."[171]
In another passage Huang Po remarks, "all the Tathagata taught
was just to convert people; it was like pretending yellow leaves are
real gold just to stop the flow of a child's tears; it must by no means
be regarded as if it were ultimate truth."[172] If concepts are impor-
tant in creating mystical experience, why would traditions try to
undermine them? And why would this very process of undermining
them be a necessary step toward the attainment of certain types of
mystical experience?

Similarities among Traditions and Experiences

Constructivists claim that all experience (not just mystical experience)
is culturally contextual and conditioned. From this perspective, not
only must mystical experiences be phenomenologically varied across
traditions, all experiences must be phenomenologically varied across

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[168] Forman, "*Samādhi*," 196.
[169] See Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 263–4; Forman, "Intro-
duction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 30ff.
[170] Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 264.
[171] In John Blofeld, trans., *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po: On the Transmission of
Mind* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), 40.
[172] In Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, 63. Dale Wright questions how much
such statements can legitimately be construed as a critique of language. I remain
unconvinced by his arguments. See his *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*
(Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

cultures. However, the assertion that experience is radically conditioned by culture is becoming increasingly less credible, given the growing awareness in anthropology that there are significant, cross-cultural commonalities at cognitive, affective, and experiential levels.[173] The same can be said of mystical experience. Many scholars note that there are in fact "similarities in mystical descriptions between traditions, which are by no means minimal."[174] These similarities can be found at the level of doctrine, practice, experience, physiological effects, and processes of transformation.[175] Regarding this final type of similarity, Brown argues that a similar sequence of developmental stages is initiated by three distinct meditative traditions: *vipassanā*, yoga, and Mahamudra.[176] Deikman points out that contemplation in different traditions often follows a common pattern: an initial stage characterized by active purification of the mind through concentration on an object, followed by a passive state of effortlessness or surrender.[177]

Katz argues that these "similarities" are entirely dependent on taking terms and concepts out of context. This is no doubt true in at

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[173] See Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 32, 34, 49, 215, 365, 427; Boyer, *Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, vii–viii, xi, 3–4.

[174] Stoeber, "Constructivist Epistemologies,"112. See also Green, "Unity in Diversity," 52–3; Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 244; Morewedge, "Critical Observations," 413; Forman, "*Samādhi*," 202; L. Philip Barnes, "Walter Stace's Philosophy of Mysticism," *Hermathena* 153 (1992): 7, 15–6; Shear, "Mystical Experience, Hermeneutics, and Rationality," 391, 396; Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 80; Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 88; Richard M. Gale, "Mysticism and Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy* 57 (1960): 479; Terence Penelhum, "Unity and Diversity in the Interpretation of Mysticism," in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), 438.

[175] On doctrinal similarities, see Vroom, "All Religious Traditions," 87. On similarities in mystical practice, see Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 126; Barnes, "Walter Stace's Philosophy," 13. Barnes goes on to argue that the differences that do exist between mystical paths are "relatively unimportant because there is an accepted diversity of practice and procedure within each of the great mystical, religious traditions, and this diversity within each religion is sufficiently broad as to bring each into agreement with the accepted range of diversity in other (mystical) religious traditions." (Ibid., 14) On experiential similarities, see Ibid., 7; Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," 78, 86–7; Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 22–3; Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 61, 68; Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 28. On similarities regarding the physiological effects of mystical practices, see Shear, "Mystical Experience, Hermeneutics, and Rationality," 397–8. For similarities in mystical processes of transformation, see Forman, "*Samādhi*," 196; Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience*, 15–6; K. Wilber, J. Engler, and D.P. Brown, *Transformations of Consciousness: Traditional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 5.

[176] See Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 219.

[177] Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 245ff.

least some cases. But as Byrne points out, the "meaning of concepts is surely not wholly determined by specific contexts of use." As he explains,

> Newton's definition of the concept of light will be different from that given by a contemporary physicist. But there will be some continuity of interest, intention, and description which links their uses of this concept, sufficient for us to say they are talking about the same thing, even though their conceptions of it are not in all respects the same.[178]

Pascal Boyer goes so far as to claim that "in the absence of substantive evidence, there is no reason to postulate that a same idea is not the same, simply because it occurs in a different cultural setting."[179]

In general, Katz's entire approach to the similar vs. dissimilar question is simplistic. He seems to consider similarity/difference an absolute value, when in fact any two phenomena may be more or less similar or different depending on the level of analysis or the problem being addressed. According to Huston Smith, "claims for similarities or differences spin their wheels until they get down to *ways* and *degrees* in which things differ or are alike, and those variables shift with the problem we are working on."[180] For example, an epistemological concern may perfectly well legitimate setting aside the differences between two experiences in favor of their commonalities. As Byrne explains, the fact that people may have different experiences of the same object

> in no way prevents the convergent aspects of perceptual experiences being employed as the basis for publicly-shareable judgements about a common world of objects. . . . [I]f we do have an epistemological purpose in mind it is this convergent aspect of unique experiences that we shall stress. For if experience does amount to knowledge it must be found to converge so as to give publicly shareable judgements about a common world. The legitimacy of an epistemological interest in a branch of experience demands that idiosyncracies within particular experiences take second place and that convergence be stressed.[181]

Beyond exclusively epistemological concerns, it could also be argued that in any context it is a

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[178] Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 243.
[179] Boyer, *Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, 6–7.
[180] Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" 252.
[181] Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 238–9.

> mistake . . . to suppose that the existence of significant dissimilarities is incompatible with the existence of significant similarities, or that two things which are significantly different (for example, whales and kangaroos) cannot be the same type of thing (for example, mammals).[182]

Smith makes much the same point. Religions may be significantly different, but this difference is not necessarily "ultimate." Using color as an analogy, he points out that

> red is not green, but the difference pales before the fact that both are light. No two waves are identical, but their differences are inconsequential when measured against the water that informs them all.[183]

When comparing mystical experiences, the differences may or may not be "inconsequential." Again, it depends on the question being asked. But the basic point stands: difference in no way denies the possibility of a more encompassing level of identity.

Conditioning as Cause?
Failed Mystics and Spontaneous Mystical Experiences

As an explanation of mystical experience, constructivism can be construed in two senses: as an explanation for the content of mystical experience or as an explanation for why mystical experiences occur at all. The second, stronger thesis is contradicted by three points:

1. Fully conditioned members of mystical traditions do not necessarily become mystics. If constructivists are right and conditioning is the cause of mystical experience, the fact that so many fully conditioned practitioners fail to become mystics raises significant problems for the constructivist thesis.[184]

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[182] Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 26–7. See also Staal's remark that the "immense variety of [mystical] experiences . . . is . . . consistent with a very small number of basic experiences, or even with one kind of basic experience." (Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 189) This rather enigmatic statement is apparently based on Staal's distinction between cognitive states and phenomenological experiences, and the point that one or a few cognitive states can "phenomenologically" manifest in different ways.

[183] Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" 256.

[184] As Fenton notes, "the metaphysical structure of the specific mystical tradition sets up the mystical situation, but it does not necessarily *produce* the experience. In fact, failure to succeed is apparently quite common." John Y. Fenton, "Mystical Experience as a Bridge for Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion: A Critique," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49/1 (1981): 65.

2. Persons who are not affiliated with a mystical tradition and have
   not undergone formal mystical training have mystical experi-
   ences.[185] This point directly counters constructivist epistemology,
   which implies that mystical experiences should only occur to indi-
   viduals conditioned within specific mystical traditions. Katz might
   respond that no one is "unaffiliated"—simply by being in a cul-
   ture one necessarily internalizes at least some religious notions,
   however vague. This is a valid point if Katz's goal is merely to
   account for the phenomenological content of mystical experiences
   (although it might still be argued that the content of such expe-
   riences goes far beyond what could be supplied by unconscious
   cultural osmosis). On the other hand, the critique stands if Katz
   is trying to explain the cause of mystical experience.
3. At least some mystical practices involve 'forgetting' the concepts,
   images, symbols, etc. of one's tradition.[186] Besides directly con-
   tradicting Katz's thesis, it would seem difficult for constructivists
   to explain why mystical traditions would even recommend for-
   getting-type practices if it is true that concepts, etc. are necessary
   for the experience to occur (regardless of whether or not such
   mystical forgetting is even possible).[187] Katz would argue that such
   forgetting never actually takes place. But even if he is right there
   are still problems with his position. Given that everyone in a mys-
   tical tradition is conditioned and yet only some practitioners
   become mystics, the only recourse left to Katz to explain the
   occurrence of mystical experience would be a radical intensification
   of one's involvement in a belief system. But how would this occur
   in a tradition that recommends forgetting one's belief system?
   Even partial conceptual forgetting would seem enough to coun-
   teract the intensification process that for Katz is essential for mys-
   tical experience to occur.

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[185] Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 258–9; Forman, "Introduction:
Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 20; Green "Unity in Diversity," 50.
[186] See Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 261ff. Forman cites
research showing how a repetitive stimulus can produce "forgetting," possibly anal-
ogous to how certain meditative practices work.
[187] See Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 261.

Mystical Experiences as Novel

Katz's epistemology necessarily implies that mystical experience be conservative, confirming the doctrines already held by the tradition.[188] This claim is contradicted by the fact that mystical traditions and experiences are sometimes unorthodox. Mystical experiences do not always confirm or match their respective traditions. They may incorporate novel elements,[189] "go beyond or [be] at odds with the received context,"[190] or exceed the mystic's expectations.[191] Constructivist epistemology cannot account for any of these phenomena.[192] Neither can it account for the fact that "mystics clearly learn from their experiences."[193]

Katz does observe that some mystical claims appear to undermine established tradition, but then argues that because these claims are often legitimized through association with canonical authority they are still essentially conservative in character.[194] This observation, however, supports the opposite conclusion: it is the very novelty of mystical experiences that requires them to be legitimized by claiming that the new teaching was present in the canon all along.[195] Along these lines, Agehananda Bharati notes that even though a mystic uses the language of her tradition, the meaning of that language is distinctive to the mystical context and the mystics' intentions.[196] Or as Jones puts it, mystical beliefs may "take on a new significance in mystical enlightenment. . . . Thus, mystics may fill some terms and

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[188] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 20.

[189] Philip C. Almond, "Mysticism and its Contexts," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 214.

[190] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 167. See also Stoeber, "Constructivist Epistemologies," 108, 112; Morewedge, "Critical Observations," 419ff.

[191] Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 259; Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 21; Evelyn Underhill, "The Essentials of Mysticism," in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), 40. In Buddhist traditions, a common analogy for awakening is the pauper discovering a treasure or a precious jewel that may have been concealed in his clothing all along. These metaphors seem to contradict the claim that the mystic finds nothing more than what she expects to find.

[192] See Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 166–8.

[193] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 267.

[194] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 30.

[195] Katz almost seems to admit this in his "Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.

[196] Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 67.

expressions from their environment with different meanings."[197] In other words, because the mystic uses terms derived from her tradition does not mean she intends the same thing by those terms.[198] Language may sound conservative without necessarily being conservative.

For Katz, the conservative nature of mysticism includes mystical practices as well as mystical doctrines and the content of mystical experiences. Katz argues that mystical practices do nothing more than "extend" the practices of the religious tradition to which they belong.[199] This may be true in most instances, but it is not always the case. Mystics do undermine or alter traditional practices, sometimes to quite radical degrees. Eckhart certainly does not echo his tradition when he claims that "whoever prays for this or that, prays for something evil and in evil wise, for he prays for the denial of good and the denial of God, and he prays for God to deny Himself to him."[200]

It is ironic that Katz admits there are novel elements with no appreciation for how this admission undermines his thesis. Katz is careful to emphasize that unlike other scholars who construct theories of mystical experience based on its radical or unusual dimensions, his theory is based on its conservative aspects (and is therefore superior because truer to the data).[201] But even if it is true that the radical aspects of mysticism do not represent its "essence"[202] and that mystical phenomena are by and large conservative in nature,[203] the very formulation of the point constitutes an admission that there *are* radical and unusual aspects of mysticism, however rare those aspects may be. Obviously, an adequate theory of mysticism needs to address such aspects. Katz, however, never does. Admitting they exist, he goes on to propose a theory that leaves them unexplained, which would seem particularly problematic given that his epistemological position implies they should not even exist.

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[197] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 31.
[198] Ibid., 31–2.
[199] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 31.
[200] Meister Eckhart in M.O'C. Walshe, trans. *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1 (Longmead, U.K.: Element Books, 1979), xlvii–xlviii.
[201] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 29–30.
[202] Ibid., 21.
[203] Ibid., 22.

'Construction' and the Mystical Experience of Unity

The idea of epistemological 'construction' is unable to account for the experience of unity reported by mystics. As Anthony Perovich explains, the construction of experience can be understood either on the level of 'form' or 'content.'[204] Construction of form is essentially what Katz means by mediation: construction does not fabricate an object, but merely mediates the experience of the object. Construction of content is equivalent to solipsism: the mind supplies all aspects of the experience. Katz takes the first approach, but according to Perovich such an understanding of construction cannot explain certain types of mystical experience.[205] The construction of form can be understood as occurring in one of two ways, the mind either synthesizing heterogeneous inputs (as Kant would maintain) or imposing distinctions on a "unified whole" or "continuum."[206] As Perovich points out, neither understanding of construction can account for an experience like Plotinus' experience of the One. Such an experience

> simply cannot be represented as the product of formal conceptual shaping: no combination of a manifold will produce a result that lacks all multiplicity and no delimitation of a continuous whole produces a result that is formless and without distinction.[207]

Katz's Misreading of the Traditions

Katz assumes a somewhat condescending attitude toward essentialist and ecumenist scholars, who he claims (1) base their views on *a priori* presuppositions rather than a close reading of the texts, (2) fail to adequately contextualize the data, (3) rely on selective presentations of the data, and (4) fail to understand the traditions in general. Katz, however, commits all these errors. His mistakes regarding the traditions do not necessarily disprove his thesis. Still, it is worth pointing some of them out in order to illustrate the questionable nature of some of his evidence.

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[204] Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" 240.
[205] Ibid., 241–2.
[206] Ibid., 241.
[207] Ibid., 242.

Comparing Judaism with Buddhism, Katz claims Judaism empha-sizes purification while Buddhism is concerned with escaping *saṃsāra*.[208] This is no doubt a valid statement, and Katz does an impressive job contextualizing the ideas of 'purification' and 'escape' by sum-ming up the essential themes and doctrines of each mystical tradi-tion. Still, a summation and comparison of doctrinal systems fails to adequately address what purification or 'escaping *saṃsāra*' mean in psychological, even existential, terms. Though these appear quite different, both include what seem to be at least some similar ethi-cal and behavioral concerns. Whether or not this similarity is significant is a question that can only be settled by closer investigation of the traditions, not by a juxtaposition of doctrinal systems in the context of a few pages.

These remarks apply to Katz's discussion of mystical "problems."[209] According to Katz, mystical traditions address fundamentally different problems: for the Christian it is estrangement from God through original sin, for the Buddhist it is clinging to an illusory self and eons of rebirth through the various realms of *saṃsāra*, etc. Katz's approach is to take key words such as 'sin' and '*saṃsāra*,' point out their distinct meanings, and consider the issue settled as self-evident. The situation would seem more complex than this, however. Though these *are* different problems, both would seem to express, along with their differences, a common sense of the core, existential predica-ment of human beings: alienation from the Real and the suffering that accompanies that alienation. Katz critiques the tendency to assume similar sounding terms mean the same thing, but here he commits the opposite fallacy, assuming that different sounding terms can have no common meanings. Given the ultimacy of mystical claims, investigating the possibility that different terms mean the same thing is philosophically imperative.

Katz's errors include his suggestion that spiritual teachers never teach the same thing.[210] While it is true that spiritual teachers do not teach a universally consistent set of doctrines, certain concepts, values, and practices *are* often repeated by teachers from diverse tra-

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[208] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 38–9.
[209] See Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 62; Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 42. See Fenton, "Mystical Experience as a Bridge," 54.
[210] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 45.

ditions (e.g., detachment, compassion, service, mental pacification, devotion, etc.). Katz further claims that Christian mystics never experience an impersonal Absolute. Much of the Christian apophatic tradition indicates otherwise—Henry Suso's experience of God as an "abyss" certainly seems impersonal. Katz's general understanding of paradoxical statements in mysticism as being fundamentally irrational[211] is also open to question.[212] Related to Katz's substantive errors is his occasional tendency to confuse levels of analysis. For example, he provides extensive documentation to show how a particular tradition of philosophical discourse is influenced by the larger religious tradition[213] without realizing that this has nothing to do with mystical experience. Or he critiques the possibility of doctrinal apophasis[214] without realizing that this has no necessary connection to the possibility of apophatic practice and experience (some mystics such as St. John of the Cross seem to have no problem with holding cataphatic views of God and following an apophatic path). Or he will show how the "meaning" of a particular mystical term may inhere in the sound of the term itself and then consider this evidence that in other contexts similar terms from different traditions cannot possibly mean similar things.[215]

Again, these errors do not necessarily disprove Katz's thesis. I list them simply to level the playing field a bit: scholars do the best they can with what they know, and everyone is bound to be wrong at least some of the time. It is not only arrogant of Katz to set himself and his fellow constructivists so far above the "dogmatic" essentialists he critiques, it is also unjustified given his own misreadings of the mystical sources.

Final Miscellaneous Problems

A few additional problems with Katz's approach are worth noting. First, a central problem in the analysis of mystical experience is its veridicality. Katz does not address the problem, considering the

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[211] See Katz, "Mystical Speech," 8–10.
[212] See Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 17ff.
[213] See Katz, "Mystical Speech," 27.
[214] Ibid., 25ff.
[215] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 28.

verification of mystical claims philosophically impossible.[216] Many
scholars agree that the issue of veridicality should be bracketed in
an analysis of mystical experience.[217] However, if the content of mys-
tical experience is to some degree caused by an object then this
would necessitate some account of that object, which in turn raises
the issue of the experience's veridicality. An adequate theory of mys-
tical experience cannot avoid this issue. Second, Katz's conclusions
on the heterogeneity of mystical experiences are based primarily on
a consideration of their phenomenological content alone. This ignores
other levels of the experience (such as feeling tone and phenome-
nological[218] structure), as well as issues of practice and ethics, that
provide evidence for the possibility of commonalities across tradi-
tions. Even if mystical reports are different, the similarity of the paths
leading to the respective experiences suggests some phenomenologi-
cal commonality. As Michael McLaughlin puts it, "I think it would
be foolish to argue that differences in language make the experiences
incommensurable when Eckhart recommends forgetting (*vergezzen*) 'thy
bodily and ghostly wits,' and Buddhaghosa describes 'the cessation
(*nirodha*) of sensation and conceptualization.'"[219] Third, Katz advo-
cates "framing . . . a substantive, defensible cross-cultural phenome-
nology of mystical experience."[220] The question is: why? Comparing
data is about recognizing patterns that may enhance understanding.
If mystical experience is little more than psychosomatically intensified
concepts and beliefs, why compare them? Why study them at all,
when all the experience does is confirm what we already know (or
will eventually find out) about the tradition? Fourth, Katz is emphatic
that experience cannot be separated from interpretation—interpre-
tation is inherent in the experience through the imposition of medi-
ating concepts and beliefs. In at least some cases this would not seem

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[216] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 22.
[217] See Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 6; Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 62; Morewedge,
"Critical Observations," 417–8.
[218] Here I use 'phenomenological' in Husserl's sense.
[219] McLaughlin, "Linguistic Subject," 184. See Barnes, "Walter Stace's Philosophy,"
14–5. Of course, it does not follow from this that different practices/doctrines must
necessarily lead to different experiences. As Staal notes, "the same or similar results
are sometimes reached by different methods." Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 127. See
also Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 243.
[220] Katz, "'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," 40.

to be the case. Deirdre Green cites an example from Suso where he describes the content of a mystical experience in which the nature of the "object" he was experiencing was clearly in doubt (though he decides upon reflection that he must have experienced the "Holy Spirit").[221] Finally, Katz relies only on texts. He does not include interviews with living mystics or religious practitioners.[222]

Concluding Remarks on Constructivism

In arguing against Katz and constructivism my point has not been to minimize the differences between mystical traditions and experiences. Katz's "plea for differences" is important. Too often scholars have attempted to discount the differences among mystical experiences through recourse to such factors as ecclesiastical pressure, the ineffability of experience, the *upāyic* concerns of mystics, etc. No doubt these do play a role in shaping mystical expression, but this role can be pushed only so far. For the most part, as Katz insists, the mystics mean what they say, and what they say usually points to phenomenological differences in the experiences. In this sense, constructivism is an important contribution to the study of mysticism. It takes into account the conditioned/contextual aspects of mystical experience and its corresponding phenomenological diversity, and so serves as a corrective to those forms of essentialism that tend to gloss over the real differences between mystical experiences. This strength, however, is overshadowed by constructivism's significant problems. These have been discussed above. Here I will reiterate one point. Constructivism is a monolithic, totalizing thesis; it does not allow for the possibility of exceptions. Even one piece of anomalous data (such as an unconditioned experience) is sufficient to disprove it.[223] Katz might be able to effectively counter many of the

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[221] Green, "Unity in Diversity," 50. Ironically, Katz mentions Suso specifically as confirmation of his thesis that mystics merely experience what they are conditioned to experience. See Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 42.

[222] Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 257–8.

[223] This stance contrasts sharply with most forms of essentialism, which acknowledge that experience is conditioned but also claim that it may sometimes be unconditioned. This weak essentialist thesis is compatible with data supporting both essentialism and constructivism.

arguments against constructivism. It is doubtful he could counter them all. Katz's claims notwithstanding,[224] constructivism is inadequate as a general theory of mystical experience; it is both epistemologically problematic and incapable of accounting for important aspects of the mystical data.

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[224] See Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 66.

AN ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGY:
A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CONSCIOUSNESS

Theories of mysticism are acts of interpretation. They involve the construal of meaning according to particular (implicit or explicit) models or interpretive frameworks. Any theory of mysticism, then, requires articulating and defending the model it uses. Since the pivotal problem for many theories is the nature of mystical experience, this model or framework is generally psychological and/or epistemological in nature. Constructivist epistemology constitutes one possible framework, but, as shown in the previous chapter, constructivism is in various ways inadequate. The study of mysticism requires alternative models. The aim of this chapter is to present one alternative: a model of consciousness based on the principles of systems theory. This systems-based model will be used in subsequent chapters to interpret Dzogchen and German mysticism. In the final chapter I show how this analysis supports the mystical pluralist thesis. Because a systems approach to mind is based on the general principles of systems theory, this chapter begins with an overview of systems theory's basic concepts as background for the psychological discussion to follow.

Systems Theory: An Overview

Systems theory, in its most generalized form, is simply an orientation to the study of phenomena *as* systems. It focuses on the systemic dimensions or properties of phenomena (such as structure, organization, evolutionary dynamics, etc.), based on the premise that understanding a given object, event, or organism often requires appreciating it as a non-summative whole rather than as an assemblage of parts.[1] This focus on the systemic dimensions of phenomena encompasses

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[1] Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 27–9. See also Michael J. Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 19/1 (1979): 34.

a broad range of fields and approaches, including Ludwig von
Bertalanffy's general system theory, Norbert Wiener's cybernetics,
Ilya Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures, chaos theory, non-
linear dynamics, etc. Within any of these sub-fields, systems theory
may be understood in ways that extend the general concern with
systems to include specific research agendas, mathematical tools,
and/or normative claims regarding the nature and functioning of
systems (or classes of systems).

   Systems theory is generally considered to have been founded by
Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1930s,[2] although as Fritjof Capra
points out, Alexander Bogdaboz presented a highly developed "sys-
tems theory" (Bogdaboz called it "Tektology") as early as 1912.[3] In
either case, systems theory as an explicitly articulated approach echoes
ideas implicit in the thought of much earlier thinkers, such as Goethe,
Blake, and Kant.[4] In 1884 Le Chatelier proposed his Principle of
Equilibrium,[5] also foreshadowing the systems approach. In the 1920s,
Walter Canon's introduction of the concept of homeostasis,[6] as well
as an emerging emphasis among biologists on viewing "living organ-
isms as integrated wholes,"[7] were important precursors to Bertalanffy's
work in particular.[8]

   Two sub-fields of systems theory that are particularly applicable
to mind are cybernetics and dynamical systems theory (also referred
to as 'dynamics' or 'non-linear dynamics'). The first was developed
by Norbert Wiener in the 1940s. Wiener defined cybernetics as "the
science of 'control and communication in the animal and the machine'"

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   [2] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "General System Theory—A Critical Review," in *Modern
Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist*, ed. Walter Buckley (Chicago: Aldine Publishing
Co., 1968), 13.
   [3] Capra, *Web of Life*, 43ff.
   [4] Ibid., 21–2.
   [5] This principle states that "if a system in equilibrium is subjected to a change
threatening the equilibrium, the system attempts to annul the change." Jeffrey
Goldstein, "Unbalancing Psychoanalytic Theory: Moving Beyond the Equilibrium
Model of Freud's Thought," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, eds.
Robin Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,
1995), 242.
   [6] Capra, *Web of Life*, 43; Stephen E. Francis, "Chaotic Phenomena in Psychophysio-
logical Self-Regulation," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, eds. Robin
Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995),
254.
   [7] Capra, *Web of Life*, 17.
   [8] For an excellent overview of the historical origins of systems theory, see Capra,
Web of Life, 17ff.

and hoped that cybernetics might eventually be used to "create an exact science of mind."[9] In general, cybernetics focuses on under- standing how machines and organisms regulate inputs and outputs to maintain system steady states (or homeostasis). Dynamical systems theory, on the other hand, utilizes non-linear, differential equations as ways to think about and model the processes of complex systems. As Frederick Abraham explains, "the dynamical systems approach measures various aspects of . . . phenomena (observable variables), and constructs rules for how the behavior of such variables change at each state of the system."[10] More recent systems approaches to mind (particularly within the field of cognitive science) have tended to be of the dynamical variety, using non-linear, differential equations to model the simultaneously interactive processes associated with cer- tain cognitive capacities.

This mathematically-oriented systems approach may be contrasted with more philosophical/intuitive approaches. My application of sys- tems theory to mind below relies almost exclusively on the latter. Though for most systems theorists mathematical formalism is the ideal, attempts to mathematically model psychological processes are so far inapplicable to mysticism. Mystical transformation involves non-ordinary states of the entire cognitive system, while the dynam- ical, systems approach has been primarily restricted to the analysis and modeling of specific cognitive capacities or performances (such as decision making, mental image formation, memory retrieval, etc.) in the context of ordinary consciousness.[11] A mathematically explicit, dynamical model of the cognitive system as a whole is currently beyond the discipline since (1) the variables at stake are imprecise and difficult to quantify, (2) there are so many potential variables operative in the system, and (3) there is no consensus on exactly what the variables are.[12]

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[9] Capra, *Web of Life*, 51, 52.

[10] Frederick David Abraham, "Dynamics, Bifurcation, Self-Organization, Chaos, Mind, Conflict, Insensitivity to Initial Conditions, Time, Unification, Diversity, Free Will, and Social Responsibility," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, eds. Robin Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 155.

[11] Some conceptual implications of the more mathematically-based systems ap- proaches are discussed below. See p. 103.

[12] Dynamical theory is still suggestive in a general sense as a metaphor to guide new ways of thinking about and conceptualizing the nature and processes of mind.

Beyond the general concern with systems, systems theorists tend to emphasize the interdisciplinary scope of the discipline. As Bertalanffy points out, because systems theory is "concerned with formal characteristics of entities called systems . . . [it] is interdisciplinary, that is, it can be employed for phenomena investigated in different traditional branches of scientific research. It is not limited to material systems but applies to any 'whole' consisting of interacting 'components.'"[13] The broad applicability of systems theory lies in the fact that it emphasizes organization and process rather than ontology: "it is not the nature of the parts alone that are basic to any whole, but the way they are interrelated that gives them their characteristic properties."[14] Because it focuses "on organization or relationships per se rather than immutable substances" systems theory may analyze "systems of all kinds regardless of their 'substantive' nature."[15]

For many systems theorists, the systems approach goes beyond a general orientation to the data; it also seeks to identify "those principles which are valid for systems in general."[16] As Laszlo explains, systems theory aims at "formulat[ing] a set of concepts . . . through which the significantly recurrent regularities of phenomena in diverse realms of investigation [can] be exhibited as isomorphisms of the level of basic invariances."[17] Some systems theorists take an additional step and consider these "universal systems principles" to be a way to "[integrate] . . . the various natural and social sciences."[18] Early

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[13] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *A Systems View of Man* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 109. See also Ervin Laszlo, Ignazio Masulli, Robert Artigiani, and Vilmos Csányi, preface to *The Evolution of Cognitive Maps: New Paradigms for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Ervin Laszlo and Ignazio Masulli (New York: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1993), x–xi.

[14] Walter Buckley, general introduction to *Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist*, ed. Walter Buckley (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968), xxiv. See also Joanna Rogers Macy, "Systems Philosophy as a Hermeneutic for Buddhist Teachings," *Philosophy East and West* 26/1 (1976): 21.

[15] Buckley, general introduction, xxiv.

[16] Bertalanffy, quoted in William Gray and Nicholas D. Rizzo, "History and Development of General Systems Theory," in *General Systems Theory and Psychiatry*, eds. William Gray, Frederick J. Duhl, and Nicholas D. Rizzo (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), 7. See also Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 31; Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "General System Theory and Psychology," in *Toward Unification in Psychology*, ed. J.R. Royce (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 221; Glenn A. Perry, "A Systems/Perennial Approach to the Evolution of Psyche," *World Futures* 36 (1993): 217.

[17] Laszlo, in Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 31.

[18] Seidler on Bertalanffy, in Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 31–2.

systems theorists in particular considered systems theory a means to unify a fragmented and overly compartmentalized science. Systems theory, because of its interdisciplinary scope, was considered the perfect "meta-science" to bring this about.

Some systems theorists claim that the existence of "universal systemic laws" or "principles" is confirmed by empirical evidence. Erich Jantsch, for example, maintains that an analysis of the self-organizing dynamics of systems within "chemistry through biology to socio-biology and beyond seems to point to the existence of a general dynamic system theory which is valid in a very wide domain of natural systems."[19] Anthony Stevens states as a self-evident "fact" that "homeostatic regulation can be observed at all levels of existence, from molecules to communities, in living as well as non-living systems."[20] These remarks notwithstanding, the commonalities that systems theorists point to are more intuitively derived than empirically confirmed. The search for "recurrent regularities" has tended to rely on identifying patterns in one type of system and then generalizing the results (at least provisionally) to others; a systemic principle identified at the organismic level (for example) may in turn be applied to ecosystems, governments, or even minds. As reductionistic as this may seem, systems theorists argue that it is not—if the principle is universal, no level is being privileged over any other. Countering the reductionist critique, Laszlo also points out that universal principles do not deny "qualitative differentiation." On some level, minds may function like cells, but "qualitative differentiation is allowed for in the (non-metaphysical) emergence of qualities associated with different levels of complexity and with different transformations of a basic invariance."[21]

Systems theory's critics are unconvinced by these arguments. The problems raised by systems theory's methodology remain serious and

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[19] Erich Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980), 56. See also Ibid., 39–40, 69; Laszlo, in Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 31; Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 126–7; Günter Schiepek and Wolfgang Tschacher, "Applications of Synergetics to Clinical Psychology," in *Self-Organization and Clinical Psychology: Empirical Approaches to Synergetics in Psychology*, eds. W. Tschacher, G. Schiepek, and E.J. Brunner (Berlin; New York: Springer-Verlag, 1992), 15.

[20] Anthony Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

[21] Laszlo, in Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 31.

will be addressed in more detail below in the context of systems the-
ory's application to mind and mysticism.

What is a 'System'?

Whether in its general or more specialized forms, systems theory is
based on the idea of 'system.' How is this term defined? In the
broadest sense, almost anything observable may be considered a sys-
tem. According to Jeremy Hayward, a system is anything that "can
be separated out by us from its background."[22] Such a broad definition
seems to render the term meaningless or redundant. However, refer-
ring to a phenomenon as a 'system' serves to highlight the particu-
lar orientation to phenomena that systems theory represents: when
something is referred to as a system, implicit in the terminological
shift is an approach to the phenomenon that emphasizes its systemic
properties, in particular, the interdependence of its components as
well as the interdependent relationship of the whole system with its
larger environment. From a systems perspective, any system is com-
posed of subsystems while itself being the subsystem of a larger
system. Systems are nested hierarchically with each level related inter-
dependently to the others.[23] In both senses (internal and external
relations), *interconnectedness* becomes an important dimension of sys-
tems analysis.[24]

    Beyond this general understanding of 'system,' the term is also
defined in more restrictive ways. Bertalanffy defines a system as "a
complex of elements in interaction, these interactions being of an
ordered (non-random) nature."[25] According to Capra, a system is
"an integrated whole whose essential properties arise from the rela-
tionship between its parts" while Anatol Rapoport describes a sys-
tem as "a whole which functions as a whole by virtue of the
interdependence of its parts."[26] These last two definitions highlight

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[22] Jeremy Hayward, foreword to *From Reductionism to Creativity: rDzogs-chen and the
New Sciences of Mind*, by Herbert Guenther (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), xii.
[23] See Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 36.
[24] This is an area where systems theorists sometimes draw parallels between sys-
tems theory and religious philosophies of interconnectedness or unity. See Capra,
Web of Life, 7; Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 93.
[25] Bertalanffy, *Systems View of Man*, 109.
[26] Capra, *Web of Life*, 27; Anatol Rapoport, foreword to *Modern Systems Research
for the Behavioral Scientist*, ed. Walter Buckley (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968),
xvii.

what is perhaps the most often cited characteristic distinguishing a system from a non-system: a system is anything whose constituent elements or processes are organized in such a way that their interaction lends to the whole a non-summative character (i.e., the whole is more than the sum of its parts). As Joanna Macy explains, the character of a system derives "less from the nature of its components than from their organization. . . . Hence, it is more than the sum of its parts. This 'more' is not something extra, like a vitalist principle or an *elan vital*, but a new level of operation which the interdependence of its parts permits."[27] The obvious implication of this definition—and one of the premises on which systems theory is founded—is that to understand any given system requires attention to the whole and not a mere dissection and analysis of its components.[28] This does not mean that systems theory ignores system components. From a systems perspective, however, these have to be understood in relation to the whole rather than as discrete, isolated entities, especially since they may take on certain unique properties by virtue of being part of a particular system.[29]

Maintenance and Evolution of System Structure

Systems theory is particularly concerned with understanding the principles governing the maintenance and evolution of system organization or structure. For example, because the elements or processes within certain systems are interdependent and reciprocally causative, the alteration, addition, and/or loss of an element may affect the whole, either instantaneously or when a variable(s) is altered beyond some critical value. A system's evolution may also be correlated to the permeability of its boundaries, i.e., how open or closed its boundaries are. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, closed systems "must eventually decay to a state of maximum chaos (highest entropy),"[30] i.e., a state of thermodynamic equilibrium. "Classical thermodynamics," in this sense, "is essentially a theory of the '*destruction of structure*.'"[31] The Second Law is limited in its applicability,

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[27] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 72.
[28] Buckley, general introduction, xxiii.
[29] Ibid., xxv.
[30] Hayward, foreward, x.
[31] P. Glansdorff and I. Prigogine, *Thermodynamic Theory of Structure, Stability, and Fluctuations* (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1971), xxi.

however, because living systems are open as well as being far from equilibrium,[32] creating unique conditions of energy/matter exchange not dealt with by classical thermodynamics. While any system in a non-equilibrium state produces entropy, open systems have the capacity to

> continuously [import] free energy from the environment and to export entropy. This means that entropy, in contrast to isolated systems, does not have to accumulate in the system and increase there. Entropy can also remain at the same level or even decrease in the system.[33]

The result is an overall negative balance of entropy (or 'negentropy') and therefore the emergence of increasingly improbable—i.e., ordered—arrangements of system constituents. This negentropy allows such systems to maintain highly organized steady-states far from equilibrium,[34] as well as undergo *anamorphosis*,[35] that is, a "sudden change of state from a state of lower order and less energy (high entropy) to a state of higher energy and greater order (lower entropy)."[36]

Identifying the principles governing the decay, maintenance, and evolution of system structure and/or steady-state is the central concern of cybernetics. Cybernetics seeks to describe the "transmission and interpretation of information"[37] in relation to homeostatic or self-organizing processes. Bertalanffy describes homeostasis as "the ensemble of organic regulations which act to maintain the steady states of the organism and are effectuated by regulating mechanisms."[38] Through homeostasis, "the continuity of structure or pattern is maintained."[39] Self-organization, on the other hand, refers to

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[32] The earth (including its subsystems) is a far from equilibrium system sustained through the input of solar energy. See I. Prigogine and P.M. Allen, "The Challenge of Complexity," in *Self-Organization in Dissipative Structures*, ed. William C. Schieve and Peter M. Allen (Austin: University of Texas, 1982), 6.

[33] Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe*, 26–7; see also 31. See Bertalanffy, *Systems View of Man*, 43; Bertalanffy, "Critical Review," 16.

[34] Bertalanffy, *Systems View of Man*, 112. See also Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 217; Miriam LeGare, "The Use of General Systems Theory as Metatheory for Developing and Evaluating Theories in the Neurosciences," *Behavioral Science* 32 (1987): 111.

[35] Gray and Rizzo, "History and Development of General Systems Theory," 15.

[36] Hayward, foreward, x–xi.

[37] Kenneth E. Boulding, "General Systems Theory—The Skeleton of Science," in *Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist*, ed. Walter Buckley (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968), 7.

[38] Bertalanffy, "Critical Review," 17.

[39] Macy, *Mutual Causality*, 74.

those processes through which a system's "structure is modified [and] its organization increased."[40]

In cybernetics, homeostatic and self-organizing processes take the form of negative and positive feedback loops respectively. Through negative feedback, any incongruency between the encoded norms of a system and input elicits output designed to reestablish congruency. Negative feedback functions to maintain a system's "calibration"[41] by reducing the "deviation between goal and performance."[42] Such processes are the basis for the "self-stabilizing" capacity of certain systems, i.e., "the ability or tendency of a systemic whole to reorient itself according to its own operational parameters after a disturbance from 'outside' the system."[43]

Positive feedback loops apply to the self-organizing or evolving processes of systems: "when perturbations in the environment persist and produce a continual mismatching between input and encoded norms, the system either becomes dysfunctional or hits on new behaviors which are adaptive to the new conditions."[44] These "new behaviors" are realized by reinforcing or amplifying deviations, a "process which can potentially *recalibrate* the system" and thereby "increase the range of its permissible behavior by triggering its evolution to a higher and more flexible order."[45]

Justifying the Systems Approach to Mind

One of the premises of systems theory is that principles of organization and evolution are generalizable across multiple types of systems. As Macy states, the principles "which govern [systemic] processes . . . are essentially the same whatever the nature of the system."[46] From a systems perspective, this includes mind or consciousness. According to Linda Olds, "just as we speak of 'energy-processing' physical systems, we might also speak of 'information-processing' mental or cognitive systems."[47]

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 218.
[42] Macy, *Mutual Causality*, 75. See also Boulding, "General Systems Theory," 7.
[43] Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 34.
[44] Macy, *Mutual Causality*, 76.
[45] Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 218.
[46] Macy, *Mutual Causality*, 73.
[47] Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 79. See also Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach,"

As noted above, systems theory's critics consider such an approach reductionistic. On what basis can mind be reduced to the level of cells, ecosystems, vortexes, and thermostats? In response, systems theorists argue that physical systems are merely the site where systemic principles were first discerned. Because these principles are considered operative in diverse types of systems, no level is being "reduced" to any other, making the context of their discovery irrelevant.[48] As Hermann Haken remarks, "though synergetics [a sub-field of systems theory] originated from physics, it is by no means a physical theory that tries to reduce complex systems or phenomena in the animate or inanimate world to the laws of physics. Rather the physical systems, which were studied first, allowed us to unearth a number of general principles that are common to a great variety of complex systems."[49] In a similar vein, Carl Jung reasoned that "because the psyche evolved in the context of the world, . . . the laws which prevail in the cosmos must also prevail in the psyche."[50] Critics of systems theory reject these arguments, contending that so-called "systemic principles" are nothing more than "'intuitive' metaphor mongering."[51] In spite of the aura of science that surrounds it, systems theory is not science because it is not falsifiable.[52] According to its critics, systems theory is a type of philosophy or metaphysics at best.[53]

217; F.D. Abraham, "Dynamics, Bifurcation," 158; Frederick J. Streng, "Religious Studies: Processes of Transformation," in *Academic Study of Religion: 1974 Proceedings*, comp. Anne Carr (AAR Annual Meeting 1974, Academic Study of Religion Section), 123ff.

[48] The same point is taken for granted in mathematics.

[49] Hermann Haken, "Synergetics in Psychology," in *Self-Organization and Clinical Psychology: Empirical Approaches to Synergetics in Psychology*, eds. W. Tschacher, G. Schiepek, and E.J. Brunner (Berlin; New York: Springer-Verlag, 1992), 32.

[50] Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*, 72.

[51] Richard J. Eiser, "Attitudes as Attractors: More Than a Metaphor?" *Psychological Inquiry* 8/2 (1997): 119.

[52] Peter T. Saunders, "Evolutionary Theory and Cognitive Maps," in *The Evolution of Cognitive Maps*, ed. Ervin Laszlo and Ignazio Masulli (Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1993), 109. Saunders' additional remarks—in defense of systems theory—are worth noting: "Not all explanation in science must be based on falsifiable theories. This is because falsification depends not on explanation but on prediction, and the two do not always go together. The sudden fall of a barometer is a reliable predictor of a storm, but it does not explain it. Conversely, we may be satisfied that we understand why the dodo became extinct without claiming that we could have predicted it in advance, nor that we can say which of the currently endangered species will survive and which will not." (Ibid.)

[53] Seidler, "Problems of Systems Epistemology," 39–40.

The critics may be right (though systems theorists would dispute the point). Regarding the nature of mind and personality, however, the critique is irrelevant. Psychology has historically been highly dependent on metaphor,[54] and since the demise of behaviorism, this has been even more the case.[55] From the stream metaphor of the early introspectionists to the hydraulic metaphor of psychoanalysis and the computer metaphor of cognitive science, psychological theory is pervasively metaphorical in nature.[56] In addition, verification and falsifiability have always been problems in psychology, as evidenced by the numerous and competing theories in the field. No amount of research or data has so far been able to prove or disprove any theory of personality, whether it be psychoanalytic, Jungian, humanistic, or transpersonal. Evidence may be suggestive (especially with regards to specific perceptual and cognitive capacities), but so far not suggestive enough to establish any one general theory of mind, consciousness, or personality as indisputably valid. To insist on verifiability, or even falsifiability, as a criterion of psychological theory would effectively leave psychology to the behaviorists, whose strict reliance on observable data turned out to be an explanatory dead end when it came to understanding behavior. Behavior cannot be understood independent of the 'black box,' the mind. But because it *is* a black box, the only way to build theory is through metaphor. If Jung was right when he described psychology as a "calculus of subjective prejudices,"[57] it can hardly be viewed as a problem if systems approaches to mind are metaphorical. This is even more the case given the heuristic value of a systems approach to mind, as demonstrated by the analysis of mind later in this chapter.

The metaphorical character of the systems approach to mind may be unproblematic, but the systems psychologist must still address two

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[54] See Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 124ff.; Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 39; K.H. Pribram, "The Role of Analogy in Transcending Limits in the Brain Sciences," *Daedalus* 109/2 (1980): 21; Christopher deCharms, *Two Views of Mind: Abhidharma and Brain Science* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), 143.

[55] Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 6, 33–4.

[56] This includes Asian models of consciousness. See Karl Potter's discussion of agricultural metaphors of mind in Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtra*. Karl H. Potter, "The Karma Theory and Its Interpretation in Some Indian Philosophical Systems," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 245–248.

[57] C.G. Jung, in Frederick David Abraham, "Toward a Dynamical Theory of the Psyche: Archetypal Patterns of Self-Reflection and Self-Organization," *Psychological Perspectives* 20/1 (1989): 165.

additional problems: what is the justification for applying a specifically
systems metaphor to mind, and what is the basis for using it instead
of alternative psychological theories (especially if empirical verification
and falsifiability are not issues)? In response to the first question,
there would now seem to be enough established precedent to justify
systems approaches to mind as viable alternatives to more main-
stream theories of mind and cognition.[58] Systems-based theories of
mind are not new. Systems theory has played a role in psychology
in two senses: implicit and explicit. In the first sense, systems-type
thinking is implicit in some traditional psychological theory.[59] The
theories of personality of Freud, Henry Murray, and Karl Menninger
are all "systemic" in nature, particularly the emphasis on maintain-
ing and restoring mental (egoic) equilibrium in the face of internal
and external conflict.[60] Freud's pleasure principle functions as a
"hydraulic," equilibrium-seeking process that is essentially homeo-
static.[61] The concept of equilibrium is at the heart of psychoanaly-
sis in general, where "regulatory mental mechanisms" are explained
as "equilibrium-seeking *systems*."[62] The structural wholeness and integrity
ascribed by Piaget to each developmental stage, as well as the processes
underlying advancement through these stages, also resonates with
a systems perspective.[63] The flow of the surrounding "life-space" in
Kurt Lewin's theory of perception is essentially a dynamical system.[64]

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[58] See, for example, Tim van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be, if not
Computation?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 91/7 (1995): 346–7.

[59] See Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 87–8; Goldstein, "Unbalancing Psychoanalytic
Theory," 242ff.; Bertalanffy, "General System Theory and Psychology," 222; Schiepek
and Tschacher, "Applications of Synergetics," 4.

[60] James G. Miller, *Living Systems* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorodo, 1995),
457.

[61] Goldstein, "Unbalancing Psychoanalytic Theory," 245; Goldstein explains this
as a symptom of "physics envy" by early psychologists. (Ibid., 243) See also Roy
Ginker, ed., *Toward a Unified Theory of Human Behavior; an Introduction to General Systems
Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), vii.

[62] Goldstein, "Unbalancing Psychoanalytic Theory," 240.

[63] Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 79; Wilber, Engler, and Brown, *Transformations
of Consciousness*, 4; Ben Goertzel, "Evolutionary Dynamics in Minds and Immune
Systems," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology*, ed. F.D. Abraham and A.R. Gilgen (Westport,
CT: Greenwood, 1995), 175; Phyllis Ann Perna, "Regression as Chaotic Uncertainty
and Transformation," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, ed. Robin
Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995),
298.

[64] Ralph H. Abraham, "Erodynamics and the Dischaotic Personality," in *Chaos
Theory in Psychology*, ed. F.D. Abraham and A.R. Gilgen (Westport, CT: Greenwood,
1995), 163.

In addition to the presence of this implicit systems perspective in psychology, there is an established and growing field of psychological theory and research that is explicitly systems-based.[65] Systems theory (including dynamical modeling, chaos theory, etc.) has been recommended or used as a theoretical framework for the interpretation of such diverse psychological phenomena as visual pattern recognition,[66] personality theory,[67] the etiology of psychopathologies,[68] attention,[69] perception,[70] belief systems,[71] decision-making,[72] attitudes,[73] associative memory,[74] social psychology,[75] family dynamics,[76] and neurophysiology.[77] Systems psychologists have emphasized the value of

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[65] Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 45–6; Bertalanffy, "General System Theory and Psychology," 222–3. For a survey of psychological researchers who use systems theory, see Marvin L. Kaplan and Netta R. Kaplan, "The Self-Organization of Human Psychological Functioning," *Behavioral Science* 36/3 (1991): 161.

[66] Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 33–4; Haken, "Synergetics in Psychology," 46; Ben Goertzel, "A Cognitive Law of Motion," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, ed. Robin Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 143.

[67] R.H. Abraham, "Erodynamics and the Dischaotic Personality," 164; Arnold Powell, Joseph R. Royce, and Burton Voorhees, "Personality as a Complex Information-Processing System," *Behavioral Science* 27 (1982): 365–6, 371. See Stevens remarks on Carl Jung's understanding of the psyche as a "self-regulating system." Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*, 72.

[68] R.H. Abraham, "Erodynamics and the Dischaotic Personality,"164–5; Schiepek and Tschacher, "Applications of Synergetics," 8–9; Isla E. Lonie, "The Princess and the Swineherd: Applications of Chaos Theory to Psychodynamcs," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, ed. Robin Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 293.

[69] Tyson, "General Systems Theory Approach," 495–6.

[70] Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 272; Thomas A. Gentry, "Fractal Geometry and Human Understanding," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology*, ed. F.D. Abraham and A.R. Gilgen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995), 145; Ben Goertzel, *Chaotic Logic: Language, Mind, and Reality, from the Perspective of Complex Systems Science* (New York: Plenum, 1994), 109.

[71] Ben Goertzel, "Belief Systems as Attractors," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, ed. Robin Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 123ff.

[72] van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 359ff.

[73] Eiser, "Attitudes as Attractors," 121–2.

[74] Ibid., 121; Goertzel, "Cognitive Law of Motion," 143.

[75] Robin R. Vallacher and Andrzej Nowak, "The Emergence of Dynamical Social Psychology," *Psychological Inquiry* 8/2 (1997): 74, 80.

[76] Kaplan and Kaplan, "Self-Organization of Human Psychological Functioning," 176; Frederick David Abraham, "Introduction to Dynamics: A Basic Language; A Basic Metamodeling Strategy," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology*, ed. F.D. Abraham and A.R. Gilgen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 37.

[77] Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 55, 134, 265; Pribram, "Role of Analogy," 23; LeGare, "Use of General Systems Theory," 108ff. See Goertzel on Freeman's

systems theory (particularly chaos theory) in modeling transitions between cognitive and emotional states (e.g., fluctuations in attitude/mood and motivation).[78] Systems theory is also playing an increasingly important role in cognitive science, where both connectionist[79] and dynamical models are systemic in nature.[80]

Such precedent does not prove that systems metaphors are superior to the alternatives (every major theory has a history of theory and praxis, most much more developed than systems approaches to mind). It does show, however, that within the fields of psychology and cognitive science as a whole, systems psychology is a viable theoretical choice. This point alone is enough to justify applying systems metaphors to mysticism. As noted in the Introduction, the study of mysticism has reached a point where any approach with the potential to resolve the current impasse in the discourse deserves serious consideration; it is not necessary that such alternatives be definitively established as superior to other psychological theories (especially when adjudicating such theories is so problematic).[81]

Within the field of psychology, however, systems psychologists do have reasons for favoring a systems-based interpretation of mind.

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work showing chaotic activity in the olfactory cortex. Goertzel, "Cognitive Law of Motion," 140; Goertzel, *Chaotic Logic*, 22–3.

[78] F.D. Abraham, "Introduction to Dynamics," 41; Vallacher and Nowak, "Emergence of Dynamical Social Psychology," 94–5.

[79] Eiser, "Attitudes as Attractors," 122; van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 370, 374; Francisco Varela, "When is a Map Cognitive?" in *The Evolution of Cognitive Maps*, ed. Ervin Laszlo and Ignazio Masulli (Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1993), 101–2.

[80] See Timothy van Gelder and Robert F. Port, "It's About Time: An Overview of the Dynamical Approach to Cognition," in *Mind as Motion: Explorations in the Dynamics of Cognition*, eds. Robert F. Port and Timothy van Gelder (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 4. For a summary of some of the specific types of cognitive research being done based on a dynamical systems approach, see van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 374–5 and van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," viii, 11. In the cognitive sciences in general, it is taken for granted that mind is a system, though what type of system—computational, connectionist, or dynamical—is a debated issue. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 23; van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 365.

[81] Systems theorists do try to make the case for the superiority of the systems approach to mind/personality over traditional psychological theories. (See Kaplan and Kaplan, "Self-Organization of Human Psychological Functioning," 161ff.; Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 216.) In the field of cognitive science specifically, those advocating the dynamical approach have amassed a strong case for the superiority of the dynamical approach to cognition over mainstream cognitivism. See van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," 10, 18, 22–3; van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 379.

Three basic arguments are usually advanced by systems theorists to justify a systems approach to mind. The first is based on the usefulness of systems theory in the physical sciences. As van Gelder and Port explain,

> dynamics provides a vast resource of extremely powerful concepts and tools. Their usefulness in offering the best scientific explanations of phenomena throughout the natural world has been proven again and again. It would hardly be a surprise if dynamics turned out to be the framework within which the most powerful descriptions of cognitive processes were also forthcoming.[82]

This point is reinforced by the second and primary justification for applying systems theory to mind/consciousness: the intuitive impression that mind *looks* and *behaves* like a system;[83] mind seems to have processes isomorphic with those of other systems. While the appearance of similarity is not conclusive evidence, the fact that so many researchers share the same intuition should not be casually dismissed. A final justification (closely related to the above) is that the systems approach to mind is better able to address aspects or qualities of mind/cognition neglected by other psychological theories.

Intuitive Appeal: Mind Appears to be a System

The systems approach to mind is partially based on the intuitive impression that in some fundamental ways mind is comparable to other natural and mechanical systems (including cybernetic and dynamical/chaotic). The idea that mind is a system is itself uncontroversial. As discussed above, *system* can be defined in such a way as to include almost anything. Most definitions of the term, however, emphasize certain uniquely systemic properties or qualities, which seem to be exemplified by mind. For example, mind appears to be "an aggregate of interacting parts or components"[84] exemplifying

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[82] van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," 18. See also Powell, Royce, and Voorhees, "Personality as a Complex Information-Processing System," 338.

[83] Schiepek and Tschacher seem to consider the operation of systems processes in the psychological domain self-evident. As they put it, "the nonlinear processes and phenomena of self-organization occur everywhere within the traditional areas of the research and practice of clinical psychology." (Schiepek and Tschacher, "Applications of Synergetics," 15) This is the only source I have encountered that makes such a strong claim.

[84] Gregory Bateson, in Capra, *Web of Life*, 305.

"wholeness and order."[85] In particular, the mind as a "whole" seems
to be non-summative in nature in that it "manifest[s] properties
which are irreducible to the sum of the properties of the compo-
nents."[86] Furthermore, the interdependence of system constituents,
appears to be a property equally characteristic of mental systems.[87]
As in other complex systems, this interdependence implies that under-
standing any given variable of the cognitive system depends on relat-
ing it to the whole. As David Zohar explains,

> thought processes . . . cannot be analyzed too much in terms of dis-
> tinct elements, because the 'intrinsic' nature of each element is not a
> property existing separately from and independently of other elements
> but is, instead, a property that arises partially from its relation with
> other elements.[88]

"Whatever the psyche may be," Laszlo states, "it is not an additive
aggregate of individual elements but a system composed of mutually
dependent parts."[89] The interdependence of cognitive variables seems
to include another, related property of systems: changing one ele-
ment or variable in the cognitive system may affect the system as a
whole.[90]

Mind also seems to exhibit some of the same types of processes
and conditions of evolution as other types of natural, mechanical,
and/or mathematical systems. Systems principles are applicable to
mind because "the set of events which constitutes the human mind
(sensations, feelings, volitions, thoughts, memories, imaginations, etc.)
exemplify fundamental patterned relationships which render it iso-
morphic with the general information and energy-flows of natural

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[85] Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy*, 124.

[86] Ibid., 124–5.

[87] Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge* (Shambhala:
Boston, 1987), 116; Powell, Royce, and Voorhees, "Personality as a Complex
Information-Processing System," 358ff.

[88] David Zohar, *The Quantum Self: A Revolutionary View of Human Nature and Consciousness
Rooted in the New Physics* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), 77.

[89] Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy*, 125. Bertalanffy, William Gray, John
Battista, Zohar, and Jantsch all agree. See Bertalanffy, *Systems View of Man*, 112,
126; William Gray, general introduction to *General Systems Theory and the Psychological
Sciences*, ed. William Gray, Jay W. Fidler, and John R. Battista (Seaside, CA:
Intersystems, Inc., 1982), 7; John R. Battista, introduction to *General Systems Theory
and the Psychological Sciences*, ed. William Gray, Jay W. Fidler, and John R. Battista
(Seaside, CA: Intersystems, Inc., 1982), 265; Zohar, *Quantum Self*, 191ff.; Jantsch,
Self-Organizing Universe, 50, 72–3.

[90] Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 264.

systems."[91] More specifically, mind seems to display both homeostatic and evolutionary tendencies dependent on such variables as boundary conditions, system stresses and perturbations, and degree of information input from the environment.

Mind Functions Like a Dynamical System

Van Gelder and Port define dynamical systems as "complexes of parts or aspects which are all evolving in a continuous, simultaneous, and mutually determining fashion."[92] This description seems applicable to mind.[93] Van Gelder and Port summarize some basic aspects of cognition, all of which support a dynamical systems understanding of mind:

1. cognitive processes always unfold in real time;
2. their behaviors are pervaded by *both* continuities and discretenesses;
3. they are composed of multiple subsystems which are simultaneously active and interacting;
4. their distinctive kinds of structure and complexity are not present from the very first moment, but emerge over time;
5. cognitive processes operate over many time scales, and events at different time scales interact;
6. they are embedded in a real body and environment.[94]

Van Gelder and Port emphasize that these are all areas that the cognitivist/computational approach—which views cognition as sequential, symbolic processing—fails to adequately address. This introduces the third justification for a systems approach to mind (and the basis for the argument that the systems approach is in fact superior to other psychological and cognitive theories): it recognizes areas of mind/cognition that other approaches either ignore or only marginally address.[95]

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[91] Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy*, 124. See also Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 236.

[92] van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," 13; see also van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 369, 373.

[93] van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 379. See also Kaplan and Kaplan, "Self-Organization of Human Psychological Functioning," 171.

[94] van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," 18. See also van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 379.

[95] While it posits a fundamentally different theory of cognition, the dynamical systems approach can still accommodate the construction of mental representations, which is the cornerstone of computational/cognitivist theory. See van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," 12; van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 376–7.

Applicability to a Wider Range of Data

For the systems approach to mind, understanding the global dimensions of consciousness includes an appreciation for its evolutionary/transformative potential as well as an emphasis on understanding the processes this transformation involves. Traditional psychological theories tend to emphasize the equilibrium-seeking nature of mind/personality and psychopathology.[96] A systems approach to mind, however, addresses both the homeostatic nature of the psyche as well as processes of change/transformation.[97] Systems theory seems to provide a particularly useful paradigm for understanding human psychological and spiritual growth.[98] While mainstream cognitivist theory focuses on specific cognitive capacities in the context of ordinary consciousness, neglecting the transformative potential of consciousness,[99] a non-linear, dynamical approach to mind "includes change and development as a natural process of system evolution."[100] Dynamical theory provides the mathematical/conceptual tools for understanding non-linear processes and abrupt phase transitions (or bifurcations).[101] Both of these areas of concern (consciousness at the global level and evolution) make the systems approach particularly applicable to mysticism, which deals with the transformation of global states of the cognitive system.

Another justification for the systems approach to mind is its capacity to describe the complex web of mental processes and interconnected variables that underlie experience. This complexity makes constructing psychological models problematic for any psychological or cognitive approach, systems theory included.[102] On the other hand, the mathematical tools used by dynamical systems theorists (non-linear, differential equations) have the potential to accommodate com-

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[96] Developmental theories are an important exception, though even here the transformational possibilities of the mature adult are relatively unexplored.

[97] Transpersonal psychology does emphasize transformation, but the systems approach articulates a more refined model of what transformation involves.

[98] Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 211, 216. See also Francis, "Chaotic Phenomena," 253.

[99] Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, 127.

[100] Goldstein, "Unbalancing Psychoanalytic Theory," 246. See also Albert R. Gilgen, "A Search for Bifurcations in the Psychological Domain," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology*, ed. F.D. Abraham and A.R. Gilgen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995), 139; Haken, "Synergetics in Psychology," 32.

[101] Schiepek and Tschacher, "Applications of Synergetics," 10.

[102] See Eiser, "Attitudes as Attractors," 124.

plexity in ways that other approaches cannot. As van Gelder and Port explain,

> any fully adequate approach to the study of cognitive systems must be one that can handle [the] multiple, simultaneous interactive activity [associated with the central nervous system]. Yet doing this is the essence of dynamics. Dynamical systems *are* just the simultaneous, mutually influencing activity of multiple parts or aspects. The dynamical approach is therefore inherently well-suited to describe cognitive systems.[103]

In addition to complexity, systems theory addresses two more areas that other psychological/cognitive theories tend to neglect: temporality as a cognitive variable and the interconnected relations of mind and environment. The first has already been mentioned above as one of the aspects of mind that seems intuitively consonant with the systems (specifically, dynamical) approach. Cognitive processes "unfold in real time," a fact that cognitivist theories ignore or address in "ad hoc" ways.[104] Regarding the relation between mind and the environment, the systems approach emphasizes the interconnected, interdependent relationship between system and surrounding milieu, as opposed to the Cartesian dualism of more traditional psychological and epistemological theories.[105]

A Systems Approach to Mind

The above arguments show that there are sound reasons to approach mind from a systems perspective. This raises the question: what exactly does a systems approach to mind involve? Given that systems theory encompasses a diverse range of theories and approaches, there are many ways this question can be answered; there is not just one systems approach to mind. The systems-based description of mind presented here therefore represents only one possibility among

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[103] van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," 24; see also van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 377–8; Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 6; R.H. Abraham, "Erodynamics," 157.

[104] van Gelder and Port, "It's About Time," 18; see also 10; van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 379.

[105] Hunt describes such dualism as "clinically disturbed" because of the isolating and alienating worldview it presupposes. (Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 24) On systems theory's undermining of the dualistic, Cartesian framework, see van Gelder, "What Might Cognition Be?" 379.

many. It incorporates aspects from various systems-oriented (as well as traditional) theories, but emphasizes cybernetic processes as metaphor for both cognitive and phenomenal levels of mind/consciousness.

Mind: Definitions and Structure

Before addressing the details of the cybernetic model itself, I begin with a few stipulative definitions of terms central to any psychological discussion: awareness, consciousness, and mind. The term *awareness* is used here to connote sentience itself (or 'sentience-as-such'). *Consciousness* is awareness constrained by a system of cognitive and emotional variables/events. This system as a whole may be referred to as *mind* or the *cognitive system*. Consciousness, then, refers to a specific mode of awareness (i.e., a *state* of consciousness) supported by an interdependent network of cognitive and affective factors/events (the cognitive system or mind). In slightly different terms, awareness is constrained by mind, creating a particular state of consciousness. Note that these definitions make a distinction between sentience-as-such—awareness as "primary and irreducible"[106]—and sentience as it is expressed according to specific sensory, neural, cognitive, and environmentally conditioned constraints (i.e., a state of consciousness).

A state of consciousness (what Charles Tart calls a d-SoC, "discrete state of consciousness") is not to be confused with the immediate and changing content of consciousness but represents an overall pattern of stabilized psychological organization that abides regardless of fluctuations in psychological sub-systems or environmental input. Though a state includes such fluctuations, a state of consciousness is the abiding frame of reference that constitutes the implicit, semantic background within which such fluctuations occur. For example, the essential characteristic of the state of consciousness identified with ordinary experience is duality, which is expressed on two levels: perceptual/spatial (a self situated in a world of apparently real and distinct objects)[107] and evaluative (the content of experience viewed as either attractive/"good" or repellent/"bad").[108] This dual-

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[106] See Hunt, *On the Nature of Connsciousness*, 51.

[107] The Buddhist Yogācāra text, the *Madhyānta-vibhāga*, defines *citta* (usually translated "mind") as nothing other than the perception of an object. See Thomas E. Wood, *Mind Only: A Philosophical and Doctrinal Analysis of the Vijñānavāda* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 12.

[108] In Buddhist thought, human affective response includes a third, neutral cat-

ity, as an abiding context of experience, persists with greater or lesser degrees of intensity regardless of whether or not one happens to be angry, joyful, distracted, etc.[109]

The mind is the entire system of mental, emotional, and behavioral variables that constructs and defends such a state, both at the level of unconscious cognitive processes and conscious, fluctuating phenomenal experience. In the case of ordinary experience, these variables include: (1) a ceaseless, self-oriented, and only partially controllable internal narrative; (2) the absorption of attention on this internal narrative and consequent abstraction of experience out of the stream of felt sensation and perception; (3) distraction-seeking and addictive behavior; (4) both unconscious/cognitive and conscious concepts and beliefs encompassing substance-based ontological presuppositions, self-image, conditions of worth/belonging, and linguistically-constructed conceptual categories; (5) the mediation of experience according to such concepts/beliefs; (6) defense mechanisms to preserve/protect the self-image; etc. These variables themselves represent fluctuating and mutually reinforcing processes, all constrained

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egory. I would argue that this is more a symptom of ordinary consciousness than indicative of a cognitively active category of associations. In other words, anything not labeled "good" or "bad" becomes neutral by default. An interesting (and existentially tragic) consequence of this is that most of life becomes irrelevant.

[109] Charles Tart, who pioneered the systems approach to states of consciousness, seems to use the term 'state' in much the same sense. (Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 5; Francis, "Chaotic Phenomena," 259) According to Tart, such states (or d-SoCs, "discrete states of consciousness") are supported by a system of variables in dynamic interaction. (Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 63; Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, 227–8) Tart uses 'structure' to refer to "a relatively stable organization of component parts that perform one or more related psychological functions." (Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 18) A set of such structures in turn comprises a d-SoC. (Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 58, 62; Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, 228–30) Structures, then, are sub-systems of a state, not meta-systems constraining states. For both Tart and myself, a state defines its own semantic parameters, rather than being subject to the semantic constraints of a higher-level cognitive structure. At least one significant difference between Tart's understanding of states and my own concerns his insistence that no state has privileged access to reality. For Tart, all states are limited constructions, each having its own criteria of "reality" and "truth." (Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, 243–4) I take exactly the opposite position: cognitive systems/states all reflect more or less veridical attunements to Reality as such. In other words, some states have greater epistemic value than others. Meditative/mystical experience in particular represents a change in the practitioner's state of consciousness and a corresponding transformation of the cognitive system as a whole. Mystical experiences involve change on all levels of the psyche—a breakthrough to a completely new, expanded, and richer level of semantic and affective appreciation.

within a critical range in order to maintain the integrity of the system as a whole.

Since a state of consciousness is generated by a particular cognitive system (or mind), the cognitive system and its corresponding state are functionally interdependent. In other words, a change in state necessarily implies a change in the cognitive system, and vice versa. Furthermore, the relation between system and state is not one way. The cognitive system constrains awareness (generating a state), but a state in turn reinforces the system of variables that created it. For example, the underlying presuppositions of an emotion like anger tend to depend on, as well as support, a dualistic perspective on life (feeling one with others would tend to promote empathy and so undermine getting angry at them). As will be discussed below, the doctrines and practices of Dzogchen and German mysticism initiate a transformation of consciousness as a system/state in the specific sense described here.

This cybernetic model of mind entails a normative claim about states of consciousness: particular states of consciousness constitute more or less veridical attunements to Reality as such. In other words, some states are more transparent "windows" on Reality than others. The state of consciousness associated with ordinary experience constitutes a particularly opaque/obscured view of the Real. This obscured or deluded quality is reflected in the implicit ontology of ordinary experience, where 'substance' is taken for granted as an object of experience when in fact 'substance' is never experienced at all. Rather, we experience an ongoing stream of sensations (color patches, tactile resistance, etc.) that, because of certain patterns of regularity in their occurrence, support the formation of a perceptual construct of 'substance.' 'Substance' is a mental construction or interpretation.

The fact that ordinary experience is so fundamentally linked with the presupposition of substance confirms Herbert Guenther's observation (inspired, it would seem, primarily by Heidegger and Dzogchen) that human beings have radically strayed from any sensitive appreciation for their own experience. The ongoing mind-body problem of philosophical and cognitive discourse is a good illustration of this experiential/existential insensitivity. The only incontrovertible fact of our predicament is experience itself. Yet many philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists consider "matter" to be the basic given of our experience and see consciousness as a problem to be explained

in relation to matter. The extreme, almost perverse, outcome of this view is the claim that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of material processes. A phenomenologically sensitive appreciation of our predicament suggests a different conclusion: sentience is the given (though a very mysterious given) while "matter" is a cognitive construction and ontological fallacy.

These reflections on the primacy of experience and the constructed nature of substance lend some support to a monist understanding of Reality, in opposition to the dualistic, Cartesian model suggested by ordinary experience. From this perspective, Reality may best be described as a single, meaning-saturated, energetic[110] field that devolves through processes of mental reification and objectification into the subject and object poles of experience. The "objects" of experience are best explained as "objectified meaning,"[111] though the process of objectification constitutes an extreme impoverishment of the semantic/epistemic dimension of experience. This model provides an elegant solution to the mind-body problem, in the sense that it negates the presuppositions that create the problem to begin with. From a monist perspective, there is no mind-body problem, since the dualism of "mind" and "body" is an erroneous interpretation of a single, dynamic field.

Processes of Mind

In the context of the ordinary state of consciousness, the diverse processes of mind together perform two basic functions. First, the mind constructs ordinary experience, and the interpretation of that experience as a world.[112] In particular, it constructs the two forms of dualism that characterize the fundamental structure of ordinary

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[110] I use the term 'energy' not in a scientific sense, but simply to refer to 'whatever is' viewed without conceptual projections identifying it as a particular thing imbued with substance.

[111] See Herbert V. Guenther, *From Reductionism to Creativity: rDzogs-chen and the New Sciences of Mind* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), 203.

[112] Describing the world as "construction" is not meant to imply that it is mere projection or hallucination. As Daniel Dennett points out, the mind does not have the information-processing capacity to generate an illusion as richly nuanced as the world of ordinary experience. (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 7ff.) In addition, pure solipsism is difficult to reconcile with the uncontrollable, unpredictable, and unpleasant aspects of life. Perception *is* radically misleading, but at the same time it is constrained by the noumenal Real. Perception primarily functions to 'skew' (through objectification/reification) the experience of that which is already given.

experience: perceptual and evaluative. Second, the mind homeostatically maintains/defends that state of reference in the face of stresses and perturbations.[113] Because the constructive processes of mind result in the intelligible world of ordinary experience, perception/mentation is generally described in information-processing terms, i.e., the mind synthesizes a perceptual whole (our experienced world) and constructs meaning out of a chaotic melange of sensory inputs. An alternative position is suggested by the recognition that the intelligibility of ordinary experience does not necessarily entail that sense data (the raw input processed by the mind) is inherently unintelligible or meaningless. Intelligibility in the context of ordinary experience may constitute a radical loss of potential meaningfulness. Rather than synthesizing a meaningful whole out of chaotic multiplicity, the mind may instead collapse an inherently meaningful Unity (the Real) into the meaning-impoverished dualistic perspective that characterizes ordinary experience. From this perspective, meaning is a given, not a construction.

The constructive processes of mind (the processes that generate ordinary experience) depend on the set of cognitive categories, maps,

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[113] Goertzel places particular emphasis on mental homeostasis when he claims that the "only logical role for consciousness" is "one of *iteratively strengthening barriers against reorganization.*" (Goertzel, *Chaotic Logic*, 112) The homeostatic nature of mind is also reflected in Combs' remark that "the central project of the ego [is] to promote itself." (Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 136) A number of systems theorists, however, argue against the claim that ordinary cognition is essentially homeostatic. Bertalanffy, for example, argues that many human behaviors are not homeostatic but creative and potentially tension-enhancing. (Bertalanffy, "Critical Review," 25; see also Powell, Royce, and Voorhees, "Personality as a Complex Information-Processing System," 347–8; Francis, "Chaotic Phenomena," 257.) Systems theory itself—with its emphasis on process and self-organization—is often presented as a corrective to this approach. While it is true that part of systems theory's usefulness is its attention to the problem of transformation (making it uniquely applicable to mysticism), it would still seem to be the case that cognitive processes are essentially homeostatic in nature. See Powell, Royce, and Voorhees, "Personality as a Complex Information-Processing System," 345–6; Miller, *Living Systems*, 459; Perry, "Systems/ Perennial Approach," 218; Lawrence K. Frank, "Organized Complexities," in *Toward Unification in Psychology: The First BANFF Conference on Theoretical Psychology*, ed. Joseph R. Royce (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 231.

Consciousness may easily shift into moments of intense aesthetic appreciation, for example (see Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 189), but true shifts in state in which one's world becomes radically altered tend to occur only under extreme, non-ordinary conditions (such as ongoing stress, ingestion of drugs, or sustained application of mystical practices). Much of what Bertalanffy refers to as "creative" or "tension-enhancing" behavior can be interpreted as homeostatic in its effects on consciousness. I think Freud (using different terminology) would agree.

concepts and beliefs[114] that function as the template for our ordinarily experienced world. This map is comprised of (1) those constructs that establish the background and focal dimensions of the perceptual field (i.e., concepts of substance, temporality, spatial orientation, etc.,[115] as well as the linguistic/conceptual inventory of the "things," qualities, and experiences comprising the world), and (2) the evaluative associations linked to every thing and experience within that perceptual context—the conditions that define desirability vs. undesirability (I will refer to these as perceptual and evaluative constructs respectively). The first category of constructs functions to reify/objectify experience and construct perceptual duality.[116] The second generates the evaluative interpretation of experiences and objects as attractive/desired or aversive/repellent, providing the basis for our essentially dualistic, affective responses to life.

   These levels are functionally interdependent since evaluative associations only occur in relation to a self (i.e., what the self wants and does not want) and a localized self in turn presupposes the perceptual duality of self vs. object. In addition, the localization of awareness as a self (one pole of perceptual dualism) is in part constructed by a network of identity-defining concepts bound together because of the evaluative associations linked to those concepts. For example, I may define myself as "nice" because of the positive, evaluative associations linked to that concept (i.e., the correlation between being nice and feelings of safety, belonging, and love), and this in turn functions as one factor within a larger system that defines/constructs the boundaries of personal identity that localize experience and so perpetuate a dualistic perceptual context.

   Perceptual and evaluative constructs are also mutually reinforcing, since an evaluative response to some "thing" first requires being able to experience/perceive that thing, while the judgement about it reinforces relating to life in terms of things. Evaluative judgements as a

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[114] Below I use 'concept' or 'construct' as inclusive categories for all these terms.

[115] These more or less correspond to Kant's categories. See Combs' comments on L.R. Vanderrvert and the construction of our sense of "space/time." Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 66.

[116] "Perceptual duality" refers to the experience of a spatially localized subject distinct from spatially localized objects, and includes the implicit presumption that this dualistic mode of experience is ontologically grounded. See Goertzel, *Chaotic Logic*, 108. On the linguistic component of perceptual construction, see Ibid., 90, 96–7, 105–6.

whole reinforce the self-concept and therefore the duality of self vs. object: all inputs are processed in terms of how they affect the self, reinforcing the self as the organizing locus of mental life. The sense of being a 'self' in turn generates some degree of attendant vulnerability, and therefore a need to manipulate people and the 'objects' of one's world and mind (thoughts) to be safe. This strengthens an object-oriented engagement with the world (internal and external) and objectifying thinking in general. Self and object become further "solidified," perpetuating efforts to "deal with life" based on this dualistic perspective. In general, these interconnected variables hold our attention within a dualistic perceptual context, which in turn reinforces the mind's categories and concepts.

Evaluative responses occur on two levels: (1) those that are derived from innate drives or needs (survival, food, safety, etc., are innately good; death, pain, abandonment, etc. are bad) and (2) those learned through socialization and empowered through their association with innate needs.[117] The following example illustrates this connection: I may strive to own a red Corvette (because a red Corvette is good), but the motivating power of that image is based on a learned association between it and more basic drives for sex and/or belonging. In general, the second, learned level comprises a complex system of images and concepts that carry emotionally charged, positive or negative associations. Once established, these conditions set up a semantic context in which inputs become potential signals of safety/belonging or abandonment/death. This context generates the continuous dislocating processes of ordinary consciousness. Once the desirable is defined in terms of a specific set of conditions, the mind has to continuously "seek" the desirable, straying from the immediacy of awareness as it grasps at thoughts, feelings, and circumstances. Depending on environmental conditions, this ongoing dis-location may be accompanied by a close and obsessive monitoring of self-image and/or environment. According to Paul Gilbert, "all stimuli must be evaluated for the degree of threat or potential reward present in a situation."[118] For example, when interacting with others,

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[117] According to Paul Gilbert, "learning theory shows clearly that previously neutral stimuli can come to trigger defensive responses." (Paul Gilbert, "Defense, Safe(ty) and Biosocial Goals in Relation to the Agonic and Hedonic Social Modes," *World Futures* 35 (1992): 37.) Culture may "tag" stimuli with positive associations of safety as well—what Gilbert refers to as "social attention holding power" [SAHP]. Ibid., 61, 41.

[118] Gilbert, "Defense, Safe(ty) and Biosocial Goals," 35.

individuals are very sensitive to how others *attend and regard them. . . .* The sense of self . . . is constantly in tune with the degree to which one is able to elicit investment from others and find an acceptable and secure place in relationship. Put simply, we live more than one life. We live our own lives in our own heads, but also we wish to live a positive life in the minds of others.[119]

The motivation to live "a positive life in the minds of others" is egocentric, however, and therefore orients attention back on the self. In this sense, attending to the other is self-referential, as suggested by Harold Sackeim and Ruben Gur's observation that "in normal conversation individuals can be said to be continually self-monitoring."[120]

Since evaluative associations all concern the well-being of the self, they exercise their strongest cognitive effects in relation to creating and maintaining a self-image. Evaluative conditions define an ideal self-image and then constrain cognitive processes to support that image. For example, any aspect of the self that matches negative associations is experienced as a threat and must therefore be repressed. Functioning in a somewhat analogous way to Jung's shadow, this repressed material is projected, making any aspect of the environment that represents the shadow equally threatening. In other words, external threats mirror internal denial. In systems terms, Glenn Perry describes this projection as psychic "waste," which accumulates in the environment leading to eventual toxicity.[121] Such external representations of the shadow have the power to generate intense states of anxiety and fear, though in many cases these emotions are suppressed in the wake of the anger at what is perceived to be the "cause" of discomfort. This "cause" must then be attacked, in either subtle or overt ways. Attacking the external representation, however, in fact expresses efforts to maintain denial within the self. In general, these "projective and transference distortions operate in such a way that one's core assumptions about the nature of the self and reality remain relatively intact into adulthood, even in the face of mildly threatening conditions."[122]

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[119] Ibid., 49, 57.

[120] Harold A. Sackeim and Ruben C. Gur, "Self-Deception, Self-Confrontation, and Consciousness," in *Consciousness and Self-Regulation: Advances in Research and Theory*, vol. 2, eds. Gary E. Schwartz and David Shapiro (New York: Plenum Press, 1978), 166.

[121] Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 239.

[122] Ibid., 238. The "high stakes" of self-image maintenance (survival vs. death) may explain the autonomic and affective arousal caused simply by hearing one's

The Homeostatic Processes of Mind

Because conceptual constructs constitute the template for the cogni-
tive system's expression as experience, system homeostasis depends
on preserving and defending those concepts through an array of cog-
nitive and psychological processes. What is the nature of these
processes? To some degree, homeostasis is a function of the inher-
ently self-reinforcing nature of the system itself. As Allan Combs
explains, consciousness is stabilized by the "tendency of the whole
experience to support its constituents, and for them in turn to cre-
ate the whole."[123] The perceived world automatically confirms the
system's structure since it is to some degree constructed by the system.

   At the perceptual level, the mind's self-reinforcing nature means
that anomalies are rarely, if ever, experienced. We may encounter
an unidentifiable object, for example, but this object is still intelligi-
ble as a substantial "thing" existing within the larger context of a
sensible world. In general, the "reality" of what we experience as
"the world" is taken for granted and seldom if ever challenged. In
this context, homeostasis does not require negotiating anomalies
(except perhaps during extreme drug-induced experiences) since per-
ceptual constructs, experience, and world generally interact as a seam-
less, self-reinforcing process.

   The requirements for homeostasis shift at the evaluative level. Eval-
uative responses to particular qualities, experiences, things, and cir-
cumstances are a quite different type of process than establishing the
global parameters of experience itself. As illusory as appearances may
be, they are continuous with the Reality that supports them (the
construction of appearances depends on this continuity),[124] and emerge

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own voice or watching a videotape of oneself in an innocuous interview. See Sackeim
and Gur, "Self-Deception, Self-Confrontation, and Consciousness," 152–5.
   [123] Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 69.
   [124] Elsewhere I have attempted to explain this continuity, inspired by Herbert
Guenther's presentations of Dzogchen: "at the ultimate level [of Reality], all that
exists is Being's dynamics, which have nothing to do with 'things' or 'substances.'
Yet within the context of an hypostasized self that somehow separates itself off from
Being, these dynamics take on certain meanings. These meanings [are] . . . con-
cretized by the mind, becoming at that point symbols of Being's qualities and
dynamics. In our current situation, however, these symbols have lost their mean-
ingfulness. Through the mind's activity of labeling and its tendency to interpret the
entire field of experience in terms of completely taken-for-granted concepts, these
symbols have become reduced to the status of things." Randall Studstill, "Being
and the Experience of Being in Heidegger and rDzogs-chen," (Berkeley, CA: Graduate
Theological Union unpublished paper, 1994), 19.

as a hermeneutically circular frame of reference that in ordinary circumstances is immune to perturbations. This is not the case with evaluative constructs—a person's overarching categorization of appearances as desirable or repellent. Here homeostasis requires processes aimed at maintaining ideal images of 'the desirable' (to feel safe and experience positive affective states) as well as avoiding negative images of 'the repellent' (to avoid negative affective states, especially feelings of abandonment). This demands unique cognitive processes compared to those associated with perceptual constructs, since evaluative judgements are correlated with specific conditions, yet actual conditions change. Matching (or not-matching) inputs with constructs is therefore a continuous effort to hold a set of static patterns against a continuously transforming flow. The human psyche is essentially an ongoing locus of resistance requiring continuous maintenance and monitoring.

Any discrepancy between static, ideal images (evaluative constructs) and internal and external conditions constitutes a threat to the system. Such threats represent perturbations or fluctuations in the system that may destabilize its structure by contradicting positive evaluative associations (accompanied by varying degrees of emotional distress).[125] If sufficiently intense, such threats may precipitate a crisis of meaning—the world becomes "unintelligible" in terms of its felt capacity to support and nurture one's life, expressed as one of a variety of mild to extreme psychological disorders (from low self-esteem, depression, or debilitating anxiety to psychotic breaks with "reality"). The intensity of the threat/stress is determined by the quality and/or quantity of the stress itself and by how experientially open/closed the system is. These three factors are interdependent, and ultimately, system openness is most important, since the conditional perspective intrinsic to ordinary consciousness (i.e., clinging to idealized, static images) sets up a corresponding unlimited number of potentially perturbing inputs (since the actual conditions of life are never static).

Rather than adjust or evolve its structure to accommodate perturbing inputs, the cognitive system, as homeostatic, tries various

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[125] See Michael R. Bütz, "Chaos, An Omen of Transcendence in the Psychotherapeutic Process," *Psychological Reports* 71 (1992): 830. It should be emphasized that most "threats" are defined in relation to prior conditions of worth and belonging. In other words, most inputs are not inherently threatening, but become threatening by contradicting internalized standards.

strategies to preserve its conceptual constructs—especially constructs defining the self-image. Generally speaking, homeostasis or 'self-stabilization' is maintained through negative feedback. The content of the experiential stream (a blur of both thought and sensation) is monitored by the system in terms of its correspondence with system constructs (i.e., its confirmation of positive evaluative associations). Inputs that contradict evaluative constructs (expressed as values, attachments, desires, etc.) initiate processes to adjust the content of the input so that it matches those constructs. The "essential variable" of this process "is the *difference* between an 'observed' or 'recorded' value of the maintained variable and its 'ideal' value. If the difference is not zero the system moves so as to diminish it."[126] Applied to cognitive systems, the mind seeks to match experiential content (the "recorded value") with system constructs (the "ideal value"). Through this process constructs are confirmed, stabilizing the system's structure.

Matching constructs with experience is achieved in two basic ways: (1) by acting to change the self and/or environment, or (2) by regulating the experiential stream (independent of the environment). Cognitive homeostasis is generally realized through both strategies. Acting to change one's self and one's environment may be considered the psychologically healthier response, though it can never be adequate by itself since circumstances and self (as ego) will never be "perfect" (and even if they are, they are bound to change). Psychological health (as ordinarily understood) is more accurately a balance of both, with the first predominating. More commonly, however, the second predominates, since direct manipulation of experience (through fantasy, addiction, etc.) is an easier and safer way to cope with dissonance and pain than acting to change one's self and environment.

'Regulating the experiential stream' itself includes a whole range of processes which together function to manipulate the "stream of experience to stabilize itself in the steady state of its actual cognitive organization."[127] This experiential regulation takes two basic forms: (1) the active shaping of internal experience to confirm concepts, and (2) the inhibition of inputs that contradict concepts. In the first case, "self-stabilization . . . involves the use of conations to structure the

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[126] Boulding, "General Systems Theory—The Skeleton of Science," 7. See also Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 5; Powell, Royce, and Voorhees, "Personality as a Complex Information-Processing System," 345–6; K.H. Pribram, "Role of Analogy," 22–3.

[127] Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy*, 127.

stream of percepts to progressive correspondence with the set of constructs already evolved in the system."[128] For example, the internal narrative functions as a reinforcing mechanism, by continuously 'telling the story' of self and world as defined by our conceptual constructs. This involvement in the internal narrative simultaneously accomplishes the second function, reducing dissonance by inhibiting awareness of contradictory/threatening inputs (from either internal or external sources). For example, mental reiteration of the self-image may be used to suppress input contradicting that self-image. Kicking one's dog in a fit of anger might be followed by a flash of discomfort at being confronted with information that conflicts with one's self-image (i.e., "I am nice" or "I am an animal lover"). This discomfort may in turn be followed by a variety of responses functioning in some way to suppress the threatening input. For example, attention may be diverted to some other activity (distraction) or substances may be ingested to numb or distract awareness. Conflicting input may also be rationalized away (the dog was bad and therefore deserved to be kicked) or suppressed through attempts to reinstate the self-image by obsessively replaying the event over and over in one's mind as it 'should have happened.'

The unspoken rules of appropriate social behavior may also function as a mechanism of denial maintenance—in this case, a preventative measure to minimize image-threatening inputs before they occur. A covert agreement of polite, adult interaction is to avoid making excessive demands on others. One possible reason for this is an unconscious understanding that asking too much of another forces her to experience the dissonance between her naturally selfish impulses ("I don't want to do it") and her self-image of being good/nice. Asking too much threatens the other's denial. For the person experiencing the discomfort of such dissonance, the source of the request is experienced as the cause of this discomfort, and therefore becomes a threat that must be attacked (subtly through judgement, or not so subtly through more overt forms of aggression). *Not* asking too much of others may in turn reflect an unconscious request to enter into a covert agreement, i.e., "I won't threaten your denial if you won't threaten mine." 'Niceness' in general may function in a similar way: a strategy to provoke reciprocal responses

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[128] Ibid.

in others in order to confirm one's self-image.[129] The ultimately ego-
centric nature of this behavior surfaces when the other does not
respond as desired. He or she then becomes a threat, initiating a
range of potential responses depending on the intensity of that threat
(ignoring, judging, verbally attacking, physically attacking, and in the
most extreme cases, murder).

   Since the circumstances of one's predicament rarely coincide with
idealized images (few of us have lives that look like the average tooth-
paste commercial), these types of constructive/inhibiting processes
are not limited to specifically threatening inputs. As Combs points
out, "anyone who is awake and alive is regularly treated to demon-
strations of the inadequacy of their formulas and protocols, whether
these concern specific skills or life in general."[130] More specifically,
we are continuously confronted by information that challenges our
concepts of belonging, acceptance, and love—information either about
the self specifically, or about the environment that reflects back on
the self. The fact that there is always some degree of discrepancy
means that the system is always subject to some degree of stress:
when acceptance and abandonment becomes tied to conditions, life
itself becomes a threatening input. For example, the inherently ego-
centric nature of ordinary consciousness is a continuous threat to the
ideal image most of us hold about ourselves as being "good/nice."[131]
Homeostasis therefore requires *continuous* denial, correlated with a
tendency to increasingly withdraw from life and immerse attention
in the internal narrative.[132] In such a state, experience becomes ab-

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   [129] Hunt would extend this analysis to the culture at large. As he puts it, "much
of 'everyday' and 'high' culture can be seen as a socially endorsed, communal
attempt to contain and control this potential for unexpected openness and nov-
elty"—in other words, as a way to maintain the status quo. Hunt, *On the Nature of
Consciousness*, 29–30.
   [130] Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 272.
   [131] See Sackeim and Gur on the inherent, anxiety-producing dissonance associ-
ated with self-confrontation. They state, "in every study that we are aware of . . . arousal
levels were higher after presentation of the self. . . . The [experimental] evi-
dence . . . indicates that feedback of the self leads to autonomic arousal, negative
self-evaluations, defensive reactions, and constrictions on ideational content." (Sackeim
and Gur, "Self-Deception, Self-Confrontation, and Consciousness," 153–4, 159) This
may reflect an inherent dissonance between the egocentric reality of the self and
the idealized self-images most of us hold. Paradoxically, positive self-image tends to
coexist with low self-esteem. In 12–Step Programs, this paradox is often expressed
by the remark, "we're all egomaniacs with an inferiority complex."
   [132] As Pope and Singer report, "a recent unpublished study by Catherine Mc-
Donald . . . indicated that subjects averaged 43% of reports of stimulus-independent

stracted out of the unpredictability of external sensation and into the more manageable world of fantasy.[133] By disassociating from sensory input, experience becomes more malleable and therefore easier to conform to one's constructs.

In general, constructive-type processes involve focusing attention on fantasized, desired conditions or circumstances, either internally (through the internal narrative as described above) or externally (e.g., by seeking out confirming inputs through popular entertainment). Such processes are simultaneously inhibiting and may therefore be distinguished from those processes that function solely as inhibitors. This latter type may take two basic forms: (1) numbing and distracting consciousness to dampen awareness of dissonance and the pain associated with that dissonance, and (2) selective attention and other types of perceptual filtering or mediation. The first would include any type of substance reliance, substance abuse, or addiction (including the "benign" substances and distractions that help many people get through their day: alcohol, tobacco, sugar, caffeine, and television). Regarding the second, James Miller lists several cognitive mechanisms that inhibit information input, which may also—extending Miller's analysis—function to help stabilize the cognitive system in the face of perceived threats:

Omission: failing to transmit certain randomly distributed signals in a message

Error: incorrectly transmitting certain signals in a message

Queuing: delaying transmission of certain signals in a message, the sequence being temporarily stored until transmission

Filtering: giving priority in processing to certain classes of messages

Abstracting: processing a message with less than complete detail

Escape: acting to cut off information input

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or daydreamlike thought during a given day." Kenneth S. Pope and Jerome L. Singer, "Regulation of the Stream of Consciousness: Toward a Theory of Ongoing Thought," in *Consciousness and Self-Regulation: Advances in Research and Theory*, vol. 2, eds. Gary E. Schwartz and David Shapiro (New York: Plenum Press, 1978), 131. See also Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 248. On the "abstract attitude," see Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, 24–5.

[133] Pope and Singer point out that the demands of perceptual processing "can monopolize channel space and severely attenuate if not interrupt entirely, the processing of private material." (Pope and Singer, "Regulation of the Stream of Consciousness," 113) I would argue that the general predictability of our routine external environments makes this kind of interruption rare.

Chunking: transmitting meaningful information in organized "chunks"
            of symbols rather than symbol by symbol[134]

To escape threatening inputs, for example, we may simply ignore
(consciously or unconsciously) information that contradicts our beliefs
or self-image. Some degree of filtering also seems to be built in to
the cognitive system, since inputs that do not fit cognitive maps will
tend to simply go unregistered.

   Important in the functioning of all the above homeostatic processes
is object-oriented attention. Homeostasis involves a defensive posture
towards life, and as Gilbert points out, "the attention structure in
defense is focused rather than open."[135] This "focusing" correlates
with an object-oriented engagement with the world, reflecting the
cognitive system's attempts to manipulate things and persons in order
to maximize safety. Such attention may be directed either externally
(on objects and persons who are treated as objects) or internally (on
thoughts). It takes the form of a non-reflective immersion in a world
of objects that rarely focuses on anything in particular (i.e., it is not
concentrative). Instead, it involves a rapid shifting of attention among
objects. Fluctuating between the mental and the external and dri-
ven by whatever egocentric agenda is at the forefront of conscious-
ness, object-oriented attention is accompanied by a loss of any felt,
existential appreciation for the moment.

   Directed externally, this type of attention reinforces perceptual
dualism and the presumption of an ontological distinction between
subject and object. As discussed above, one of the self-reinforcing
aspects of the mental system is the perceived world itself—being a
construction of conceptual constructs, it reflects those constructs back
to the system. Object-oriented attention is a central factor support-
ing this involvement in a constructed world. In doing so, it also oper-
ates in conjunction with conceptual constructs that define the "objects"
of attention, thereby reinforcing those constructs and the dualistic
mode of experience they help generate. Directed internally, it involves
attention on the internal narrative (and the forms this narrative may
take, such as fantasy) and becomes one of the primary mechanisms
regulating evaluative constructs and the self-image in particular.[136]

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[134] Miller, *Living Systems*, 123. See also 61, 121ff., 149, 152. Contra Miller, I would
argue that in many cases, stress is not caused by information overload, but by anx-
iety created by dissonance between task performance and self-image.
   [135] Gilbert, "Defense, Safe(ty) and Biosocial Goals," 36.
   [136] See Tart's discussion of attention and self-awareness (Tart, *States of Consciousness*,

Integral to all of these various processes is an overriding self-obsession,[137] reflecting once again the self-reinforcing dimension of the system: the concept/experience of self creates an inevitable sense of vulnerability, which encourages self-obsession and the need to protect the self through the processes described above. This in turn reinforces a "self," exacerbating the sense of vulnerability and therefore strengthening attempts to defend the self in a continuous and self-perpetuating cycle.

Evolution through Positive Feedback

To the extent that safety/meaning is construed according to a conceptual system, disconfirmation is inherently threatening and therefore will tend to be suppressed. However, if disconfirmation (stress) crosses a critical threshold, the cognitive system's ordinary homeostatic mechanisms may be inadequate to suppress the threat. System organization therefore becomes dysfunctional (felt as some form of emotional discomfort) since it is no longer able to maintain a sense of safety/belonging in relation to self-image and/or environmental circumstances. In response, the system may take one of two courses. Typically, the system will intensify efforts "to rigidly adhere to dysfunctional patterns in an attempt to accommodate the crisis without having to actually change."[138] To preserve its constructs, the system may dissociate and close its boundaries even more, either by intensifying constructive processes to support a sense of "personal grandiosity" or by intensifying inhibiting processes (such as increased "emotional withdrawal").[139] This initiates the devolution of the system into what

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15) as well as Deikman's distinction between the "action mode" and "receptive mode." The action mode specifically overlaps what I have described as object-oriented attention. As Deikman points out, the goal of such attention (manipulating the environment) makes the "reference point" of such attention "the experience of a separate, personal self." (Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 261, 267) To some degree, these processes also correspond with what Tart calls *loading stabilization*, i.e., "keeping attention/awareness and other psychological energies deployed in habitual, desired structures by loading the person's system heavily with appropriate tasks." (Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 5) My emphasis is not on the "task," but on the objectifying mode of attention itself, which may be internalized as well as externalized.

[137] As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch observe, one of "the first insights of the meditator who begins to question the self . . . [is] the discovery of total egomania." Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, 62.

[138] Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 238. See also 239.

[139] Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 24.

may eventually become psychopathological states. The other option is to change constructs—specifically, to evolve one's understanding of life toward a less conditional, less dualistic perspective. This takes place through positive feedback, which reorganizes "the existing construct sets to fit the actual stream of sensory experience."[140] As Ervin Laszlo explains, "negative-feedback stabilizing cycles give way to positive-feedback motivated *learning* cycles when the input fails to match the constructs of the system, or matches then insufficiently."[141]

Through positive feedback, constructs are allowed to deviate from their steady state in an attempt to evolve a conceptual model that can accommodate threatening inputs. This deviation may increase chaos and stress within the cognitive system, yet ultimately it makes it possible for new "cognitive organizations [to evolve] which map the relevant states of the environment with increasing precision and range of prediction. . . . They enlarge the horizons of the system and provide it with increasingly wide ranges of progressively more refined meanings."[142] Such new constructs simultaneously represent the release (to some degree) of evaluative conditions, accompanied by less defensiveness, more openness, and therefore an enhanced sensitivity to one's environment.[143] Knowing becomes less conceptual and more felt/intuitive while emotional upset subsides as fluctuating external conditions no longer carry the same semantic associations.[144] From this perspective, learning is not simply the incorporation of new data within an existing set of constructs, but involves the reorganization of conceptual maps, experienced on an existential level as a deeper and more satisfying appreciation of life's meaning. As Erich Jantsch explains, an evolutionary, systems perspective suggests that learning

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[140] Laszlo, *Introduction to Systems Philosophy*, 127.

[141] Ibid., 130.

[142] Ibid., 132. See also Peter Fenner, *Reasoning into Reality: A System-Cybernetic Model and Therapeutic Interpretation of Buddhist Middle Path Analysis* (Sommerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 104; Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 224.

[143] Inputs are not innately threatening, but become threatening by contradicting system conditions. Letting go of conditions therefore involves a re-integration of formerly repressed or denied aspects of the self and environment. Perry seems to make the same point when he explains that as the cognitive system evolves, "that portion of the environment which perturbed the system and drove it beyond its stability threshold quite literally in-forms the system. This, in turn, allows new properties to emerge which enable the system to process information previously exported as waste." Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 240.

[144] On cognitive reorganization and anxiety reduction, see Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 238.

is not simply "adaptation to a specific form into which knowledge has been brought . . ., but [represents] the formation of new and alive relationships with a multifaceted reality which may be experienced in many forms—learning . . . become[s] a creative game played with reality."[145] Learning, in this sense, represents a *qualitative* change in one's engagement with life.[146]

Summing up the Model

From a cybernetic perspective, mind is as an interdependent network of cognitive variables/events that functions to (1) constrain awareness within the dualistic frame of reference represented by ordinary consciousness and (2) defend that state of reference against any perturbing influences. The first is a constructive process in two senses: perceptual and evaluative. The second function—defending the dualistic state once it has been constructed—reflects the homeostatic nature of mind. As described above, this encompasses a whole range of mental and behavioral strategies/behaviors that serve to reiterate and reinforce established constructs/processes and/or dampen threatening inputs.

In addition to these two functions, the cybernetic approach recognizes a third: the mind's capacity to 'self-organize' or evolve its structure. In this case, cognitive variables may be disrupted, boundary conditions may change, and the entire cognitive system may evolve toward more aware, more environmentally adaptive, and more existentially satisfying modes of experience. The contrast between ordinary vs. evolving states of consciousness highlights the normative claim of the cybernetic model of mind described here. The ordinary state of consciousness represents an impoverishment of awareness, a loss of one's felt sense of life's meaningfulness, and a denial of one's full, human potential (often in association with a variety of unpleasant affective states).[147] But as Harry Hunt states, "if we are willing to entertain the idea that conscious awareness in itself is a 'system,' and that that system can be selectively impaired, we ought

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[145] Jantsch, *Self-Organizing Universe*, 284.
[146] Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 55.
[147] As R.D. Laing puts it, "the *ordinary* person is a shriveled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be." R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), 25–6.

to be prepared to consider the possibility that it can be selectively enhanced and developed as well."[148] Such "development" is identified here with the self-organizing processes of mind—processes that constitute an increasing realization of one's human potential, an enrichment of emotional life, and heightened semantic appreciation.

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[148] Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 34.

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE IN THE DZOGCHEN TRADITION

This chapter has two goals: (1) to present selected doctrines and practices of the Tibetan Buddhist[1] tradition known as Dzogchen (*rdzogs-chen*), and (2) to briefly discuss how these doctrines and practices may affect the consciousness of the Dzogchen practitioner (an extended discussion of this second topic is reserved for the last chapter). With respect to the first goal, my intent is not an exhaustive survey of Dzogchen's history, doctrines, and/or practices;[2] the complexity of the tradition makes a complete discussion of Dzogchen impossible here. Dzogchen has been practiced in Tibet for at least eleven hundred years by both Buddhists and Bonpos. Its doctrines and practices have evolved through various different oral and textual transmissions. And though Tibetans have created refined systemizations of Dzogchen teachings, these systems are themselves nuanced, complex, and elaborate. For these reasons, this chapter is necessarily selective, focusing on identifying, and to some degree contextualizing, a few core themes of the tradition.

Dzogchen, in simplest terms, is a philosophical and meditative tradition of Tibet. Its name is an abbreviation of *rdzogs-pa chen-po*. *rDzogs-pa* may be variously translated as "to be complete," "full," "exhausted in," etc. while *chen-po* means "big" or "great."[3] Herbert

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[1] Dzogchen is not exclusively Buddhist, but is also practiced in Tibetan Bon. Some Tibetan Buddhists claim that Dzogchen is not Buddhist—that it is really a disguised form of Hindu theism. While Dzogchen is a departure from more conventional Buddhist teachings associated with Nikāya and Mahāyāna Buddhism, and may even have elements interpretable as theistic, this is completely irrelevant to the fact that Dzogchen has been (and is) practiced by Buddhists *as* a Buddhist tradition.

[2] To my knowledge, the best and most comprehensive scholarly discussion of Dzogchen is Samten Gyaltsen Karmay's *The Great Perfection (rDzogs-chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching in Tibetan Buddhism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988). See also David Germano, "Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17/2 (Winter 1994): 203–335.

[3] Gareth Sparham, trans., *Dzog-chen Meditation*, a translation of the *Rdor sems thugs kyi sgrub pa'i khrid yig rab gsal snang ba*, by 'Jam-dbyangs-don-grub, Sga-rje Khams-sprul,

Guenther has suggested several English renderings of the term: "ultimate completeness," "sublime wholeness," "impeccable entirety," and "supercompleteness."[4] The most common translation—and the one that will be used here—is Great Perfection.[5] According to John Reynolds, the Great Perfection "is so called because it is complete and perfect (*rdzogs-pa*) in itself, with nothing lacking, and because there exists nothing higher or greater (*chen-po*) than it."[6] The "greatness" of Dzogchen is associated with the distinctive nature of its doctrines and path. For example, Dzogchen posits innate and natural perfection as the individual's "ever-present" and permanent condition and maintains that the simplicity of immediate awareness, unconditioned by any concept, symbol, practice, etc., constitutes a direct path to realizing this perfection.[7]

Among Tibetan Buddhists, Dzogchen is primarily associated with the Nyingma School, where it is considered the most advanced of the Nine Paths or Yānas (Tib. *theg-pa*) of Buddhism.[8] The Nine Paths

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explained in Tibetan by Khamtul Rinpoche. Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series, no. 133 (Delhi, India: Sri Satguru Publications, 1994), 1.

[4] Guenther, *From Reductionism to Creativity*, 184.

[5] Because Tibetan Buddhists of the Nyingma School believe Dzogchen to have originated in India or the quasi-mythical kingdom of Uḍḍiyāna (or Oḍḍiyāna in some sources), the term *rdzogs-chen* is considered to be a translation of an original Sanskrit term, variously reconstructed as *mahāsandhi, mahasanti, mahāsampatra,* and *mahāshānti.* John Myrdhin Reynolds, trans., *Self-Liberation Through Seeing with Naked Awareness* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1989), 4; Sonam T. Kazi, introduction to *The Oral Instruction of Kün-Zang La-Ma on the Preliminary Practices of Dzog-ch'en Long-ch'en Nying-Tig*, by Kün-zang La-may Zhal-lung, trans. Sonam T. Kazi (Upper Montclair, NJ: Diamond-Lotus Publishing, 1993), xxvii; Sparham, *Dzog-chen Meditation*, 4; Tulku Thondup, trans., *The Dzog-chen: Preliminary Practice of the Innermost Essence; The Long-chen nying-thig ngon-dro with Original Tibetan Root Text*, by Jigme Lingpa ['Jigs-med gling-pa, b. 1730] (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1982), vii, x. Because of the absence of any Dzogchen texts in Sanskrit, the Indian origins of Dzogchen have tended to be questioned by modern scholars. See pp. 136–7 below.

[6] John Myrdhin Reynolds, trans., *The Golden Letters: The Three Statements of Garab Dorje, the First Teacher of Dzogchen*, attributed to Garab Dorje [dGa'-rab rdo-rje], with a commentary by Dza Patrul Rinpoche, entitled *The Special Teaching of the Wise and Glorious King* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 21.

[7] Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche, "Maha-Ati," in *Psychology 107 Class Reader*, compiled by Eleanor Rosch (Berkeley, CA: By the compiler, University of California, 1993), 379; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 22.

[8] The esteem accorded Dzogchen is by no means universal among Tibetan Buddhists. Some non-Nyingmapas (i.e., members of either the Kagyupa, Sakyapa, or Gelugpa Schools) have been highly critical of Dzogchen, claiming that it is either not really Buddhism or that it is a covert form of Ch'an. Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 218, 220, 263. See also Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 463. On the other hand,

are a hierarchical systemization of Buddhist paths arranged according to soteriological efficacy and level of spiritual capacity required by the practitioner. Listed in order from least advanced to most advanced they are: Śravaka, Pratyekabuddha, Bodhisattva, Kriyātantra, Caryātantra, Yogatantra, Mahāyogatantra, Anuyogatantra, and Atiyogatantra.[9] In general terms, the first two ("Hearer" and "Solitary Buddha" respectively) are based on the Nikāya sūtras and emphasize renunciation and a realization of no-self (anātman) with respect to persons. The third refers to the sūtra-based path of the Mahāyāna, emphasizing purification in association with the Six Perfections (pāramitā) and placing particular stress on compassion and analytical reflection on emptiness (śūnyatā). The next six paths represent progressively more advanced levels of tantric practice, culminating in Atiyogatantra, another name for Dzogchen.[10]

Within this framework, Nyingmapas describe and define Dzogchen in different (though usually overlapping) ways. As stated above, it is claimed to be the highest path, with respect to either its view and/or practices. In the first sense, Dzogchen doctrines are considered the ultimate expression (possible in words) of the true nature of Reality,

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some of Dzogchen's greatest advocates have been non-Nyingmapas. See Reynolds, Golden Letters, 280; Samuel, Civilized Shamans, 463−4.

[9] Non-Nyingma schools list four tantric paths: Kriyātantra, Caryātantra, Yogatantra, and Anuttarayogatantra. In this list, Dzogchen is not formally recognized as a path, though non-Nyingmapas may still practice it. (See Samuel, Civilized Shamans, 463.) In addition, Anuttarayogatantra is often considered to culminate in Mahāmudrā, which has close affinities to Dzogchen. See Reynolds, Golden Letters, 221; Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1986) and Karma Chagmé, Naked Awareness: Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2000).

[10] Reynolds, Golden Letters, 30−1. Atiyoga in turn encompasses three sub-categories of teachings, translated by Eva Dargyay as the Section of Mind (sems-sde), the Section of the Unending Dynamic of Being (klong-sde), and the Section of Instructions (man-ngag-gi sde). (See Eva K. Dargyay, The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), 43−4.) The nuanced distinctions between these three divisions of Dzogchen will not be addressed here. For a brief explanation, see Sam Van Schaik, Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Approaches to Dzogchen Practice in Jigme Lingpa's Longchen Nyingtig (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 8. For more on this topic, see Tulku Thondup, trans., Buddha Mind: An Anthology of Longchen Rabjam's Writings on Dzogpa chenpo [translated selections from the works of Longchenpa (kLong-chen rab-'byams-pa), b.1308], Buddhayana Series (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1989), 47−76.

According to Dargyay, the final three Yānas—the Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga tantras—are subcategories of Yogatantra, and all three together comprise levels of the Great Perfection (Atiyoga simply being the highest of the three). Dargyay, Rise of Esoteric Buddhism, 17, 43.

the individual, and the state of awakening. In the second sense, "highest" refers to the special directness or uncontrived nature of Dzogchen "practice." In the context of the Nine Paths, Dzogchen is also described as (1) the culmination of all Buddhist paths, (2) the "essence" or "condensation" of all previous paths, and/or (3) the culminating stage of a single path or awakening process. In this final sense, the first eight "paths" are considered preliminary stages of realization leading to an ultimate state of realization called "Dzogchen." In addition, some presentations of Dzogchen describe it as an "all inclusive" path—a tradition that includes all Buddhist paths as means of "provok[ing] . . . the awareness (*rig-pa*)[11] of the true nature of reality in its ultimate purity and perfection."[12] In many of these formulations, Dzogchen is identified with the goal of Buddhism, i.e., the enlightened state/buddhahood/*nirvāṇā*. Such an identification is the basis for Namkhai Norbu's claim that Dzogchen is the "essence" of all Buddhist paths. As he puts it, Dzogchen is "the recognition of our true State and the continuation of its presence," and as such, "really is the essence of all paths, the basis of all meditation, the conclusion of all practices, the pith of all the secret methods, and the key to all the deeper teachings."[13]

In general, then, 'Dzogchen' may be used as a term for ultimate Reality (identical with the true nature of the individual) and the ultimate experiential state that realizes Reality. As a term for the Real, Dzogchen "connotes a natural and effortless unity underlying and pervading all things,"[14] often described as an empty, yet luminous Ground (*gzhi*) out of which all phenomenal appearances arise. As a

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[11] Other translations of *rig-pa* (Skt. *vidyā*) include intrinsic awareness, knowledge, intellect, pristine cognition, pure presence, or intelligence. Guenther variously translates *rig-pa* as ec-static intensity, cognitive intensity, or simply 'excitation' in order to specify *rig-pa*'s expression through the individual as an "ongoing" existential pressure to transcend "all limits set by the prevalent 'unexcited' state of one's everydayness." (Herbert V. Guenther, *Meditation Differently: Phenomenological-Psychological Aspects of Tibetan Buddhist (Mahamudra and sNyingthig) Practices from Original Tibetan Sources* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), 27.) Along these lines, Longchenpa describes *rig-pa* as "(one's) mind intending and suffused by (the whole's) pellucidity and consummation." Quoted in Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, xv.

[12] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 541, 550. Samuel associates this understanding of Dzogchen with the Rimed movement. (Ibid., 535) This inclusivist approach may be directly contrasted with the sectarian, clerical (i.e., non-shamanic) systemizations of Buddhism by the Gelugpas. Ibid., 543.

[13] Namkhai Norbu, *The Mirror: Advice on the Presence of Awareness* (Barrytown, NY: Barrytown, Ltd., 1996), 32–3.

[14] Sparham, *Dzog-chen Meditation*, 1.

label for the realization of the Real, Dzogchen indicates "a higher-order level of thought, . . . the peak of a person's endeavor to fathom the depth of his being [and] gain an unobstructed view."[15] Dzogchen constitutes "the direct introduction to and the abiding in [the] Primordial State of enlightenment or Buddhahood,"[16] or, as Sogyal Rinpoche puts it, "*the* primordial state . . . of total awakening that is the heart-essence of all the buddhas and all spiritual paths."[17]

From the above perspectives, some Dzogchen teachers deny that Dzogchen is a school, a path, or an articulatable set of doctrines. As John Reynolds notes, "the Nyingma Lamas do not regard Dzogchen as just another set of beliefs, or a system of philosophical assertions, or a collection of texts, or some sect or school."[18] They point out that if Dzogchen is already ineffable enlightenment as well as the "the primordial state of the individual,"[19] it cannot also be a "path" for attaining enlightenment. Sa-pan Kun-dga' rgyal-mtshan (1181–1282) states: "the theory of Atiyoga is Gnosis, not a means. To make a subject—that can not be expressed in words—an object of discussion, is not a thought of the learned."[20] These points notwithstanding, Dzogchen texts and teachers do attempt to explain through language the nature of Reality, and they recommend a particular type of contemplative approach—as Geoffrey Samuel describes it, "a formless and nonconceptual system of meditation conceived of . . . as the final stage of Tantric practice, . . . going beyond the transformational techniques of Tantra itself to the goal of the Enlightened state."[21] Though Dzogchen may ultimately be much more than a view and path, these categories are still legitimate and helpful ways of approaching the tradition.

Dzogchen's placement as the final of the Nine Yānas raises an additional issue. Is Dzogchen essentially tantric (as the name Atiyogatantra suggests), or does it constitute a distinct, non-tantric tradition?

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[15] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 185.

[16] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 21–2.

[17] Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 151.

[18] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 21.

[19] Reynolds, *Self-Liberation*, 4.

[20] Quoted in Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 147. See also Dudjom Rinpoche [Bdud-'joms 'Jigs-bral ye-śes rdo-rje, b. 1904], *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, Volume One: The Translations, trans. and ed. Gyurme Dorje (Boston: Wisdom, 1991), 300, 907.

[21] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 464.

Even though the framework of the Nine Yānas locates Dzogchen as the highest tantric path, it is common for both Tibetan Buddhists and scholars to contrast tantra and Dzogchen as being fundamentally distinct in approach. For example, tantra may be described as a path of "transformation" based on highly ritualized, structured, and symbolically rich meditative practices, in contrast to Dzogchen, which aims at "self-liberation" (*rang-grol*) through the "formless" practice of "letting be."[22] While this distinction is valid (and will be elaborated on below), it would not seem to override the essential continuity between tantra and Dzogchen, and the sense in which Dzogchen is the completion or culmination of tantric practice. Like tantra (and Mahāyāna Buddhism in general), Dzogchen stresses the unqualified continuity of Absolute Reality and mundane appearances, though tantra represents this continuity symbolically through the forms of the *maṇḍala* while Dzogchen tends to subvert (at least as an ultimate ideal) any form of symbolic representation (especially in the context of meditative practice). Dzogchen also shares one of tantra's most distinctive characteristics: the identification of path and goal. In advanced tantric practices, one visualizes oneself as already being a tantric deity, fully enlightened with all attendant buddha-qualities. In Dzogchen, inherent perfection/buddhahood is considered one's primordial condition from the very beginning. Again, this common theme takes either a symbolic or non-symbolic form depending on the path: in tantra the identification is accomplished through symbolic visualization while Dzogchen bypasses symbols altogether (one's current predicament *is* the *maṇḍala*). Put another way, both tantra and Dzogchen are means of 'tuning in' to the here and now, one through symbols and one non-symbolically through the experience of immediate presence. This non-symbolic approach is directly correlated by Nyingmapas with Dzogchen's ultimate superiority as a path, since from the Nyingma perspective any type of condition imposed on experience is necessarily an obscuration of one's true, primordial nature.[23]

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[22] See Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 31; Kennard Lipman, preface to *Dzog Chen and Zen*, by Namkhai Norbu (Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 1984), 9.

[23] Tantra exercises such a pervasive influence on all forms of Tibetan Buddhism that in actual Dzogchen practice symbolic and non-symbolic approaches tend to be inseparably enmeshed. Nevertheless, a tendency to undermine symbolic representation is in most cases still discernable even in the more tantric expressions of Dzogchen.

Dzogchen's Historical Origins

According to Norbu, Dzogchen, being "the Primordial State of the individual," is independent of any religious tradition and "outside" or "beyond" the history of any particular school.[24] This claim notwithstanding, the teachings and practices of Dzogchen have a history that is to some degree traceable, though the origins of Dzogchen are obscure and will only be treated here in the most general and broadest of terms. I begin with the tradition's own account of its historical origins, though from the perspective of Western Buddhologists this account has little (if any) historical value.

According to traditional, Nyingma accounts, the historical founder of Dzogchen was Garab Dorje (dGa'-rab rdo-rje), king of Uḍḍiyāna (or Oḍḍiyāna), a quasi-mythical kingdom possibly located in modern day Pakistan, Afghanistan, or the Swat Valley.[25] The Nyingma sources cited by Reynolds date Garab Dorje's birth at either 853 BCE, 715 BCE, or 521 BCE (each date being calculated with reference to the Tibetan estimate of 881 BCE for the *parinirvāṇā* of the Buddha[26]).[27] The Dzogchen teachings were transmitted to Garab Dorje through a visionary encounter with Vajrasattva[28] (Tib. rDo-rje sems-dpa'), the tantric personification of the Buddha's *saṃbhogakāya*.[29] Since Vajrasattva received the Dzogchen transmission from Samantabhadra (Tib. Kun-tu bzang-po, the tantric personification of the

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[24] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 343; Adriano Clemente, introduction to *The Mirror: Advice on the Presence of Awareness*, by Namkhai Norbu (Barrytown, NY: Barrytown, Ltd., 1996), 18.

[25] For an excellent summary of the traditional account of Garab Dorje's life, see Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 18–21. See also Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 22; Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group, with a foreword by the Dalai Lama, Sacred Literature Series (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 338ff.

[26] This date is universally rejected by scholars. The Pali sources, generally considered more reliable, date the Buddha's *parinirvāṇā* sometime early in the 5th century BCE. More recent scholarship has argued that the late 4th century BCE is the more likely date. See Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, trans. and ed. Paul Groner (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 22–3.

[27] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 206–7.

[28] Other sources credit Vajrapāṇi with this role. See Patrul Rinpoche, *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, 339.

[29] The *saṃbhogakāya*, often translated 'enjoyment body,' is one the various "bodies" of the Buddha described in Mahāyāna and tantric sources. Others include *dharmakāya*, *nirmāṇakāya*, and *svabhāvakāya*. The meaning of these terms is discussed on pp. 151–4 below.

Buddha's *dharmakāya*),[30] it is the latter who is usually credited as being
the ultimate source of the Dzogchen teachings, as well as the source
of the Mahayoga and Anuyoga tantras.[31] Given that Samantabhadra
is the personified symbol of ultimate Reality (i.e., the *dharmakāya*) and
"an emanation of the primary wisdom of all Buddhas,"[32] the tradi-
tional account of Dzogchen's origins reflects the Nyingma view that
Dzogchen is a direct revelation of ultimate Reality itself.

   According to the tradition, Garab Dorje passed on the Dzogchen
teachings to his student(s) and thereby established the various lin-
eages of Dzogchen teachings that eventually made their way to Tibet.
The sources, however, do not necessarily agree on the sequence of
figures making up these lineages. One early account lists the lineage
as follows (locations in parentheses indicate the site where the trans-
mission took place):[33]

<div align="center">

Garab Dorje

↓ (in China)

'Jam-dpal-bśes-gnyen

↓ (in China)

Śrīsiṃha

↓ (in India)   ↓ (in China)

Vimalamitra   ←   Jñānasūtra

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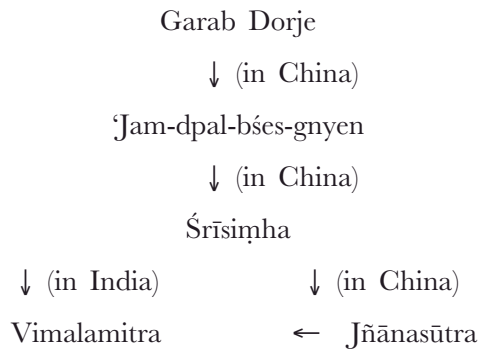
[30] Karmay identifies Samantabhadra with *sems-nyid* (the essential nature of mind)
while Reynolds identifies him with the *gzhi* (the Ground). See Karmay, *Great Perfection*,
50; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 233. In Dzogchen, *sems-nyid* and *gzhi* are generally con-
sidered synonyms.

   [31] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 23, 28; Sogyal Rinpoche, *Living and Dying*, 150; Dargyay,
Esoteric Buddhism, 13–4.

   [32] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 38. Guenther describes Kun-tu bzang-po (Samanta-
bhadra) as "the highest intensity of cognition." Guenther, *Reductionism*, 199. See also
Ibid., 197–8; Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 14.

   [33] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 18, 24–5. For alternative lineages, see Dargyay,
Esoteric Buddhism, 27 and Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 19–20. See Dargyay, *Esoteric
Buddhism*, 22ff. for details on Śrīsiṃha's life and biographical information on other
early Dzogchen teachers in the lineage. A.W. Hanson-Barber has attempted to
reconstruct the actual lineage based on the conflicting accounts given in the sources.
See A.W. Hanson-Barber, "The Identification of dGa' rab rdo rje," *Journal of the
International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9/2 (1986): 58.

Reynolds presents an alternative sequence:[34]

Garab Dorje

↓

Mañjuśrīmitra

↓

Śrīsiṃha

↓   ↓   ↓   ↓

Jñānasūtra   Vimalamitra   Padmasambhava   Vairocana
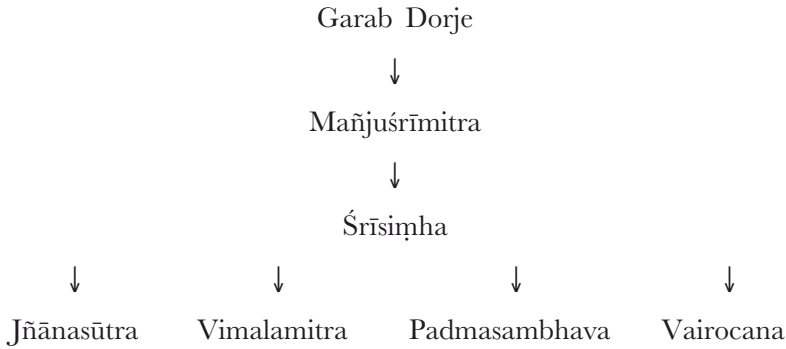
In the second account, the transmission of the Dzogchen teachings from Śrisimha to his four students takes place in India.[35] The teachings were then brought to Tibet by Vimalamitra, Vairocana, and Padmasambhava in the 8th century CE.[36] Of these three, early Dzogchen sources depict Vairocana as playing the central role in transmitting Dzogchen to Tibet.[37] The later Nyingma tradition, however, tends to attribute the transmission primarily to Padmasambhava.[38] Padmasambhava is claimed to be an incarnation of Samantabhadra and as such, an embodiment of the "essential spirit" of Dzogchen.[39]

An interesting discrepancy between the lineages outlined above involves the sequence of geographical locations associated with the transmission. In the first, Dzogchen begins in Uḍḍiyāna, is transmitted to China, then India, and finally Tibet. The second, in contrast, omits China as a locality of transmission.[40] In this case, the sequence of transmission is Uḍḍiyāna, India, and then Tibet. This

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[34] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 24. See also Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 44.

[35] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 216.

[36] Ibid. See also 209, 216ff., 253–55 and Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 29, 54ff. for detailed discussions of these figures in relation to the different textual lineages and sub-classes (Sem-de, Long-de, and Man-ngag-de) of Dzogchen teachings. Tantric texts of the Anuyoga class are also attributed to Padmasambhava. See Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 219.

[37] Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 4, 17ff., 23–4, 34.

[38] Sogyal Rinpoche, *Living and Dying*, 150; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 217, 219ff.; Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 31–2. Norbu, on the other hand, considers Vairocana to have been the most important of the three. See Namkhai Norbu, *Dzog Chen and Zen* (Nevada City, CA: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 1984), 18–9.

[39] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 32; Sogyal Rinpoche, *Living and Dying*, 150.

[40] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 215.

version of the lineage is the one historically favored by the Nyingma
School, reflecting the overwhelmingly negative attitude of the Tibetans
toward the Chinese from the 11th century onwards.[41] Without nam-
ing his sources, the modern Tibetan teacher Khetsun Sangpo states
that Dzogchen was transmitted from India to Tibet, not mention-
ing Uḍḍiyāna as an originating locale.[42] He adds that Dzogchen was
also transmitted from India to China and Japan, "but only to Tibet
was it transmitted in its complete form."[43] As evidence, he refers to
the Tun Huang manuscripts, in which Dzogchen ideas can be found
but are scarce and undeveloped. This scenario would seem to reflect
an attempt to acknowledge the presence of Dzogchen type ideas in
Chinese Buddhism (usually associated with Ch'an), while denying
that Chinese Buddhism in any way mediated the transmission of
these ideas into Tibet. The possible motives behind this position are
discussed below.

Once in Tibet, these teachings were passed down either through
a continuous (textually-based) lineage of Tibetan teachers, or were
hidden, to be discovered later as "Concealed Treasures," or Termas[44]
(Dzogchen texts attributed to Padmasambhava, and some attributed
to Vimalamitra, falling into this second category). Beginning in the
11th century, "*Terma* texts began to appear" in large numbers, becom-
ing from then onwards the textual basis for the Dzogchen tradition.[45]
Nyingma accounts of the later transmission of Dzogchen will not be

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  [41] Ibid., 222–3.
  [42] Khetsun Sangpo Rinbochay, *Tantric Practice in Nying-ma*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey
Hopkins (London: Rider, 1982), 185.
  [43] Ibid.
  [44] Terma (*gter-ma*, 'hidden treasure') primarily refer to a class of sacred literature
in the Tibetan Nyingma tradition (certain relics may also be considered Terma).
Most are texts considered to have been composed by Padmasambhava or his con-
sort, Ye shey Tsho gyal, in the 9th century, but then hidden by him to be redis-
covered at a later date by the reincarnations of his disciples (called 'Terton'). They
may take the form of actual physical texts discovered in some concealed place, or
be "Mind Treasures," transmissions from Padmasambhava "concealed in the cen-
ter or depth of the heart" and discovered through meditative experience. See Tulku
Thondup, *Hidden Teachings of Tibet: An Explanation of the Terma Tradition of the Nyingma
School of Buddhism* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1986), 164. See also Samuel,
Civilized Shamans, 461; Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 62ff. Non-Nyingmapas (especially
Gelugpas), as well as scholars, tend to reject Termas as "genuine historical sources"
(at least with respect to Padmasambhava). (Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 201) They are,
of course, sources for understanding the Buddhist traditions that created them.
  [45] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 463, 302.

addressed here,[46] except to mention the 14th century Dzogchen master Longchenpa (kLong-chen rab-'byams-pa)—one of the greatest scholar-practitioners of the Nyingma School and one of the most important promulgators of the Dzogchen teachings. Longchenpa systematized the Dzogchen teachings and "brought them into relationship with the New Tantra tradition."[47] In addition, Nyingmapas attribute an important collection of Termas to Longchenpa—the *Longch'en Nyingt'ig* ("The Vast Expanse of the Essence of Mind") received by the Terton Jigme Lingpa in the 18th century.[48] These Termas exercised a strong influence on the later Dzogchen tradition.

As noted above, scholars consider this traditional account to have little historical value. Garab Dorje in particular is a historically problematic figure, given the conflicts in the sources, the mythical content of his biography, and his unlikely dates.[49] Even if Garab Dorje is dated 6th century BCE (the latest date indicated in the traditional sources), his dates are absurdly early given that he is separated from Padmasambhava by only two figures in the lineage and Padmasambhava is dated 8th century CE. The tradition makes sense of these dates by maintaining that Garab Dorje had an extremely long life span—an unsatisfactory explanation for anyone but a devout Tibetan Buddhist. Given these problems, Garab Dorje is best considered a mythical figure. Reynolds' Nyingma sympathies lead him to maintain that Garab Dorje, as well as Dzogchen's other early masters, were historical figures. As he argues, "the very existence of Dzogchen as a viable and successful spiritual path points to the real existence of its early masters; for if not with them, with whom did Dzogchen originate?"[50] Having said this, however, he then concedes that, at least in the case of Garab Dorje, it is impossible to know when he lived, where he lived, or much of anything else about him.[51]

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[46] For an overview of the later development of the Dzogchen tradition, see Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*, 8ff.

[47] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 492. For an excellent summation of Longchenpa's textual output and contribution to Dzogchen, see Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*, 9–10. For a detailed discussion of Longchenpa's role in the transmission and formulation of Dzogchen teachings, see Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 56.

[48] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 534. For general overviews of traditional Nyingma accounts of Dzogchen's origins and history, see Patrul Rinpoche, *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, 335–347; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 256–261; Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 19ff.; Clemente, introduction to *The Mirror*, 15ff.

[49] See Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 206ff.

[50] Ibid., 200.

[51] Ibid., 212–3. Hanson-Barber also considers Garab Dorje an historical figure,

In contrast to Garab Dorje, the historicity of the other members of the Dzogchen lineage is less doubtful. In general, Śrīsiṃha, Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and Vairocana all seem to have been historical figures,[52] and there is good evidence (according to Dargyay) that Vimalamitra and Vairocana played central roles in the promulgation of Dzogchen in Tibet (Padmasambhava's role in the dissemination of Dzogchen appears to have been marginal).[53] Beyond these broad generalizations, however, establishing historical facts for any of these figures remains problematic.

The traditional Nyingma account of Dzogchen's origins is complicated by several other considerations. No Sanskrit originals for any Dzogchen texts have been discovered.[54] This means there is no historical evidence to support the Nyingma claim that certain early Dzogchen texts are translations of Indian, Sanskrit originals and are therefore Indian in origin. The earliest Dzogchen texts are from Tun Huang. They are Tibetan texts, dated to either the 8th or 9th centuries.[55] If dated to the 8th century, these texts confirm the existence of Dzogchen during the period associated with Vairocana, Vimalamitra,

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though he rejects dating him to the mid-1st century CE (the date given by Guenther, Dargyay, and Tarthang Tulku). Hanson-Barber dates him to the mid-6th century CE (Hanson-Barber, "The Identification of dGa' rab rdo rje," 58) Reynolds agrees that if Garab Dorje did exist, his most likely dates belong to the 6th century CE (Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 206) For a detailed discussion of issues surrounding Garab Dorje's historicity, see Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 199ff.

[52] On Vairocana, see Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 17–37.

[53] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 29–32, 54–61. See also Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 6, 37. Dargyay's reconstruction of the textual traditions is quite complex and restating it here is beyond the scope of this chapter. Her essential point is that during the beginning of the second dissemination of Buddhism to Tibet (11th century) different textual traditions were conflated and in the process a number of Dzogchen texts were erroneously attributed to Padmasambhava. See Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 32–3, 37–8, 54ff. For a summary of Dargyay's position on Padmasambhava, see Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 218. As Reynolds notes, certain Gelugpas have made the same point, rejecting the attribution of Dzogchen to Padmasambhava because of what they considered to be the non-Buddhist and/or Chinese Buddhist elements in Dzogchen doctrine.

[54] Dzogchen's Tibetan critics like to emphasize this point. These critics may be willing to admit the attribution of Dzogchen texts to Vairocana, Vimalamitra, etc., but they argue that these masters composed the texts themselves rather than translated them from Sanskrit originals. (Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 216) Reynolds notes an additional possibility: the texts considered by the tradition to have been translated by its early figures may have actually been composed by 10th century Tibetans and then falsely attributed to the early masters as a way to authenticate the tradition. Ibid., 200.

[55] Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*, 3–4; Karmay, *Great Perfection*, ix.

and Padmasambhava. But they provide no concrete historical evidence for the existence of Dzogchen before this time (i.e., in India). Furthermore, the Dzogchen doctrines in these texts seem to echo ideas found in Chinese Ch'an. How similar Ch'an and Dzogchen actually are is debated. Among scholars and Tibetans, there seem to be three positions on the issue: (1) the appearance of similarity between Dzogchen and Ch'an is illusory (in other words, the teachings of the two traditions are fundamentally distinct), (2) there is some similarity, and (3) the teachings are very similar or almost identical. These positions suggest a variety of conclusions regarding the historical origins of Dzogchen. The rejection of any similarity between Dzogchen and Ch'an supports the view that Dzogchen is exclusively derived from Indian Buddhist tantra. The second position—that there is some similarity—is compatible with three different conclusions: (1) Dzogchen is essentially a development of Indian Buddhist tantra, strongly influenced by Ch'an; (2) Dzogchen is essentially a development of Ch'an, strongly influenced by Indian Buddhist tantra; and (3) Dzogchen is a form of syncretism, that evolved through the combined influence of the two traditions. The third position—that the teachings are close to identical—supports the view (favored by some Tibetan critics of Dzogchen) that Dzogchen is really Ch'an in Tibetan guise. In order to evaluate these contesting views I address in more detail the relationship between Dzogchen and Ch'an below.

Chinese Influence on Dzogchen?

In addition to Indian Buddhism, there is no doubt of a Chinese Buddhist presence in Tibet during the 7th and 8th centuries (the period of Buddhism's first introduction to Tibet). Given the apparent similarities between Dzogchen and Ch'an, it seems reasonable to conclude that Chinese Buddhism (especially Ch'an) played some role in the eventual emergence of Dzogchen and that Dzogchen represents a continued residual presence of Chinese Buddhism within Tibetan Buddhism. The affinity is so close between certain aspects of Chinese Buddhism and Dzogchen that Dargyay speculates that before the Samye (*bsam-yas*) debates[56] late in the 8th century Dzogchen

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[56] There is some disagreement over the historicity of the Samye (*bsam-yas*) debates, where representatives of Chinese and Indian Buddhism are claimed by the Tibetan tradition to have entered into a three-year debate (792–794 CE) in order to determine which form of Buddhism Tibet would adopt. Traditional Tibetan sources

may not have been "distinguished from the related Chinese schools."[57]

The evidence that Chinese Buddhism (most likely, Ch'an) influenced Dzogchen is persuasive. As indicated above, according to at least one traditional account Garab Dorje transmitted Dzogchen to 'Jam-dpal-bśes-gnyen in China, who in turn transmitted it to Śrisimha also in China. Though the details of these lineages are historically unreliable, they nevertheless suggest Chinese influence on the tradition. Dargyay seems to accept the Nyingma claim that Dzogchen is originally Indian. She maintains, however, that the particular form that Dzogchen took in Tibet evolved in China.[58] According to her, "many of the early hierarchs of the Tibetan Old School (rNying-ma-pa) received their education in China and brought texts from there to Tibet, where they were translated into Tibetan."[59] She therefore concludes that "the *rDsogs-chen* teachings are, in all probability, . . . based on . . . several [Chinese schools] . . ., mixed with elements of Indian systems."[60]

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claim the Indian Kamalaśila won, leading to the official adoption of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism within Tibet, the expulsion of Chinese Buddhists, and an anti-Chinese Buddhist sentiment among Tibetans ever since. According to Herbert Guenther, the debate is nothing but a "hoax," invented by the later tradition to serve political and doctrinal ends. See Herbert Guenther, trans. and ed. *The Full-Fledged Khyung-chen Bird: An Essay in Freedom as the Dynamics of Being*, by Longchenpa [kLong-chen rab-'byams-pa, b. 1308], Studia Philologica Buddhica (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies of ICABS, 1996), 1.

Reynolds also doubts the historicity of the debate; according to him, Ch'an was expelled from Tibet, but for purely political as opposed to religious reasons. (Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 222–3) On the other hand, David Ruegg argues persuasively that not only is the historicity of the Samye debate factually "demonstrated," but that the Tibetan accounts of what occurred at the debate are historically reliable. See David Seyfort Ruegg, *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective: On the Transmission and Reception of Buddhism in India and Tibet* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1989), 64–5, 68, 76, 91. Ueyama also considers the historical occurrence of the debate proven, though he notes the likely possibility that the Tibetan records about the debate are not accurate. Daishun Ueyama, "The Study of Tibetan Ch'an Manuscripts Recovered from Tun-huang: A Review of the Field and its Prospects," in *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, ed. Whalen Lai and Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1983), 341, 348 n. 29. For a general discussion of Tibetan and scholarly views on the Samye debates, see Luis O. Gomez, "Indian Materials on the Doctrine of Sudden Enlightenment," in *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, ed. Whalen Lai and Lewis Lancaster (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1983), 393ff.

[57] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 37.

[58] Ibid., 26, 59–61.

[59] Ibid., 32. See also Samuel on the possibility of contact between early Nyingma and Chinese Buddhism. Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 454.

[60] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 9.

Giuseppe Tucci asserts that at least some elements of Dzogchen doctrine may be traced back to Chinese Buddhism—specifically, the Ch'an School and one of Ch'an's most famous representatives in Tibet, Ho-shang Mahāyāna.[61] As evidence, Tucci cites "Nyingma traditions that Vairochana . . . actually studied under Hwashang Mahayana."[62] Tucci's argument is supported by Longchenpa's claim that Śrīsiṃha, one of the earliest figures of the Dzogchen lineage, *was* Ho-shang Mahāyāna, "the much maligned opponent of the Indian Kamalaśila . . . at the so-called bSam-yas 'debate.'"[63] In other words, according to one of the most respected figures of Tibetan Buddhism, the archetypal representative of the Ch'an "heresy" in Tibet is none other than one of the greatest representatives of the Dzogchen tradition.

Tucci also argues that some Dzogchen Termas, discovered in the 11th century and attributed to Padmasambhava, were actually texts of the Ch'an school hidden by Ho-shang Mahāyāna in the wake of anti-Chinese sentiment following the Samye debates.[64] Dargyay makes a similar point when she states that "at the time of the expulsion of Chinese Buddhists, many [Chinese Buddhist] texts were hidden and later unearthed as the Concealed Books (*gter-ma*)."[65] As noted elsewhere, these Termas came to form the primary textual basis for the later Dzogchen tradition. Attributing these texts to an Indian author, however, did not prevent some Tibetans from criticizing Dzogchen

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[61] Ibid.; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 220. Ho-shang Mahāyāna is famous as the representative of Chinese Buddhism at the Samye debates in the late 8th century. Most scholars as well as Tibetans consider him to have been a member of the Ch'an school. See, for example, A.W. Hanson-Barber, "No-Thought" in Pao-T'ang Ch'an and Early Ati-Yoga," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8/2 (1985): 72.

Dargyay argues that Ho-shang Mahāyāna was actually a representative of the early Chinese Madhyamaka school of Seng-chao (itself strongly influenced by Taoism), noting that Ho-shang himself claimed to be a teacher of Madhyamaka. (Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 8–9) Given that Ch'an teachers have often considered themselves to be explicating the true meaning of emptiness according to the Mahāyāna sūtras and the Madhyamaka of Nāgārjuna, and that Ho-shang's position in Tibet would have likely lead him to defend his views by identifying them with Madhyamaka, Dargyay's point does not seem very persuasive. Regardless, Dargyay would still affirm a Ch'an influence on Dzogchen, though she would not attribute that influence to Ho-shang Mahāyāna as Tucci does.

[62] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 220. See Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 28–9, for textual claims that Vairocana journeyed to China (claims that Karmay views with suspicion).

[63] Guenther, *Khyung-chen Bird*, 1.

[64] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 8–9.

[65] Ibid., 32.

as having "too much in common with the Chinese schools as to its doctrine, origin of texts and masters."[66] Non-Nyingmapas such as Sakya Pandita (12th–13th centuries) were critical of Dzogchen because of what they considered its Ch'an origins.[67]

The influence of Ch'an on Dzogchen is also supported by the common perception that "there is much in the doctrine of Rdzogs chen that is similar in content to early Ch'an doctrine."[68] Luis Gomez notes the similarities between teachings attributed to Vimalamitra and Ch'an.[69] Dargyay observes the close affinities between early Chinese Madhyamaka, Ch'an, and Dzogchen.[70] According to her, "in many particular instances . . . [Dzogchen] teachings [attributed to Padmasambhava] correspond with those of Chinese Buddhist schools . . . [such as] *Ch'an, Seng-chao*, and *Hua-yen*."[71] A comparison of Ch'an and Dzogchen indicates that both undermine conventional notions of virtue by emphasizing the "relativity of good and bad."[72] Both consider immediate presence (identified with one's own mind or nature) to be the basis of both the path and goal, as opposed to involvement with doctrines, images, and formalized practices. Both are "direct," "non-gradual," or "sudden" paths to realize the "absolute condition" through "no-thought."[73] Even Dudjom Rinpoche—a modern Nyingma lama who emphasizes sectarian distinctions between Dzogchen and Ch'an—admits that the Dzogchen practice of "total freedom from deliberations during periods of meditative equipoise may well be the meditation of Hoshang Mo-ho-yen."[74]

Even though some Nyingmapas acknowledged the influence of Chinese Buddhism on Dzogchen and the Nyingma School in general (Longchenpa being the foremost example),[75] for the most part,

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[66] Ibid., 37.

[67] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 220. See also 277; Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 453, 463.

[68] Ueyama, "Study of Tibetan Ch'an Manuscripts," 349 n. 32.

[69] Gomez, "Indian Materials," 401–2.

[70] Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 8, 28.

[71] Ibid., 32.

[72] Norbu, *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 25–6. This is an important element of tantra as well.

[73] Ibid., 26. See also 23–5; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 220; Lipman, preface to *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 5. On their common understanding of 'sudden enlightenment' specifically, see Hanson-Barber, "No-Thought," 66, 71.

[74] Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 905. Dudjom Rinpoche goes on to cite passages to show that this practice is equally part of Indian Madhyamaka.

[75] Herbert V. Guenther, *Tibetan Buddhism in Western Perspective* (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1977), 140. See also Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 223.

Nyingmapas have resisted any suggestion that Dzogchen is derived from or influenced by Ch'an, or is in any essential way similar to Ch'an.[76] Some Western scholars (or scholar-practitioners) have supported this position as well. Both Hanson-Barber and Per Kvaerne claim that Dzogchen is a development of Indian tantric or Indian Mahasiddha traditions respectively, an indirect but strong rejection of the view that Ch'an played an important role in the emergence of Dzogchen.[77] Other scholars make a weaker argument—as Reynolds puts it, that "there exist no historical grounds" for considering Dzogchen to be "derived from the Chan of China."[78] This position, however, is fully compatible with the view that Ch'an played some role in the emergence of Dzogchen in Tibet. Karmay, for example, maintains that Dzogchen and Ch'an have distinct Indo-Tibetan and Chinese origins.[79] At the same time, he acknowledges the existence of "parallel ideas and practices" in Dzogchen and Ch'an and the possibility that Ch'an may have had some influence on the development of Dzogchen.[80]

Reynolds notes Tucci's position on Dzogchen and Ch'an, but rejects it, claiming that Tucci provides no supporting evidence.[81] Reynolds, however, gives little evidence for his own view. He cites the *bSam gtan mig sgron* of Nubchen Sangye Yeshe as an indication that "at least as early as the ninth century, and probably before, Tibetan Lamas could clearly distinguish the respective viewpoints of Dzogchen and Chan."[82] According to this text, there are four basic Buddhist paths: Sūtrayāna, Ch'an, Tantra, and Dzogchen.[83] Within this framework, Ch'an functions as a transition between the Sūtrayāna and Tantra, with Tantra and Dzogchen both representing fundamentally superior paths that fully recognize the positive quality of emptiness and therefore go beyond viewing emptiness as a mere "antidote."[84] This contrasts with Ch'an, in which the possibility of

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[76] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 222–3. For an example of Dzogchen anti-Ch'an sectarianism, see Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 899.

[77] Hanson-Barber, "The Identification of dGa' rab rdo rje," 55; Kvaerne, "The Great Perfection," 384.

[78] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 222.

[79] Lipman, in *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 33, n. 12.

[80] Ibid.; Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 11.

[81] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 225.

[82] Ibid., 224; see also 248.

[83] Ibid., 225.

[84] Lipman, preface to *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 8.

such an understanding is merely "opened up."[85] Granting that these
distinctions are valid, the strength of Reynolds' argument depends
on his early dating of the text. However, as Reynolds himself points
out, this date is disputable. Karmay, for example, dates the text to
the 10th century.[86] This later date, if accurate, substantially weak-
ens Reynolds' argument, since an earlier Ch'an/Dzogchen syncretism
could have easily evolved into sectarianism by the 10th century.

Even though they may admit some doctrinal similarities between
Dzogchen and Ch'an, Tibetans tend to emphasize what they con-
sider to be the important differences between the schools. According
to some Tibetan Buddhist teachers, for example, even though Ch'an
is a "direct approach" like Dzogchen, it is still a "Sūtra path" that
renounces the relative while Dzogchen (like tantra) does not renounce
the relative.[87] In addition, some Nyingma teachers claim that Ch'an
practice aims at "the realization of emptiness" while Dzogchen (and
tantra in general) emphasizes both emptiness and "luminous clarity"
(*gsal-ba*).[88] This distinction would seem to echo Hanson-Barber's point
regarding 'no thought' in Pao-T'ang Ch'an[89] and Dzogchen. According
to him, in Ch'an, no-thought may be interpreted literally as the ces-
sation of thinking. In Dzogchen, however, it has a positive, "dynamic,"
and "all-encompassing" meaning because it emphasizes a pure aware-
ness that includes the experience of "objects" as suchness (*tathatā*).[90]
More generally, Hanson-Barber claims that in Ch'an no-thought is
identified as the goal whereas in Dzogchen the goal is "pure aware-
ness," no-thought being only a potential by-product of that experi-
ence.[91] Hanson-Barber also argues that Ch'an and Dzogchen have
fundamentally different understandings of enlightenment: in Ch'an,

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[85] Ibid. In the *bSam gtan mig sgron*, Nubchen Sangye Yeshe distinguishes Dzogchen
and Ch'an against what he acknowledges to be their apparent similarities and com-
mon terminology. His presentation of the distinction between the two traditions is
subtle and sophisticated. For translations of the relevant passages from this text, see
Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 103–20. See also Herbert Guenther's analysis of this mate-
rial in his "'Meditation' Trends in Early Tibet," in *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*,
eds. Whalen Lai and Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series,
1983), 356–61.

[86] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 248; Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 11, 99, 102.

[87] Norbu, *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 23, 26.

[88] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 223.

[89] He specifies Pao-T'ang Ch'an because he considers it the form of Ch'an most
likely practiced by Ho-shang Mahāyāna. Hanson-Barber, "No-Thought," 64.

[90] Ibid., 70.

[91] Ibid., 71.

enlightenment (and the Buddha) is identified with one's "own mind" while in Dzogchen enlightenment is described as *bodhicitta*.[92]

The merit of these distinctions is debatable. Many appear more rhetorical than substantive. Hanson-Barber's distinction between "own mind" and *bodhicitta* is weak without some elaboration on the meaning of these terms in the particular texts being compared. He claims that "own mind" is derived from the sūtra tradition while *bodhicitta* is used in a tantric sense. He then cites two passages to illustrate the meaning of *bodhicitta*, but the esoteric nature of the passages makes them meaningless without additional commentary (though it is clear that *bodhicitta* is being presented from a tantric perspective). Hanson-Barber's emphasis on enlightenment as *bodhicitta* may actually undermine his point since in Dzogchen *bodhicitta* is often equated with *sems-nyid*, or the essential nature of mind. From this perspective, both systems seem to be identifying the goal—enlightenment or Buddhahood—with one's own nature or consciousness.

Regarding the possibility of Chinese Buddhist and Ch'an influence on Dzogchen, what can be concluded from the above remarks? It would seem that many of the arguments for rejecting such influence are weak, as well as suspect, considering the Nyingmapa's sectarian agenda and the anti-Chinese bias surrounding and following the Samye debates. Furthermore, even if the doctrinal distinctions noted above are valid, this does not negate the similarities that do exist and have been noted by both scholars and Tibetan Buddhists from non-Nyingma schools.[93] Again, the distinctiveness of such doctrinal similarities suggests the likelihood of at least some Ch'an influence on the early development of Dzogchen.[94]

Dzogchen Origins and Tantra

As discussed above, Dzogchen is in important respects doctrinally continuous with tantra. The tantric themes in early Dzogchen texts suggest that Dzogchen developed directly from Buddhist tantra or developed from Ch'an with strong tantric influence. The earliest use of the term '*rdzogs-chen*' occurs in a tantric context, where it seems

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[92] Ibid., 65.

[93] Of course, Tibetan Buddhists belonging to non-Nyingma schools often have their own agenda to de-legitimize the Nyingma School and its traditions, and in Tibet, accusations of Chinese influence were always a convenient way to do that.

[94] For an in-depth discussion on the relationship between Ch'an and Dzogchen, see Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 86–106. See also 108.

to be used either as a synonym for *rdzogs-rim* (the Tibetan transla-
tion for *utpanna saṃpannakrama* or *niṣpannakrama*, the perfection phase
of tantric practice),[95] as a label for the highest state of realization
within the perfection phase,[96] or as a term denoting a third, distinct
phase of tantric realization, the consummation of the generation and
perfection phases.[97] In this final sense, "'great perfection' apparently
referred to a kind of technique-free 'natural' immersion in a non-
conceptual state that became a frequent experience for some prac-
titioners after prolonged use of perfection phase techniques."[98] In
other words, in its earliest usage, *rdzogs-chen* did not refer to a dis-
tinct path, but to the realization of a particular grade of *samādhi*,
the highest stage of tantric, meditative realization.[99] This particular
state may in turn have inspired (in conjunction with other influences,
such as Ch'an) the development of distinctive, new Buddhist doc-
trines such as Primal Spontaneity (*ye nas lhun gyis grub pa*) and Primeval
Purity (*gdod nas dag pa; ka dag*). According to Karmay, Dzogchen as
a religious tradition then emerged through the "syncretism" of these
two concepts and Mahāyoga tantra[100]—in other words, through the
reappropriation and reinterpretation of tantric teachings from the
perspective of Primal Spontaneity and Primeval Purity. Samuel seems
to provide an example of this process. In the Guhyagarbha (an Old

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[95] Sparham, *Dzog-chen Meditation*, 4. Other translations include: completing or
completion process/phase/stage. This phase represents the second of the two basic
phases of tantric practice/realization. In general, "one may say that the *sampann-
akrama* deals with a direct non-conceptual apprehension of the goal (the ultimate),
particularly through the utilization of esoteric yogic techniques, while the *utpattikrama*
[the first, or 'generation,' phase] deals with the conceptual relative (the means to
the goal), particularly in the use of symbols such as deities and mandalas." Ibid., 5.

[96] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 223. See also Reynolds, *Golden Letters*,
265–6, 268, 339; Vitapāda's *Sukusumanāmamukhāgamavṛtti*, quoted in Dudjom Rinpoche,
Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, 313. In the New Tantra tradition of the non-
Nyingma schools, the culmination of the Perfection Stage is identified with Mahamudra.
Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 265.

[97] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 213, 223. See also Sparham, *Dzog-
chen Meditation*, 5; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 219, 265–6.

[98] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 223.

[99] Ibid. See also Karmay's discussion of Padmasambhava's *Man ngag lta ba'i phreng
ba*. Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 138ff.

[100] Ibid., 11. See also 86ff.; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 230. Karmay does not seem
to address the origins of the doctrines of Primal Spontaneity and Primal Purity. If
Dzogchen is indeed a "syncretism" of Mahāyoga and these two doctrines, then
explaining the origin of Dzogchen depends on discovering the origin of these two
concepts. I have speculated here that perhaps they evolved based on tantric med-
itative experience itself and/or the influence of Ch'an.

Tantra of the Mahāyoga class), the terms *jorwa* and *drölwa* literally refer to sexual union and animal or human sacrifice respectively.[101] Appropriated by Dzogchen, however, *jorwa* and *drölwa* take on completely different meanings: "fusion with the primal source" and "'release' of the energy frozen within the rigidity of emotional structures."[102]

According to Van Schaik, early Dzogchen was not a distinct tradition, but an "interpretive approach to tantra"—a way of "contextualizing" or thematizing tantric practice based on the distinctive doctrines of Dzogchen.[103] To some degree, this would seem to resonate with Karmay's claim that Dzogchen emerged through the application of certain doctrines (Primal Spontaneity and Primal Purity) to Mahāyoga tantra. Both views make a distinction between tantra and an interpretive framework applied to tantra. This distinction raises the question: what are the origins of this interpretive framework? Did it perhaps originate outside a tantric context, or through the influence of non-tantric traditions (e.g., Ch'an)? An affirmative answer to either question is a possibility given the similarities between Ch'an and Dzogchen discussed above.

Final Remarks on Dzogchen Origins

What general conclusions (if any) can be drawn regarding Dzogchen's historical origins? Again, the earliest evidence of Dzogchen's existence is the Tun Huang manuscripts dated to either the 8th or 9th centuries. This fact, in combination with the absence of any Sanskrit Dzogchen texts, supports the claim that Dzogchen probably evolved in Tibet in the 8th century. (I choose the earlier date because even if Karmay is correct and the Dzogchen texts from Tun Huang are best dated 9th century, they are likely to be the products of a tradition that predates their composition.) This date coincides with the reported activities of Vairocana, Vimalamitra, and to a lesser degree, Padmasambhava, though again, there is no reliable historical information concerning the activities of any of these figures.

As an indigenous Tibetan tradition, the historical problem turns to the influences that gave rise to Dzogchen. I have emphasized

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[101] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 467.
[102] Guenther, quoted in Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 467.
[103] Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*, 8, 5. See also Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 211.

tantric and Ch'an influences above, though several other possible influences are mentioned in the scholarly literature, including Indian Mahasiddha traditions,[104] Bon, Indian Yogācāra/*tathāgatagarbha* theory,[105] Hindu Śaivism, and even Gnosticism.[106] These possible influences notwithstanding, tantra and Ch'an remain by far the strongest, potential precursors to Dzogchen. They suggest five possible scenarios for the historical emergence of Dzogchen: (1) Dzogchen evolved from Indian Buddhist tantra, (2) Dzogchen evolved from Indian Buddhist tantra strongly influenced by Ch'an, (3) Dzogchen is a syncretism of tantra and Ch'an, (4) Dzogchen evolved from Ch'an, strongly influenced by Indian Buddhist tantra, and (5) Dzogchen evolved from Ch'an. Given the presence of both tantric and Ch'an elements in early Dzogchen texts, the extreme views (1 and 5) may be rejected. The idea that Dzogchen is either a pure derivation of Indian tantra or "pure Ch'an" would seem to reflect sectarian wishful thinking, either on the part of Nyingmas or Dzogchen's non-Nyingma critics. Is there a way, however, to adjudicate positions two through four? To my knowledge, the answer is no. At this point, Samuel's cautious remarks are probably the wisest: "the origins of Dzogch'en are obscure and perhaps go back to the mixture of Indian and Chinese Shamanic currents in eighth-century Tibet."[107]

Dzogchen Doctrine

The remainder of this chapter focuses on Dzogchen doctrines ('view') and practices ('path'). As emphasized above, due to the complexity of the tradition, my comments here are necessarily selective. Dzogchen's views and practices evolved over time, while at any particular time the various groups and lineages that identified themselves with Dzogchen did not necessarily present or interpret its doctrines in identical ways. This complexity is exacerbated by the fact that in

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[104] See Reynolds on Tucci, *Golden Letters*, 220. The case for Dzogchen's origins being in the Indian Mahasiddha traditions is strengthened if Anuyoga is considered part of Dzogchen, as Dargyay maintains. Dargyay, *Esoteric Buddhism*, 38–43.

[105] Mañjuśrīmitra's *rDo la gser zhun* ("Gold Refined from Ore") is cited by Reynolds as one of the primary indications of Yogācāra influence on Dzogchen. Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 205–6. For a discussion of Tibetan materials on the relationship between Dzogchen and Yogācāra, see Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 178ff. On the influence of the *tathāga tagarbha* doctrine on Dzogchen, see Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 211–2.

[106] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 215, 205, 220.

[107] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 463.

actual practice Tibetan traditions are rarely insulated entities. In the traditional Tibetan context Dzogchen would never have been practiced in isolation. All forms of Tibetan Buddhism are thoroughly integrated with what Tibetans refer to as the Sūtrayāna (stressing renunciation, compassion, and emptiness) and the intricately ritualized complexities of tantric practice. Still, alongside this variation and complexity certain key themes have remained more or less constant throughout Dzogchen's history, and it is these that will be focused on here.

Ultimate and Conventional Reality

Reality, according to the Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, may be understood from two different perspectives: 'ultimate' (*paramārthasatya*) or 'conventional' (*saṃvṛtisatya*). Conventional reality is usually identified with the ordinary cognition of things as inherently existing. Ultimate Reality, on the other hand, refers to emptiness (*śūnyatā*): the absence of inherent existence in any "thing" and therefore the ultimate illusoriness of "reality" at the conventional level.[108] In the Tibetan context, however, the meaning of ultimate Reality is more complex. Tibetan Buddhism is essentially tantric. And though an apophatic understanding of emptiness (associated with Prasangika Madhyamaka) represents the official position on ultimate Reality held by many Tibetan Buddhists (especially Gelugpas), the pervasively tantric character of Tibetan Buddhist practice lends itself to a more cataphatic approach. From the tantric perspective, emptiness is "a radiant presence full of vivid imagery" that constitutes "the source of [the] . . . primordial energy that brings all possible forms, even the universe itself, into manifestation."[109]

Tibetan Buddhism is also influenced by other, more cataphatic forms of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, such as Yogācāra and the concept of *tathāgatagarbha*—the innately pure and luminous Buddha-nature residing within all sentient beings. Yogācāra has been particularly important for the Nyingma School. According to Samuel, Nyingmapas have historically tended to emphasize "Yogācāra [i.e.,

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[108] Properly speaking, emptiness is not 'emptiness of' anything, since in the cognition of emptiness no 'thing' has ever existed to be negated. Ultimately, emptiness neither affirms nor negates anything, the basis for the Madhyamaka claim to be the 'middle way' between the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism.

[109] Lipman, preface to *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 8; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 281.

positive] conceptualizations of the path" rather than the Prasangika Madhyamaka approach of strict negation.[110] The result is that Tibetan, and particularly Nyingma, presentations of ultimate Reality often sound much more positive than the term emptiness suggests.

This willingness to describe Reality in positive terms is particularly evident in Dzogchen. In the Great Perfection, ultimate Reality is referred to as *gzhi* (literally, "ground"), variously translated as Ground, Base, Foundation, Primordial Basis, and Being. In its most general sense, *gzhi* refers to an eternal, pure, and luminous Reality that is the source of all phenomenal appearances. *Gzhi* is considered equivalent in meaning to standard Mahāyāna and tantric terms for the Ultimate, such as *chos-sku* (*dharmakāya*), *chos-nyid* (*dharmatā*), or *thig-le* (*bindu*).[111] It is used more or less interchangeably with the terms *sems-nyid* (the nature of mind) and *spyi mes chen-po* (the great universal Ancestor). *Gzhi* is also equated with terms associated with qualities or states of realization that contact Reality: *rang-byung-gi ye-shes* (intuitive awareness born of oneself), *rtog-pa* (non-conceptual), *rig-pa* (intrinsic awareness), and *ye-shes* (intuitive awareness). In Dzogchen, Reality and the state of consciousness that realizes Reality are identical.[112] Ontology, epistemology, and realized experience ultimately become indistinguishable since the experience of awakening is pure, experiential identification with Reality itself.

The nature of the Ground is generally described as ineffable. From a Dzogchen perspective, language is "a deviation from the principle [i.e., the *gzhi*]" and a "lie."[113] Any attempt to predicate something of pure Being constitutes a "going astray" from Being itself. For this reason, "the Absolute (*dharmatā*) has, from the beginning, never been pronounced."[114] Ultimately, It remains nameless.[115] This ineffability,

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[110] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 465.

[111] Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 108, 118. See Samuel on the conflation of terminology for the Ultimate in *The Tibetan Book of Great Liberation*. (Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 504) *Bindu* is generally translated as "drop" in tantric contexts, though in Dzogchen, Karmay argues that "(Great or Single) Circle" is closer to its intended meaning. The first two terms of this list—*dharmakāya* and *dharmatā*—are common to Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole, though the Dzogchen understanding of these terms may be somewhat different from that found in other Mahāyāna traditions. *Dharmatā*—literally "Dharma-ness"—is generally translated as Reality, Ultimate Reality, or the Absolute.

[112] Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche, "Maha-Ati," in *Psychology 107 Class Reader*, compiled by Eleanor Rosch (Berkeley, CA: By the compiler, University of California, 1993), 379; *Kunched Gyalpo* tantra, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 95.

[113] Commentary to *Tun-huang* Manuscript 647, in Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 55.

[114] Ibid. See also Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 65, 72.

[115] Ibid., 118.

however, did not prevent Dzogchen thinkers from describing It, beginning with the unequivocal insistence that It *does* exist.[116] Though It is invariably described as empty, this is the positive emptiness inspired by tantra, Yogācāra, and possibly the Jonangpa School.[117] In Dzogchen, emptiness is anything but an "inert void."[118] As Guenther explains, Being's nothingness "is not some abstracted and lifeless emptiness, but an utter fullness that . . . is vibrant with energy and hence a meaning-mobilizing potential (Tib. *nyid*)."[119] And because It exists, It naturally has qualities. Among other things, the Ground is described as unchanging, invulnerable/indestructible, authentic, perfect, complete in itself, non-modifiable, incorruptible, unborn, eternal/

[116] Ibid., 177. See also 215; Eva K. Dargyay, "The Concept of a 'Creator God' in Tantric Buddhism," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8/1 (1985): 44–5.

[117] The Jonangpas distinguished two types of emptiness: 'self-emptiness' (*rang stong*) and 'emptiness of other' (*gzhan stong*). The first represents the standard Madhyamaka negation of inherent existence, applicable to the phenomenal appearances of ordinary, deluded awareness. The second, 'emptiness of other,' applies to Reality itself, which is "empty" only in the sense that it lacks anything other than itself. In other words, emptiness in the *gzhan stong* sense affirms that there is a positively existing, pure and luminous Reality that is empty of adventitious obscurations or defilements. For more on the Jonangpa School and the *gzhan stong* approach to emptiness, see S.H. Hookham, *The Buddha Within: Tathagatagarbha Doctrine According to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhaga* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1991). See also Keith Dowman, trans., *The Flight of the Garuda: Teachings of the Dzokchen Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1994), 199.

[118] Richard Barron, trans., *Buddhahood without Meditation: A Visionary Account Known as Refining Apparent Phenomen* (nang-jang), by Dudjom Lingpa [Bdud-'joms gling-pa, b.1835], translated under the direction of Chagud Tulku Rinpoche (Junction City, CA: Padma Pub., 1994), 91. See also Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 510; Guenther, *Reductionism*, 228–9; Alexander Berzin, trans. and ed., *The Four-Themed Precious Garland: An Introduction to Dzog-ch'en, the Great Completeness*, by Longchenpa [kLong-chen rab-'byams-pa, b. 1308], with explanation and oral commentary by Dudjom Rinpoche and Beru Khyentze Rinpoche, translated, edited, and prepared in conjunction with Sherpa Tulku and Mathew Kapstein (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1993 [c. 1979]), 33.

[119] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 203. Emptiness is often explained specifically in relation to mind, where it is again emphasized that it is not a mere vacuity or void. Though emptiness involves the "complete cessation of all [mental] elaborations," this is a positive state "with all the auspicious attributes of knowledge, mercy, and power spontaneously established." (Khetsun Sangpo Rinbochay, *Tantric Practice in Nying-ma*, 191; see also 186) As Shabkar Lama states, "the emptiness of the mind is not just a blank nothingness, for without doubt it is the primal awareness of intrinsic knowledge, radiant from the first." (In Dowman, *Flight of the Garuda*, 95) Chetsangpa Ratna Sri Buddhi describes the "emptiness" of mind as "clear, shining, fresh, sharp, lucid"; "in the real nature of emptiness, clarity is present like a manifesting essence" that is "pure and all-pervading." In James Low, trans., *Simply Being: Texts in the Dzogchen Tradition* (London: Vajra Press, 1994), 62, 56. See also Low, *Simply Being*, 77–8; Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 535.

atemporal, non-localized, one/non-dual, unobstructed/all-pervasive, invincible, permanent, pure from the beginning, spontaneous, luminous, and motionless. In addition to these abstract qualities, Dzogchen texts use more personalized, symbolic, and/or tangible representations of the Ultimate. The *gzhi* is referred to as a "cognitive being" or "subject" (*yul-can*), symbolically represented as the "primeval grandmother," the "mother of all Buddhas," and the "great universal grandfather." It is often identified with Kun-tu bzang-po (Skt. Samantabhadra), the tantric personification of the *dharmakāya* who assumes the role of teacher/Buddha in many Dzogchen and Nyingma tantras. In some sources, the *gzhi* is described in even more concrete terms. As Karmay explains,

> in tantras chiefly associated with rdzogs chen, the *gzhi* is conceived as having a form which resembles a vase and its intellect is likened to a butter-lamp. . . . The overall presentation of the three components, viz. the body, its intellect, and light, is in the form of a "light ball". . . . The components are on top of each other. . . . This effulgent body knows no old age, hence its name "The Young Vase-like Body."[120]

In more technical language, the qualities of Being may be explained with reference to what Guenther calls the "triune dynamics of Being": essence/facticity (*ngo-bo*), nature/actuality (*rang-bzhin*), and energy/compassion/resonance (*thugs-rje*).[121] Guenther describes the first as "the [non-material] 'stuff' the universe including ourselves is made of," considered by the tradition to be both "diaphanous" (*ka-dag*) and "nothing/empty" (*stong-pa*). Dzogchen discussions of Being's essence usually emphasize emptiness as its decisive characteristic, though again this emptiness is never simply a void. According to Guenther, Longchenpa's explanations of Being's essence use *stong-pa* as a verb, and so nothingness, "far from being empty or void, is a void*ing*."[122] Longchenpa also states that "nothing exists" in the Ground's essence only in the sense that "nothing is distinguishable."[123] Nothing exists as a distinguishable entity—an entirely different claim than "nothing exists at all." The positive nature of Being's essence is emphasized by Dilgo Khentse's translation of *stong-pa* as "openness," referring

[120] Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 185.
[121] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 25–6. I have juxtaposed conventional translations with Guenther's translations in order to better evoke the meaning of the original Tibetan terms.
[122] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 26.
[123] Longchenpa, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 61.

to the "open," "unobstructed," and "mutually interpenetrating" nature of everything in the universe.[124]

The term *rang-bzhin*, the Ground's "nature" or "actuality," literally means "own itself/continuance/face," implying that Being's nature is the "lighting up" (*gzhi-snang*) or "showing its face" of Its essence (emptiness).[125] This lighting-up is suffused with the qualities of spontaneity (*lhun-grub*) and luminosity/radiance (*gsal-ba*) and represents an intermediate phase between pure potential and actuality (what Guenther characterizes as a "becoming-an-actuality").[126] At this level, the Ground is described as a "primordial glow": the "utmost subtle appearances" of Being's qualities as a rainbow of "lights, forms, [and] rays . . . in the ultimate sphere" of its expression.[127]

The final of Being's triune dynamics, *thugs-rje*, is variously translated as 'energy,' 'compassion,' or 'resonance.' According to Reynolds, *thugs-rje* is simply the unity of the above two facets (i.e., Being's essence and nature).[128] Guenther's choice of the term "resonance" evokes a richer sense of what this unity involves: a coordinated, vibrational harmony between all levels and facets of Being's energetic expression/play. In other words, one of Being's fundamental qualities is its own resonance with itself.[129] Describing *thugs-rje* as "ceaseless," Jigme Lingpa further considers it "the basis of [Being's] various manifestations."[130] It is associated with two basic qualities: *kun-khyab* ("all-encompassing") and *rig-pa* ("excitation").[131] The second quality refers to the excitation or cognitive intensity of Being as a whole that "breaks away from Being" and becomes the "seed" for Its consequent evolutionary options.[132]

The Four Kāyas

Another framework for describing the multilevel processes of Being is the Four[133] Kāyas or "Buddha Bodies:" *ngo-bo-nyid-kyi sku* (*svabhāvakāya*),

[124] Dilgo Khentse, "Maha-Ati," 379.
[125] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 25–6.
[126] Ibid., 25–7.
[127] Longchenpa, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 61.
[128] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 282.
[129] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 27.
[130] In Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 52.
[131] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 26.
[132] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 22; Longchenpa, in Guenther, *Reductionism*, 196.
[133] Sometimes five are listed. Dudjom Lingpa adds a fifth Kāya transcending the *svabhāvakāya*: the "Unchanging Vajra Kāya." (Barron, *Buddhahood without Meditation*,

chos-sku (*dharmakāya*), *longs-sku* (*saṃbhogakāya*), and *sprul-sku* (*nirmāṇakāya*). These are commonly translated as Essential Nature Body, Dharma Body, Enjoyment Body, and Transformation Body respectively. The four Kāyas are a tantric/Dzogchen elaboration of the standard three Kāyas of Mahāyāna Buddhism: *dharmakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya*, and *nirmāṇakāya*. As generally explained in Mahāyāna sources, the ultimate "Dharma Body" of the Buddha is identified with Reality/emptiness. The *saṃbhogakāya* is the compassion-motivated manifestation of the *dharmakāya*, symbolically represented as a celestial form of a buddha enthroned in his Pure Land and surrounded by hosts of bodhisattvas and other divine figures. The *nirmāṇakāya* is identified with any material form the *saṃbhogakāya* may take in order to aid sentient beings, Śākyamuni Buddha being the foremost example.

According to Guenther, these standard explanations utterly fail to convey the intended meanings of these terms, at least as they are used in Dzogchen. He translates *sku* ("body") as "gestalt," explaining that

> a gestalt is an unbroken whole, a complete pattern that cannot be arrived at through an accumulation of parts, but rather imbues the parts with meaning. . . . In the Buddhist context gestalt refers to the wholeness of experience where the subject-object split has not yet occurred and the field of experience has not been dissected into isolatable units of interest.[134]

From this perspective, the Kāyas are a way to understand Being's varying levels of expression in relation to (or *as*) an individual's experience. The first level, *svabhāvakāya*, Guenther describes as "the gestalt of Being-in-its beingness," referring to the ultimate, ontological Ground of experience.[135] According to Longchenpa, the three other Kāyas "are all incorporated into this [fourth Kāya], which is permanent, all pervasive, unconditioned, and without movement or change."[136] The next three Kāyas all represent experiential manifestations of this ultimate ontological Ground. The *chos-sku* (*dharmakāya*) refers to "Being's meaningfulness" or "meaning-rich gestalt"—the *svabhāvakāya*'s "exci-

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119–20) Longchenpa adds a fifth Kāya at the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, the "gestalt experience of mystery" (*gsang-ba' i-sku*), corresponding with ordinary, deluded experience. Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 45.

[134] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 37.

[135] See Ibid., 44–47; Longchenpa, in Berzin, *Four-Themed Precious Garland*, 57–8.

[136] Longchenpa, in Berzin, *Four-Themed Precious Garland*, 57–8. See also Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 44.

tation" as self-understanding.[137] The epistemological connotations of *chos-sku* are specifically suggested by its synonyms, *rig-pa* ("ec-static intensity" or intrinsic awareness) and *ye-shes* (pristine/primordial awareness).[138] Its basic characteristics are emptiness and radiance, as well as "primordial purity" due to its freedom from any trace of "reflexive representational thinking."[139] This ec-static intensity manifests as Being's "autopresencing," giving rise to *longs-sku*: "Being's coming-to-presence as a 'world'-engagement" or "gestalt as a world-spanning horizon of meaning."[140] *Longs-sku*'s "manifold . . . projections" in turn constitute *sprul-sku*, i.e., "Being's presencing as cultural guiding images."[141] Guenther elaborates on the three experiential Kāyas in the following passage:

> The triple gestalt experience [represented by the three Kāyas] . . . shows the connectedness of what might be spoken of as focal settings within the gestalt experience of Being. These gestalt experiences account for the embeddedness of the individual in the multidimensional reality of which he is both a particular instantiation and the expression of the whole itself. Within the field of experience these gestalt settings range from the holistic thereness of Being's sheer lucency as the proto-patterning of the contextual horizon of meaning [*dharmakāya*] to the presencing of the cultural norms and guiding images that express and serve the individual's aspiration for meaning [*nirmāṇakāya*]. Yet though these gestalts are spoken of as if they existed independently, they are interconnected inasmuch as they are all of one fabric—roughly, they are all experience.[142]

In other words, the "gestaltism of Being" represents "a process of 'embodying' the meaningfulness of Being in its multiple nuances."[143]

In Dzogchen thought, these four Kāyas are correlated with the three aspects of the Ground discussed above (though how they are correlated may vary depending on the source). As Dudjom Lingpa explains, the Ground's "essential nature as emptiness is dharmakaya; its inherent nature as lucidity is sambhogakaya; its innate compassionate

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[137] Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 239; Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 37–8, 45.

[138] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 45; Guenther, *Western Perspective*, 238.

[139] Guenther, *Western Perspective*, 39; Reynolds, *Golden Letters*, 239.

[140] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 40, 37; *rDzogs-pa-chen-po lta-ba ye-shes gting-rdzogs-kyi rgyud*, quoted in Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 45.

[141] *rDzogs-pa-chen-po lta-ba ye-shes gting-rdzogs-kyi rgyud*, quoted in Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 45, Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 37.

[142] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 37–8.

[143] Ibid., 28.

responsiveness as natural freedom is nirmanakaya; its pervasiveness and extension throughout all of samsara and nirvana are svab-havikakaya."[144] Longchenpa links the aspects and the Kāyas in a similar manner, though he is not entirely consistent. Being's essence (or "intensity 'stuff'") is identified with either (or both) the *svabhā-vakāya* or the *dharmakāya*, as well as with *ye-shes* (pristine cognition or primordial awareness).[145] *Saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* are identified with Being's third aspect (energy/resonance), both emerging through Being's nature/actuality (i.e., emptiness 'lighting up').

The Gzhi *as 'Creator'*

The relation of *dharmakāya* to *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* is often presented as a process of emanation, corresponding with the general understanding of Being as the primordial Source or Creator of all phenomenal appearances. The *gzhi*, metaphorically speaking, "gives birth."[146] In a general sense, It emits a radiance that congeals into the phenomenal universe as its own "adornment," displaying through this process such qualities as intelligence, compassion, primeval spontaneity, creativity, and playfulness. In the *Kun byed rgyal po'i mdo*, the universe is considered to be "an outflow of the primordial ground,"[147] personified as the "All-Creating King." As asked in the text, "who else if not the Mind of Pure Perfection (*byang chub sems; bodhicitta*)[148] would create the entirety?"[149]

The ultimate source of creation is commonly referred to as the "youthful vase(-like) body": a symbol for Being's essence as pure,

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[144] Dudjom Lingpa, in Barron, *Buddhahood without Meditation*, 89. See also Shabkar Lama, in Dowman, *Flight of the Garuda*, 107.

[145] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 44, 36–7.

[146] Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 190.

[147] Dargyay, "Creator God," 41. See Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 465.

[148] In this text, bodhicitta (Tib. *byang-chu-kyi sems*) and *gzhi* are used synonymously. On the identification of *bodhicitta*, Samantabhadra (Tib. Kun-tu bzang-po), *dharmakāya* (Tib. *chos sku*), *gzhi*, and *sems-nyid* in Dzogchen, see Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 45–6, 128, 131, 176.

Dargyay argues that *bodhicitta* is used here as a synonym for mind (*citta*) in the Yogācāra sense. The problem with this interpretation is that "mind" as the creator of the phenomenal world for the Yogācārins is essentially defiled. The "Creator" as identified in this text, on the other hand, represents a pristine and absolute principle, which may be identified with "awakened mind" (*bodhicitta*) or *gzhi*. Though Dzogchen texts may echo Yogācāra by describing the illusory appearances of ordinary experience as mental constructions, from the Dzogchen perspective, mind and objects are ultimately the presencing of a pure Ground.

[149] Dargyay, "Creator God," 43.

unconditioned, and unmoving. It is called "vase-like" because "its outer covering . . . is not (yet) broken"—it has "not appear[ed] outwardly"[150] but is still "contained" within its own freedom from conditions or distinguishable characteristics. But as stated above, it is the nature of the Ground to "light up."[151] As Guenther explains, "the whole's ec-static intensity . . . prevents it from ever becoming static and constantly seems to push it over the instability threshold into the world of actuality."[152] Metaphorically, the "vase breaks" and manifests as the "externalized glow" of Being's qualities as "lights" and "rays."[153] This ultimate sphere of Being's activities in turn sets the stage for two possible evolutionary trajectories. The first trajectory—Being's "emancipatory mode" (*grol-lugs*)—is initiated by the self-recognition of all appearances as nothing other than the Ground itself. This, from a Dzogchen perspective, is *nirvāṇā*/buddhahood, understood as a return to one's Source.[154] The second—Being's "errancy mode" (*'khrul-lugs*)—is the failure to make this recognition, being the fundamental ignorance (*ma-rig-pa*) that initiates a process of "going farther astray" (*'khrul-pa*) from the authenticity of Being.[155] This dimming of Being's pristine intelligence is poetically described in the *lTa ba klong yangs* as follows:

> The immovable moved slightly,
> The unquivering quivered slightly.
> Although there is no motion in the Basis,
> The motion comes out of the versatility of the Intellect [*rig-pa*].
> This versatility is called the Mind.
> It is also that of spontaneous compassion.
> Just like the wind of the breath of a small bird.
> Or the movement of the unborn cock.
> Or one hundredth part of a hair from a horse's tail split into a hundred,
> Such is the quivering which joins intellect to mind.
> This is called the Innate Nescience.[156]

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[150] Longchenpa, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 60.
[151] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 189–91.
[152] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 29.
[153] Pema Ledral Sal, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 58. For more on the emanation from the Basis, see Guenther, *Reductionism*, 189–91.
[154] This "return" is purely experiential, since ontologically, "straying" is impossible.
[155] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 30, 36–7. See also Longchenpa, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 62; Chetsangpa Ratna, in Low, *Simply Being*, 57; Guenther, *Western Perspective*, 153.
[156] In Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 189–90.

In other words, ignorance is the "joining" of Being's pristine intelligence and the dichotomizing, obscuring processes of ordinary mentation (*sems; citta*), a joining in which *sems* is privileged and Being is occluded. In the more technical accounts of the *gzhi*'s errancy mode, ignorance establishes the "ontic foundation" or "site" (*kun-gzhi*)[157] for the limiting/obscuring thought processes (*sems; citta*) more directly associated with human experience. Mind itself is constituted by eight 'perceptual patterns' (*rnam-par shes-pa; vijñāna*) and the fifty-one 'co-operators' (*sems-byung; caitta*), the latter including a variety of cognitive/affective pollutants (such as passion, conceit, jealousy, etc.) that "specify processes of wandering farther and farther away from that which existentially matters, of a continual being off course, and of straying deeper and deeper into obscurantism and self-deception."[158] In this context, *sems* is described as a "lost child" who has strayed from his mother's (i.e., the *gzhi*'s) side.[159]

As indicated above, ignorance is generally identified as the cause of the errancy mode. Based on personal visionary experience, Dudjom Lingpa attributes these words to Vajradhara: "the obscuring of the ground of being by non-recognition of intrinsic awareness is indisputably the ground of all ordinary experience (*kun-gzhi*)."[160] But ignorance is also a general and pervasive characteristic of the entire 'straying' process, including its end product, the person.[161] Mind (*sems*) and ignorance are functionally equivalent in Dzogchen.[162] And because ignorance constitutes the experiential alienation from Being, it is in

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[157] The term *kun gzhi*, the 'ground of everything,' is borrowed from Yogācāra, and in the sense used above (following Longchenpa) refers to the Yogācāra concept of *alāyavijñāna* (Tib. *kun-gzhi rnam-shes*): the 'container' of all cognitive/affective habitual tendencies, the basis of the deluded mental processes associated with *citta* and therefore the basis of saṃsāric experience in general. (Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 179–80) In Dzogchen, however, the *kun gzhi* is grounded in an inherently pure basis (*gzhi*), an idea that is not as explicitly articulated in Yogācāra. Some Dzogchen sources use *kun gzhi* as a synonym for the *gzhi* (Ibid., 178), in which case its meaning departs significantly from Yogācāra usage. (Ibid., 179) Longchenpa understands *kun gzhi* strictly in the Yogācāra sense. From this perspective, *kun gzhi* can not be equivalent to *gzhi* (as *chos sku*) since "*kun gzhi* is the root of *saṃsāra* . . . contain[ing] the saṃsāric traces (*bag chags*)" while *chos sku* is free of all saṃsāric traces. (Ibid., 178–180) See also Longchenpa, in Guenther, *Reductionism*, 214–5, 217; Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 210–11.

[158] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 225. See also 209, 227.

[159] Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 175–6.

[160] Dudjom Lingpa, in Barron, *Buddhahood without Meditation*, 97.

[161] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 195, 199, 216.

[162] Ibid., 226.

turn identified with duality: a localized subjectivity (the 'I') over against the object. The close association of all these aspects means that any or all may be described as the 'basis' of *saṃsāra*. In some sources, *saṃsāra* is "rooted" in subject-object duality.[163] Others may emphasize that duality is founded on the "I,"[164] which may in turn be considered to include the concept of self-nature in general. According to Dudjom Lingpa (reporting, he claims, the words of Śrisimha experienced in vision),

> just as water, which exists in a naturally free-flowing state, becomes frozen into ice under the influence of a cold wind, so the ground of being exists in a naturally free state, yet the entire spectrum of cyclic existence is established solely due to the underlying conception of an individual self and a self-nature of phenomena.[165]

It is important to emphasize, however, that from a Dzogchen perspective, the unfolding of the errancy mode never compromises Being's essentially pure nature. With respect to the individual, this invariant purity is referred to by various terms: *sems-nyid* (the nature of mind), *byang-chub-kyi sems* (*bodhicitta*, the awakened mind), *bde-gshegs snying-po* (*tathāgatagarbha*, Buddha-nature),[166] etc. All express the idea that regardless of how far one strays, one's primordial nature remains Being itself. *Sems-nyid* in particular is used to signify the view that our own "innermost being" is itself Being's "lighting-up," and as such has lost "nothing of its connectedness with the 'wider ownmostness' of Being."[167] In other words, our "innermost being" is nothing other than the *gzhi* in its utter completeness: "as the *garuda* when still in the egg has already developed its wings and other parts of its body so is *chos sku* in us."[168] *Sems-nyid* goes unrecognized because *sems* (ordinary mind) "creates . . . the world of illusion and through its activities it has obscured its own real nature (*sems-nyid*) from time immemorial."[169] Nevertheless, the "'real nature' of the *sems*" (i.e., *sems-nyid*) remains

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[163] See Vimalamitra, in Guenther, *Reductionism*, 211; Shabkar Lama, in Dowman, *Flight of the Garuda*, 96–7.

[164] Dudjom Lingpa, in Barron, *Buddhahood without Meditation*, 29; Chimed Rigdzin Lama, in Low, *Simply Being*, 43, 45.

[165] Dudjom Lingpa, in Barron, *Buddhahood without Meditation*, 157, 159. See also 29.

[166] Literally, *tathāgatagarbha* translates as "the womb (or embryo) of the thus gone one." Guenther translates it as "Being's optimization thrust."

[167] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 28.

[168] Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 185.

[169] Ibid., 175.

"immaculate . . . and luminous."[170] Within this framework of *sems* and *sems-nyid*, Buddhahood is identified with their reuniting, symbolically "described as the meeting between the mother and her lost child."[171] It is also described as the liberation of *sems-nyid* from the obscuring power of the *sems*, or as "the return of the *sems* to the Primordial Basis" (*mas ldog*, or "return from below").[172] Whichever metaphor is used, the general sense is that "one arrives back where one has been originally and was from the [very] beginning."[173]

Being's invariance is not only identified with a person's true nature (*sems-nyid*) or the pure state of consciousness that realizes this nature. Ignorance, mind, and subjectivity are considered continuous with Being as well, such that even the mind's "pollutants" are nothing but the "concrete presence" of pristine modes of awareness (*ye-shes*).[174] The errancy mode itself is correlated with Being's essence, nature, and energy "metaphorically described in terms of 'resting' and 'surging'."[175] So whereas Being's essence at rest is *chos-sku*, when "surging" it "becomes the closed system potential of one's primordiality-(constituted) existentiality," i.e., the *kun-gzhi*.[176] As surging, Being's nature/actuality is identified with the mind's unconscious cognitive/affective propensities (*bag-chags; vāsanā*) while energy/resonance is expressed as the joining of *kun-gzhi* with these propensities.[177]

This implies that in "going astray," self and world have "never departed from the vibrant dimension of (Being's) originary awareness mode."[178] As Shabkar Lama puts it, "no matter how large or violent the rolling wave, it cannot escape the ocean for a moment."[179] Though a person's finiteness does represent the dimming of Being's radiance/intelligence, this dimming is itself viewed as part of Being's "play of obscuring and clearing."[180] Dzogchen therefore proposes the "grandiose idea . . . that Being conceals and obscures itself by 'immers-

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[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid., 176.
[172] Ibid., 190.
[173] Ibid., 189.
[174] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 320.
[175] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, 35.
[176] Ibid., 36.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Longchenpa, in Guenther, *Reductionism*, 187. See also 234.
[179] Shabkar Lama, in Dowman, *Flight of the Garuda*, 114.
[180] Guenther, *Reductionism*, 243.

ing' itself in us as a kind of camouflage, but also reveals itself through us; and what is so revealed is Being itself that is our humanity."[181] This in turn becomes the basis for what is perhaps Dzogchen's central doctrinal claim: "the spiritual domain . . . is nowhere else than in an individual's body as experienced in the immediacy of its lived concreteness."[182]

Being's invariance extends to the world of phenomenal appearances. In Dzogchen texts, the *sems* (rooted in ignorance/duality/ego) is often identified as the immediate cause of illusory phenomenal appearances. This illusoriness, however, does not mean that appearance is hallucination. Rather, ordinary appearances represent a fundamental misperception of Reality, especially the failure to recognize/ experience the unbroken continuity between appearances and Ground. Dzogchen texts tend to assert that all phenomena are nothing but the *gzhi*. As Longchenpa puts it, "know everything thought or attended to be the substance of the unborn ordering principle itself."[183] Or, as the *Kun byed rgyal po'i mdo* states, "each individual [phenomena] is in some respect My nature, My identity, My person, My word, My mind."[184] In other words, creation only "appears to be distinct from its origin."[185] The "ontological ground" is both "immanent and transcendent at once," and "not essentially different" from its creations.[186]

Being, then, remains invariant both as an abiding presence immanent within all things and as the things themselves (the expressions of that presence). Even though Being has in some sense "gone astray" as mind and the phenomenal world, It "has never parted from the vibrant dimension of [its] originary awareness mode;" what has been "built up" by mentation is still considered "perfect and complete."[187] Everything is, as Dzogchen teachers often express it, primordially pure and enlightened from the beginning.

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[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid., 227.
[183] In Kennard Lipman and Merrill Peterson, trans., *You are the Eyes of the World*, a translation of *The Jewel Ship: A Guide to Meaning of Pure and Total Presence, the Creative Energy of the Universe*, by Longchenpa [kLong-chen rab-'byams-pa, b.1308] (Novato, CA: Lotsawa, 1987), 43.
[184] In Dargyay, "Creator God," 41.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid., 41–2.
[187] Longchenpa, in Guenther, *Reductionism*, 187.

The Dzogchen Path

Dzogchen practice is a direct extension of its view. Since we, as well as everything else, already are Being, to know Reality and attain buddhahood is nothing other than being naturally and spontaneously present in a state of immediate awareness. As Longchenpa advises, "seek for the Buddha nowhere else than in . . . the pure fact of being aware right now."[188] Though the means of doing this may include the cultivation of specific types of mental attitudes such as non-discrimination and non-attachment, generally speaking, Dzogchen "practice" is described as an effortless non-striving, letting be, relaxing in the natural state, or even "doing nothing" (*bya bral*). Since one's true nature is unfabricated and already perfect, "there is nothing to correct, or alter, or modify."[189] And since the Ground is "spontaneously present from time immemorial," there is no need to seek It.[190]

This implies the remarkable proposition that to do anything—such as a spiritual practice—is to stray from Reality. Why? Because seeking automatically imposes a condition on one's experience, and therefore represents an inherent betrayal of the nature of Reality itself. According to Dudjom Lingpa (he attributes the statement to Hungchenkara, heard in visionary experience), "to think of the goal as gaining freedom in some other place or realm . . . is to think that the pervasive, extensive panorama of space is an object or agent of coming and going. What an extremely bewildered and deluded state of mind!"[191] Since one already *is* the Ground, "aiming at something" through an activity or practice is like "the sun look[ing] for the light of the glow worm."[192]

In general, the conditions inherent in structured contemplative practices—or in even trying to 'look for' something—are considered a limiting and obscuring influence.[193] The immediacy of awareness

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[188] Longchenpa, in Lipman and Peterson, *Eyes of the World*, 47.

[189] Namkhai Norbu, foreword to *Naked Awareness* by Reynolds, x; Namkhai Norbu, *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 27.

[190] Longchenpa, in Berzin, *Four-Themed Precious Garland*, 39.

[191] Dudjom Lingpa, in Barron, *Buddhahood without Meditation*, 113.

[192] Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, in Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 113.

[193] See Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 900; Shabkar Lama, in Dowman, *Flight of the Garuda*, 121. This rejection of formalized practices is particularly emphasized in early Dzogchen, though even here it may have been somewhat rhetorical. See Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 239; Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 213.

is "beyond all mental constructs and fixation"[194] while structured contemplative practices simply "feed . . . [the *sems*] with the mental discursiveness (*rtog pa*) for creating its own delusion (*'khrul ba*) still further."[195] As one early Dzogchen source puts it, "the activities of accumulation of merit, both physical and spiritual, the practice of contemplation, and purification of samsāric traces, all are a 'fixing stake.'"[196] Being goal-oriented, such practices perpetuate a dualistic frame of reference by specifying a 'doer' on the way to some destination; all promote the localization of consciousness within the bounded domain of egocentric mentation.

Understanding what Dzogchen means by 'letting be' or 'doing nothing,' however, depends on understanding the mind in its ordinary condition (usually through some type of structured meditative or contemplative practice). As discussed in Chapter Three above, experience is shaped by unconscious and conscious beliefs that define an essentially conditional/dualistic relationship to life. In a subtle or not so subtle way, the background assumption of every moment is that there is something, somewhere better than the here and now. Driven by this assumption, the ordinary mind tends to be engrossed in an internal narrative and abstracted out of the immediacy of felt sensation. The mind tends to grasp and identify with passing thoughts and emotions in an almost frantic effort to capture a 'somewhere else' that corresponds with our concepts and conditions of acceptance, safety, and survival. In this way, the ordinary mind is a deeply habitualized and generally unconscious process of constant dis-locating from the present moment. In the terminology of Dzogchen, *sems* has "through its activities . . . obscured its own real nature (*sems-nyid*) from time immemorial."[197]

This understanding of mind is the basis for appreciating the cognitive/experiential significance of Dzogchen's view and practice. The concept of *gzhi* encourages a perspective on the world that stands in direct opposition to the ordinary point of view and the dualistic concepts that support that view. Rather than the conditional "good" of ordinary experience, the Good as *gzhi* is unconditional, entailing that

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[194] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 229.
[195] Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 175.
[196] *Tun-huang* Manuscript 594 (v. 9–11), in Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 72. See the *bSam gtan mig sgron* (Ibid.) and also Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 84.
[197] Ibid., 175.

there is nowhere to go and nothing to accept or reject. In addition, the practice of 'doing nothing' as a resting in the immediacy of the moment is diametrically opposed to the mind's habitual tendencies of grasping and distraction. It requires constant, non-wavering mindfulness, and therefore involves a very *active* and *effortful* 'holding' to the immediacy of present awareness.[198] 'Doing nothing' turns out to be an extremely difficult psychological feat.[199]

Given the difficulty of the practice, Dzogchen texts emphasize that it is a path only suitable for advanced practitioners. Telling a beginner to simply "let the mind be," with no prior training in mental quiescence and no acquaintance with a sense of presence, does nothing but encourage the habitual, non-present processes of the mind. According to Longchenpa, without the preliminary use of at least some "meditative references (*dmigs pa*) or specific icons such as visualization (*mtshan bcas*) . . . one will not have the slightest meditative experience and thus will not be able to stabilize one's mind."[200] He therefore emphasizes "the importance of beginning with meditative objects, and only subsequently releasing them into non-referential (*dmigs med*) meditation."[201] Longchenpa, in fact, characterizes those "who [attempt] . . . to directly meditate on the [Dzogchen] path without . . . [certain] preliminaries . . . as deviant or mistaken."[202] In a general sense, preliminary practices are considered necessary for the "energization of . . . [Dzogchen's] contemplative techniques."[203] More specifically, they serve to refine and pacify consciousness to the point where 'letting be' functions as a means of settling even deeper into the here and now, rather than as a sanction for ordinary, egocen-

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[198] See Hanson-Barber's comments on *rig-pa* as non-straying or "no-movement" from "pure awareness." Hanson-Barber, "No-Thought," 67–70. See also Chetsangpa Ratna, in Low, *Simply Being*, 58.

[199] See Low, *Simply Being*, xxiii. In Zen, 'just sitting' (*shikan taza*) is so strenuous that after "half an hour you will be sweating, even in winter in an unheated room." Hakuun Yasutani, in Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 54.

[200] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 259.

[201] Ibid. See also Longchenpa, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 282–3. In at least one source, Longchenpa does state that one can skip preliminary practices if one has no difficulty quieting the mind or if one simply finds such practices too difficult. (Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 225) Since few practitioners meet the first criterion at least, this does not significantly call into question the importance of preliminary practices.

[202] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 255.

[203] Ibid., 260.

tric mentation. In all phases of Tibetan Buddhist history, these pre-liminaries[204] are subsumed by practices and attitudes associated with mainstream Mahāyāna and tantric traditions—practices that a student would have already mastered before ever being initiated into Dzogchen by his or her lama. By Longchenpa's time at least (14th century), some of these preliminaries (especially tantric practices) were also incorporated within Dzogchen itself. Either way, these preliminaries and Dzogchen proper are functionally inseparable.

Preliminary Practices

Longchenpa specifies three types of practices that need to be performed before one should engage in Dzogchen practice.[205] These three are

> correlated to the three vehicles: the general preliminaries on imper-
> manence and renunciation of cyclic existence (the Lesser Vehicle); the
> special preliminaries on compassion and . . . engendering a compas-
> sionate motivation (the Great Vehicle); and the supreme preliminar-
> ies, which are identified as the generation phase, perfection phase and
> guru yoga [associated with tantra/Vajrayāna].[206]

The nature of these preliminaries can only be touched upon here. Briefly, all Tibetan Buddhist practice is founded on an understanding of the pervasiveness of suffering (the First Noble Truth) and a concomitant attitude of renunciation toward all things in the world. The practices associated with this are generally sustained contemplations on suffering in all its variegated and wide-ranging forms, not only in this human realm, but also in the other five realms of existence into which a sentient being may be born. By establishing an evaluative orientation of pervasive unsatisfactoriness, an attitude of renunciation helps to disengage attention from the ordinary concerns of the ego and thereby pacifies the mind by weakening the attachments that formerly preoccupied it. Associated with this practice is reflection on the inexorable law of karma (the cause-effect relationship between one's present thoughts and actions and one's future circumstances), designed to encourage ethical (i.e., ego-subverting)

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[204] The practices below are described as "preliminaries" from the perspective of Dzogchen. Depending on the school or tradition, a preliminary practice (in Dzogchen) may itself be considered a central and/or ultimate Buddhist practice.

[205] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 260.

[206] Ibid., 255; material in brackets my addition. See also 260.

behavior (or else face the consequence of possible rebirth in one of the many different hell realms).

Having realized some degree of renunciation, further preliminaries are specifically associated with the Mahāyāna and take various forms. Perhaps the most important involves the cultivation of compassion and an altruistic motivation for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*). A common practice for generating *bodhicitta* begins with the premise that all beings have been one's mother in a previous lifetime. With this in mind, one reflects on all of one's "mothers" in their present conditions of suffering. By sustained meditation on this "fact," strong feelings of compassion arise toward all beings followed by the desire to relieve their suffering. This desire then becomes one's motive for striving for enlightenment, since enlightenment is a state of power and omniscience best suited to help others. Included here are practices associated with the bodhisattva path: basic virtues such as giving, patience, etc. (the *pāramitā*s) as well as other thematized contemplations which seem to encourage compassion by cultivating attitudes and behaviors that counter any tendency toward self-protection. For example, in any circumstance in which one would be inclined to assume a defensive posture, bodhisattva practice requires action or attitudes directly counter to one's natural inclinations. According to Ngulchu Thogme, "if, in the midst of a large gathering, someone exposes your hidden faults in an insulting way, perceive him as your spiritual teacher and bow to him respectfully."[207] More generally, one imaginatively seeks to embrace the suffering of others rather than erect protective boundaries against it, based on the insight that it is the very tendency to protect the self against suffering (and the dualism inherent in that posture) that is the basis of suffering. Essentially, this attitude functions to uproot deep-seated conditional associations of acceptance/rejection that drive the egocentric processes of ordinary mind.

Additional Mahāyāna practices (preliminaries from the Dzogchen perspective) include meditation focused on calming and pacifying the mind (*zhi-gnas; śamatha*) and analytical contemplation aimed at gain-

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[207] Precept 15 of Ngulchu Thogme's *Thirty-Seven Precepts of the Bodhisattva*. I have not been able to identify the translator. For other translations of the *Thirty-Seven Precepts*, see Geshe Sonam Rinchen, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, trans. Ruth Sonam (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), 47; Geshe Jampa Tegchok, *Transforming the Heart: The Buddhist Way to Joy and Courage* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1999), 211.

ing first a conceptual and then a non-conceptual insight into empti-
ness (*lhag-mthong; vipaśyanā*).[208] For Longchenpa, Insight meditation
"involve[s] no specific techniques beyond analytical or poetic shap-
ing of a preexisting contemplative state, with a focus on directed
inquires into emptiness."[209] By undermining the concepts of inher-
ent existence of both subject and object, Insight practice may not
only weaken evaluative associations (since there is nothing to evalu-
ate or cling to), it may, with enough practice, weaken perceptual
dualism as well. Longchenpa also presents two practices integrating
śamatha and *vipaśyanā*. David Germano's description of these prac-
tices hints at what they involve. The first he describes as a "the-
matic type of contemplation focused on finding the valorized state
of awareness while sitting in the standard posture" while the second
("an 'enhancer' . . . to the first") utilizes "specific postures and gazes
to contemplate a lucent cloudless sky."[210]

Tantra introduces the next level of preliminary practices.[211] The
core of tantric practice is meditative visualization. Usually this involves
visualizing oneself residing in a tantric deity's pure realm, or (in more
advanced tantric practices) oneself *as* the deity in his/her pure realm,
with the aim of awakening in the practitioner an awareness of what-
ever 'energy,' aspect of Reality, and/or aspect of one's own mind
the deity represents.[212] Other aspects of tantric practice include (1)
embracing one's embodied situation (particularly all associated feel-
ings and passions) as the vehicle of awakening, (2) de-conditioning
dualistic evaluative associations by imaginatively superimposing the
maṇḍala over ordinary appearances, and (3) gaining awareness and
control of the subtle energy (*rlung; prāṇa*) of the body through *nāḍī-
prāṇa* yoga.[213] More generally, tantra seems to serve the additional
function of beginning (through symbols) to acquaint the practitioner
with the experience of immediate presence.

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[208] Generally, *śamathā* is considered a prerequisite to *vipāśyana*.
[209] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 253.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Longchenpa lists tantric practices as Calming techniques. Germano, "Architecture
and Absence," 252–3.
[212] In some presentations (particularly Gelugpa), this awareness is considered a
more direct means of realizing emptiness.
[213] These include practices in which one visualizes energy flowing along various
channels (*nāḍī*) in the body as well as practices of breath retention or alternate-
nostril breathing.

Though these practices may be quite structured and formalized, they tend to become less so as preliminary methods of Dzogchen. As Germano notes, most of the preliminary practices described by Longchenpa involve

> no techniques beyond the standard lotus posture, and are . . . poetically thematized styles of contemplative inquiry attempting to evoke and/or pinpoint such key dimensions as emptiness, clarity, awareness and primordial freedom.[214]

For example, the practices outlined by Longchenpa in his *Sems-nyid ngal gso* tend to be "technique-free, exhortatory and evocative in nature."[215] Furthermore, the structured practices that are utilized are modified according to Dzogchen ideals:

> though they draw upon tantric practices and other normative Buddhist meditative techniques, the guiding principle is extreme simplicity (*spras bral*), and always priority remains on the mind's state, not the imported practice's specific details.[216]

Tantric practices in particular are simplified, with focus being on "the generation of concentration rather than any quality of the technique in and of itself."[217]

Dzogchen Practice

The various preliminary techniques of Dzogchen are generally considered essential means of turning the mind from its habitual egocentric tendencies, and as Dzogchen evolved historically (especially from the 11th century onwards) they became increasingly important based on the recognition that holding to simple awareness requires prior practice in stabilizing the mind.[218] From the perspective of Dzogchen, however, at some point in one's spiritual maturation such practices stop being an aid to awakening and instead become an obstacle. Reality (the Ground) is unconditioned, while these practices are themselves conditions that by definition must conceal the Ground,

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[214] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 253.
[215] Ibid., 254.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid., 253.
[218] On Dzogchen's shift from an early rejection of all formalized, structured practices to an increasingly structured (especially tantric) approach, see Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 205–9, 216, 234, 266.

through both the structures of the practices themselves and the dualistic presupposition of path and goal. From a Dzogchen perspective, an additional "practice" is necessary: "a technique free immersion in the bare immediacy of one's own deepest levels of awareness,"[219] transcending the dualistic conditions of path/goal, meditation/non-meditation, and quiescence/activity.[220] In a sense, the "method" becomes liberation, since the only way to realize a non-dual state is through non-duality itself.[221] At this level, practice becomes non-practice. As Dilgo Khentse states, "one must realize that to meditate is to pass beyond effort, beyond practice, beyond aims and goals and beyond the dualism of bondage and liberation."[222] Paradoxically, this non-dual, non-practice constitutes the complete severing of one's ties to the mundane through the radically non-ordinary state of uncontrived presence.

Dzogchen rhetoric notwithstanding, its rejection of practice (at least as an ultimate ideal), valorization of goalessness, and entire cosmology turn out to function *as* practice. The Dzogchen view constitutes an orienting frame of reference that actively shapes contemplative (and non-contemplative) experience and uproots the more subtle levels of conceptual duality (the persistent sense that one is a "practitioner" going somewhere) that are still active as one approaches the threshold of enlightenment: the point where practice leaves off and pure awareness is realized. As noted above, to existentially embrace the idea that everything, including ourselves, represents the presencing of Being and is therefore primordially perfect and already enlightened has direct implications on one's relationship to life and one's own experience. First, it encourages a non-discriminating attitude toward the world of phenomenal appearances. Since "whatever arises has arisen as the play (*Rol-Ba*) of the ultimate nature," one neither has to grasp or reject, but can simply "enjoy all phenomena"

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[219] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 254, 240.

[220] In the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, the concept of emptiness seems to have also been an attempt to refer to or evoke an unconditioned approach to enlightenment, though the Tibetan Buddhist tradition has tended to emphasize the analytical, Madhyamaka method of realizing emptiness.

[221] See Lipman, preface to *Dzog Chen and Zen*, 7. The non-duality of uncontrived awareness is itself buddhahood. As is stated in the *All-Accomplishing King*: "the realization of the buddhas of the three times is gained in the sole determination that two are not seen." In Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 897.

[222] Dilgo Khentse, "Maha-Ati," 379.

without discrimination.[223] Second, by identifying all standard Buddhist terms for the Absolute (buddhahood, *dharmakāya*, *dharmatā*, etc.) with one's own mind or experience, the Dzogchen view functions to constantly redirect attention back to the here and now. Holding the view of oneself as already a buddha, one does not stray from immediacy. And this 'non-straying' (or non-duality) *is* buddhahood. As Longchenpa explains, "by first having the certainty that one's Mind is spontaneously the real Buddha from primordial time, later one realizes that there is no need of aspiration for Buddhahood from any other source. At that very time one dwells in Buddhahood."[224]

The practice of 'letting be' has a pacifying/purifying effect on consciousness (another apparent paradox); if one simply allows thoughts (neither accepting or rejecting them), thoughts are "liberated." Again, view plays a central role in this process. According to Longchenpa, "by saying that this present mind is the buddha itself [i.e., by contemplating the view], and by attending to its intrinsic clarity, incidental conceptualizations are clarified in the dimension of mind as-it-is, just as we clear up muddy water" (i.e., by doing nothing but letting the water sit).[225] A mind that has developed some familiarity with the state of immediate presence (supported by the Dzogchen view) remains undistracted.[226] In this state of presence, 'allowing' undermines the dualistic/conditional framework that generates thought. And so "without having to be eliminated, [thought] is released. Remaining with that state of contemplation, the thoughts release themselves right away like a drawing on water."[227] The "stains" of mentation (*sems*) being removed, the Ultimate is then automatically realized.[228] This meditative approach contrasts with the more conventional attempt to suppress thoughts, which some Dzogchen sources claim has exactly the opposite of its intended effect. As Shabkar

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[223] Lochen Dhamaśri, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 86.
[224] Longchenpa, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 282.
[225] Longchenpa, in Lipman and Peterson, *Eyes of the World*, 50.
[226] Reynolds, *Naked Awareness*, 39, 56.
[227] Longchenpa, in Lipman and Peterson, *Eyes of the World*, 37. On the "self-clarifying" nature of mind, see also Mathew Kapstein, "The Amnesiac Monarch and the Five Mnemic Men: 'Memory' in Great Perfection (Rdzogs-chen) Thought," in *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Janet Gyatso (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 244.
[228] Longchenpa, in Berzin, *Four-Themed Precious Garland*, 56–7; Dudjom Rinpoche, *Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 907; Longchenpa, in Tulku Thondup, *Buddha Mind*, 289.

Lama explains, "trapped by the thought of desiring thoughtlessness, conflicting thoughts multiply, and in mounting frenzy you run aimlessly hither and thither." To quiet the mind, one must instead "relax and merge into the primal space of knowledge. . . . Cut loose and just let it be."[229]

The calming associated with these types of practices echoes standard *śamatha* practices, and Germano asks if there is any significant difference between the two approaches.[230] As he points out, the Great Perfection argues that there is a difference, in that

> its [own] meditations are not fixated or exclusionary as calming practices generally are—instead they allow a vibrant and ceaselessly active type of awareness to come to the fore, which is then integrated into everyday life.[231]

Though *śamatha* and certain Dzogchen practices appear similar in some respects, Dzogchen's "'formless' contemplations cultivate not only an alert, vigilant, eyes-open awareness, but are also shaped in [distinctively Dzogchen] styles of psychological inquiry by poetic thematization."[232] Guenther also points out that Dzogchen practice promotes a "self-centering" process fundamentally different from ordinary *śamatha/vipaśyanā* practices, which are "object-oriented" and therefore perpetuate a dualistic frame of reference.[233]

Systems Theory and Dzogchen

As discussed in the previous chapter, mind is a system of factors and processes that constructs a dualistic state of consciousness at both perceptual and evaluative levels. Given this understanding of mind, what effects would Dzogchen have on consciousness? In general, Dzogchen constitutes a sustained assault on the system of factors and processes that construct ordinary consciousness. This assault is founded on the doctrine of the *gzhi*. As the ultimate and only Good, *gzhi* entails the concept of spiritual goal (even if realizing this goal ultimately requires goalessness). The two concepts (the Real and the goal) are linked since the goal is nothing other than experiencing/

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[229] Shabkar Lama, in Dowman, *Flight of the Garuda*, 121.
[230] Germano, "Architecture and Absence," 225.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid., 226.
[233] Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, xii–xiv.

knowing the Real (also identified with knowing one's true nature). The identification of the Real as goal entails a specific way of interpreting any aspect of one's perceptual, mental, and emotional life that manifests duality—since the Real is unconditioned Unity, all forms of duality represent separation from the Real. If one's goal is to realize the Ground, the concepts, behaviors, attitudes, etc. that support duality must be eradicated. The goal, then, establishes a context for defining a path: the active cultivation of certain attitudes (i.e., virtues) and the performance of certain practices and behaviors that function to deconstruct the duality/separation that opposes experiencing the Real.

Dzogchen's deconstructive program begins with its preliminary practices, which initiate the process of deconditioning the mind of its dualistic constructs. Calming and Insight practices make the practitioner aware of the nature of ordinary mind—an essential achievement given (1) the difficulty of seeing beyond one's ordinary, taken-for-granted perspective and (2) the necessity of a first-hand understanding of the problem to effect a final solution. Through Calming the meditator acquires some capacity to still the mind, upsetting the constructive/homeostatic functions of the internal dialogue, while tantric practice redirects one's attention from the abstract attitude of ordinary consciousness to an aesthetically rich, symbolically-mediated experience of the immediacy of Reality. Dzogchen view and practice completes this destabilization process by undermining dualistic constructions inherent in the path itself.

According to Dzogchen, the Buddha is one's own mind, and recognizing this mind requires only that one "effortlessly" reverse the direction of all one's ordinary cognitive and emotional tendencies and settle into the immediacy of one's experience here and now. The result is an automatic or spontaneous recognition of Reality. Dzogchen's view functions to encourage this settling in the here and now (when everything is the *gzhi*, there is nowhere to go). But understanding the transformative value of the view depends on some appreciation for the larger Buddhist context that Dzogchen presupposes. Inherent in the concept of *nirvāṇā* is the view of ultimacy as Other. The Mahāyāna approach, on the other hand, undermines that Otherness (epitomized by Nāgārjuna's statement that *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇā*). Dzogchen would seem to be an extension of the Mahāyāna approach, expressed in more cataphatic language (and without the rigorous analytical method of Madhyamaka). The important point to recog-

nize, however, is that this identification is not an attempt to reduce the Ultimate to the level of the mundane. Rather, Otherness and Identity stand as two, conceptually irreconcilable poles, and it is the tension between them that generates the transformative potential of Dzogchen contemplation. The Ultimate as here and now encourages a 'non-straying' from immediate awareness, countering all evaluative dualism and deconstructing conditional constructs of the desirable. 'Otherness' counters fixation on anything within the known, under-mining the mind's tendency to grasp and thereby set up a dualistic experiential context. The result is a state of presence that in its open-ness stands poised to go beyond itself—a state so diametrically 'other' than ordinary mind as to constitute the ultimate destabilization of the cognitive system. Destabilized and open,[234] the cognitive system evolves and a new state of consciousness emerges, one that resonates with the open/empty dimension of Being and its meaning-saturated field. In Dzogchen, the more one is here, the more one realizes the Other. Relative to ordinary consciousness, complete 'here-ness' *is* the Other, which is only realizable through the 'antidote' of doing nothing and going nowhere.

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[234] The 'openness' inherent in the Dzogchen approach is particularly emphasized in this passage by Dilgo Khentse: "when performing the meditation practice one should develop the feeling of opening oneself out completely to the whole universe with absolute simplicity and nakedness of mind, ridding oneself of all 'protecting' barriers." Dilgo Khentse, "Maha-Ati," 379.

CHAPTER FIVE

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE IN GERMAN MYSTICISM

German mysticism (*die deutsche Mystik*) refers to the peculiar and extra-ordinary flowering of Christian mystical theology and practice that occurred in the Rhineland area in the 13th–14th centuries.[1] Unlike 'Dzogchen,' the term is an etic, rather than emic, designation. The mystics who made up the movement did not consider themselves founders or members of a distinct mystical school.[2] In their minds, they were simply professing and practicing their Christian faith.[3] Nevertheless, the boundaries of what may be considered a semi-cohesive, German mystical movement or school emerge through the

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[1] 'German mysticism' is one of several designations used to refer to this particular Christian mystical movement. Others include Rhineland mysticism, Dominican mysticism, and speculative mysticism. Bernard McGinn also recommends "*the* German mysticism" and "mysticism of the ground," the latter based on his contention that *grunt* [Middle High German (MHG): ground] represents the "master metaphor" of Meister Eckhart's mysticism. See Bernard McGinn, preface to *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons* [translated selections from the works of Henry Suso (Heinrich Seuse), b.1295], trans. Frank Tobin, The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 3; Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 35–38. I will tend to use either 'German mysticism' or 'German school,' though I use 'school' not in a strict sense, but to refer to a general movement of thought and practice.

[2] Tauler, Suso, and other 14th century religious writings refer to the "friends of God," which has been interpreted by some modern scholars as "an organized society or congregation" to which Tauler and Suso belonged. As James Clark shows, however, the friends of God were not an organized society. The phrase merely referred to "a free association of like-minded" individuals distinguished by their dedication to a mystical path. See James Midgley Clark, *The Great German Mystics, Eckhart, Tauler and Suso* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1949; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1970), 92–3; quotation is from W. Preger in Clark. See also Frank Tobin, introduction to *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons* [translated selections from the works of Henry Suso (Heinrich Seuse), b.1295], The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 17.

[3] This does not mean that the German mystics were not aware that what they professed went beyond conventional Christian piety. See Bernard McGinn, "Eckhart's Condemnation Reconsidered," *The Thomist* 44 (1980): 403; Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Master Eckhart and the German Mystics*, trans. Hilda Graef (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 161. The radical form of self-abnegation associated with the German school is identified as an "advanced school" in one of Suso's visions. Henry Suso, in Frank

distinctiveness of certain repeated concerns and themes, in particu-
lar, the combination of apophatic theology, apophatic contemplative
practice, and an emphasis on attitudes and practices of extreme self-
abnegation.

The central figures of this school are Meister Eckhart (1260–1328),
John Tauler (1300–1361), and Henry Suso (1295–1366).[4] This chap-
ter focuses on Eckhart, with secondary references to Tauler, Suso,
and the anonymous text *Sister Catherine*[5] (*Schwester Katrei*). An empha-
sis on Eckhart is justified on two grounds. First, Eckhart's thought
and mystical path set him apart as German mysticism's greatest rep-
resentative (perhaps one of the greatest representatives of the Chris-
tian mystical tradition as a whole).[6] Second, the range and complexity
of the German mystical tradition require some limits be set on the
data (especially in the context of a single chapter). Concentrating on
Eckhart is one way to set those limits, and probably the best way
given his importance. Of course, Eckhart's thought is itself complex,
and my discussion of his mystical theology and practice is by no
means comprehensive. The goal of this chapter is limited to iden-

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Tobin, trans., *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons* [translated selections
from the works of Henry Suso (Heinrich Seuse), b.1295.], The Classics of Western
Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 98.

[4] The latter two are the common Anglicized versions of Johannes Tauler and
Heinrich Seuse respectively.

[5] The text cited here is the translation by Elvira Borgstädt (under the title *The
"Sister Catherine" Treatise*) in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn,
The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1986): 347–87.
The content of *Sister Catherine* clearly locates it within the German mystical tradi-
tion. See Bernard McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* [trans-
lated selections from the works of Meister Eckhart, b.1260], ed. Bernard McGinn,
The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 10, 14. The
text consists of a series of conversations between "a daughter" and her confessor.
The text does not identify either by name. The title of some manuscripts refers to
them as Sister Catherine and Meister Eckhart. Scholars consider the reference to
Eckhart spurious, though the text may have been written by one of Eckhart's stu-
dents and contains within it many Eckhartian themes. For the sake of convenience,
I will refer to the female protagonist as Sister Catherine below.

[6] Blamires describes Eckhart as "the greatest and most daring of the medieval
German mystics" while McGinn claims that "Eckhart is arguably the most pro-
found and influential, as well as most controversial, late medieval mystical author."
D. Blamires, "Tauler and Eckhart Marginalia in a Copy of *theologia teutsch* (1518),"
Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester 73/1 (1991): 102. See also
Bernard McGinn, "The God Beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought
of Meister Eckhart," *Journal of Religion* 61 (1981): 2; Dom Placid Kelley, "Meister
Eckhart's Doctrine of Divine Subjectivity," *Downside Review* 76 (1958): 65.

tifying and explaining a few central themes in Eckhart's mysticism, and by implication, central themes in German mysticism as a whole.

The Historical Emergence of German Mysticism

In order to contextualize the doctrines and practices discussed later in this chapter, I begin with some brief historical remarks. My concern is not the biographies of its major figures[7] or the history of the school itself but what preceded it—the movements, events, and ideas that contributed to its emergence and shaped its doctrinal formulations. Below I will touch upon some of these factors based on one of the most comprehensive, historical accounts of medieval religious movements, Herbert Grundmann's *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*.[8] These factors do not 'explain' German mysticism—the spiritual and philosophical genius of an Eckhart cannot be reduced to history alone—but they do identify much of the theological 'raw material' that made its eventual development possible.

The foundation of German mysticism is scholastic theology.[9] Summing up Heinrich Denifle's position, Grundmann notes that the "'German Mystics' . . . were in the first instance scholastically trained theologians and preachers, who had no 'German faith' or philosophy to proclaim, but rather proclaimed Christian doctrine on behalf of their order."[10] As Dominicans of the 13th–14th centuries, this training would not only have emphasized the teachings of the great Fathers and theologians of the Church (Aquinas, Augustine, and Albert the Great in particular),[11] but would have included familiarity

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[7] Biographies of German mysticism's major figures are plentiful in the secondary literature. For the most part, these biographical details are peripheral to understanding how the German school emerged, and will not be addressed here. For a biographical sketch of Eckhart's life see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 1–19. For a short biography of Suso, see Tobin, introduction to *Henry Suso*, 19–26. Short biographical accounts on Suso and Tauler may be found in Clark, *Great German Mystics*, 36ff., 55ff.

[8] Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: the Historical Links Between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism* [1935], trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

[9] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 238. See also Benedict Ashley, "Three Strands in the Thought of Eckhart, the Scholastic Theologian," *The Thomist* 42 (1978): 226.

[10] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 239.

[11] See Ibid., 238.

with the Aristotelian and Platonic/Neoplatonic traditions that in-
fluenced Aquinas, Augustine, etc.[12] For the German mystics specifically,
Neoplatonic philosophy seems to have been particularly important,
especially as mediated through the 6th century Christian Neoplatonist
Pseudo-Dionysius.[13] Aspects of German mysticism that echo Platonic
and/or Neoplatonic themes include its "metaphysics of flow" (Bernard
McGinn's term for the emanation and return of all things in rela-
tion to the One), the continuity of the God's creative act, the vir-
tual and higher reality of all things in the mind of God (corresponding
to Plato's realm of Ideas), intellect as a capacity for direct and intu-
itive grasping of truth,[14] the natural and inherent divinity of the per-
son, the spiritual journey as an inward return to the One (the soul
being satisfied with nothing less), and an understanding of salvation
as unqualified and indistinct union with the One.[15]

   Scholasticism and Neoplatonism were influences in much of Medie-
val Europe, yet German mysticism was a temporally and geograph-
ically localized movement. The emergence of German mysticism
cannot be explained by scholasticism alone; other factors[16] contributed

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[12] As Dominicans in association with the School of Cologne, they would have
been additionally exposed to aspects of Islamic and Jewish theology. See Richard
Woods, "Meister Eckhart and the Neoplatonic Heritage—the Thinkers Way to
God," *Thomist* 54/4 (1990): 610.

[13] Woods, "Neoplatonic Heritage," 624; Ashley, "Three Strands," 228–9.
Neoplatonism is a foundational influence on Christian mysticism in general. The
roots of the Christian mystical tradition are generally traced to the influence of
Platonism and Neoplatonism on Christianity's early Fathers. Through the work of
Philo, Plato shaped the thought of Clement and Origen (3rd century). The Neo-
platonism of Plotinus and his student Porphyry (3rd century) likewise influenced Basil
of Ceasarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine (4th–5th centuries),
Boethius (5th century), and Dionysius (6th century). The Neoplatonist Proclus (5th
century) also exercised some influence on the tradition, particularly through Dionysius.
See Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 7–8; Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical
Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 161.
   It was through the Latin translations of Dionysius' work by John Scotus Erigena
in the 9th century that Neoplatonism exercised its greatest impact on later medieval
Christian mysticism. (Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 8) According to Ancelet, "all the mys-
tical speculation of the Middle Ages" was inspired by Dionysius, Augustine, and
Boethius, and so through them "Platonic and neo-Platonic thought remained the
predominant influence in the medieval West . . . down to the twelfth century." Ibid.

[14] See Kelley, "Meister Eckhart's Doctrine," 69. On the Platonic understanding
of the intellect, see Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, xv–xvii.

[15] These themes are discussed later in this chapter.

[16] Frank Tobin speculates that political instability, war, economic hardship, and
plague may have contributed to the increased emphasis on inward spirituality that
marks German mysticism. See Tobin, introduction to *Henry Suso*, 13–4.

to its appearance. Of these, one seems to have been particularly important: the pastoral obligations of Dominican friars.[17] According to Grundmann, the distinctive flavor of German mysticism derived from the Dominicans' interaction with women's religious communities and beguines.[18] Denifle (cited by Grundmann) argues that German mysticism evolved because this audience required special forms of preaching:

> the peculiar forms of expression found in [the] German sermons and tracts [of the German mystics were] . . . grounded . . . in the mission imposed on them by their order to care for a large number of women as pastors and preachers.[19]

Grundmann agrees, but adds that in the process the Dominicans were influenced by their audience.[20] From this perspective, German mysticism involved an actual synthesis of views rather than the self-initiated adaptation of scholasticism to meet the needs of a particular audience. Contemplative women influenced their Dominican advisers, and through this influence German mysticism took shape.

According to Grundmann, the roots of this influence can be traced back to the early 13th century Amaurian heresy.[21] Though there is

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[17] Ibid., 16.

[18] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 240. Tobin describes beguines as "religious women leading lives of chastity, generally grouped in convents, supporting themselves by manual work and engaged in prayer and other religious practices, but without any fixed rule, organization or permanent vows, and without ecclesiastical approbation." Their male counterparts, referred to as beghards, "often led a less fixed existence and frequently lived by begging." Tobin, introduction to *Henry Suso*, 16–7. For a brief outline of the history of the beguines, see Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 15. For detailed historical accounts of the emergence and nature of beguine communities, see Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism Series, Vol. 3 (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 32ff.; Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 75–152.

[19] Grundmann on Denifle, in Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 239. See also Clark, *Great German Mystics*, 5.

[20] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 240, 183. See Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 17, 19. Ashley seems to make the same suggestion. See Ashley, "Three Strands," 227–8.

[21] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 153–4, 239. Amaurianism was an early 13th century heretical movement centered in and around Paris and associated with the heresy of the Free Spirit. Amaury of Bène is generally considered to have provided the philosophical inspiration for the sect, though Norman Cohn considers the connection unestablished. Amaury's theology was influenced by Neoplatonism (particularly as mediated by Eriugena), Aristotle, and Aristotle's Arabic commentators (i.e., Averroes and Avicenna). (Ibid., 154–5) The Amaurian heresy condemned in Paris in 1210 (after Amaury's death in 1206 or 1207) combined three basic elements: pantheism (derived from Eriugena and Neoplatonism), Pauline theology, and Joachite

some uncertainly regarding the nature of Amaurian doctrine (the sources are second-hand and invariably biased and hostile),[22] the claim is plausible—many of the teachings of the German mystics

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historical doctrine. Ibid., 159. See also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 152–6.

According to Grundmann, the Amaurian heresy was a manifestation of the more general religious movement of the 12th century. By "movement" Grundmann does not mean a self-consciously defined tradition, but a constellation of themes and concerns that inspired the emergence of multiple sects and religious groups often centered on individual charismatic leaders. These groups were united by the common belief that "the work of salvation could be accomplished outside of ecclesiastical orders by a strict imitation of the life of the apostles (the *vita apostolica*), with special emphasis on the practice of poverty, itinerant preaching, or both." Robert E. Lerner, introduction to *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: the Historical Links Between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, by Herbert Grundmann, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), xix. See also Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 212, 220ff.; McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 5–6; Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 13.

The policies of Innocent III in the 13th century channeled this movement into orthodox and heretical forms. Before Innocent III the various, particularized expressions of the movement were simply suppressed. (Lerner, introduction to *Religious Movements*, xviii–xix) Innocent III, however, was willing to support those forms of the movement that were obedient to papal authority (i.e., the mendicant orders) while intensifying the Church's persecution of those forms that refused obedience. The result was an increasingly polarized distinction between orthodox and heretical forms of the movement. (Ibid., xix) Regarding the heretical forms, it lead to movements among the laity that advocated "abandon[ing] public worship as well as priests, and even the sacraments, in order to avoid all intermediaries between God and . . . [the individual]." (Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 13; on the rejection of sacraments, see Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 78–9) According to Grundmann, the rejection of the sacraments by heretical groups in the 12th century was generally founded on the perceived unworthiness of priests and not on a rejection of the sacraments per se. (Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 229) Other heretical elements included preaching without ecclesiastical office and claiming that ecclesiastical authority depended on moral purity. (Ibid., 224–5, 227) Grundmann considers the women's religious movements of the 13th–14th centuries a manifestation of this more general movement in the sense that it "shared with the religious movement in general the goal of the Christian way of life in the sense of the gospels, which they believed could be achieved particularly through voluntary poverty and chastity." (Ibid., 82) He points out, however, that the women's movement "distinguished itself from the heretical poverty movement . . . through its renunciation of apostolic activity as well as its dropping of the demand that the clergy and Church fulfill apostolic norms in order to administer their ecclesiastical offices legitimately." (Ibid.) In the context of the women's movement, heretical tendencies emerged under the influence of Free Spirit type doctrines. See Ibid., 141ff.

This general religious movement may be tied to what McGinn considers a major turning point in the Christian mystical tradition c. 1200, marked by "new styles of religious life" (in particular, the mendicant orders and the beguines), "new forms of mystical expression," and the increasing influence of women. McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, ix. See also 1–2.

[22] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 156–7.

seem to echo earlier Amaurian views. What views comprised this heresy? A central characteristic of Amaurianism was a strong tendency toward pantheism. Not only was God identified with the "essence" or "nature of all things," the Amaurians considered themselves to be God incarnated and therefore equal to Christ.[23] This pantheism was more than ontological. Natural events and human actions were also identified with God,[24] a "dynamic pantheism" (as Grundmann calls it) that supported Amaurianism's antinomian tendencies. As Grundmann explains, "whoever knows that whatever he does is God's doing cannot 'sin,' does not need to have remorse or do penance."[25] From the Amaurian perspective, "a person, insofar as he participates in being and hence in God, could no more sin than he could be obliterated."[26] This antinomianism was also founded on the claim (based on Eriugena) that evil has no ontological basis. Sin was "nothing" and therefore carried no penalty.[27]

Amaurian pantheism was closely related to two other Amaurian heresies: a devaluation of Christ and a devaluation of the eucharist. According to Grundmann, the Amaurians "could not recognize a unique and supreme importance in Christ become human, since they claimed that, as Christians, they were [themselves] members of Christ."[28] Likewise, if God was in everything, His presence as the

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[23] Ibid., 155, 157.

[24] Ibid., 158.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid. This is an ambiguous statement as it stands. The Church may have interpreted it as antinomian, but it could just as easily support a strongly ethical mode of life based on uncontrived and spontaneous action in tune with God. *Knowing* that one's own action is God's action could be interpreted as a quite stringent requirement for sinlessness, as well as defensible basis for it. The issue at stake is what is meant by "knowing." If it merely refers to adopting a belief system, the results are antinomian. If it refers to a mystical, direct, and intuitive knowing (inseparable from a transformation of one's being), the results would be anything but antinomian. The possibility that it is the latter interpretation that is correct is indicated by the Amaurian contention that "a person who knows that God is in him can never be sad but only joyful." (Ibid., 159) Clearly, mere intellectual knowledge could never yield such a complete transformation of ordinary affective life. That the Amaurian understanding of sin was not antinomian is further supported by the fact that the "pious fools" (papelardes) and beguines associated with the Amaurians displayed "an extraordinary pious attitude" and a "strange earnestness . . . [in] their religious way of life" (Ibid., 154, 161)—an appearance criticized as hypocrisy based on the claim that they "violat[ed] in secret the abstinence they displayed in public." Ibid., 163. See also 164.

[27] Ibid., 158.

[28] Ibid., 157.

host lost significance.[29] This pantheism tended to devalue all the sacraments.[30] From the Amaurian perspective, Amaurian doctrines were themselves a revelation of the Holy Spirit, and it was this special knowledge (rather than faith and hope) that was not only the means of salvation, but *was* salvation.[31] "This knowledge [was] . . . the resurrection" or "paradise."[32] Its power functioned outside the Church and its sacraments, constituting a direct means of salvation bypassing the Church.[33] "Hell," on the other hand, was identified with non-knowledge.[34]

These Amaurian views influenced the women's religious communities in Germany that would later influence their Dominican pastors. How did Amaurianism get transplanted to Germany? Grundmann contends that even after the official condemnation of Amaurianism, Amaury's students continued to teach and spread Amaurian doctrine. As he elaborates,

> the speculative ideas of [Amaury] . . . were reminted as 'doctrines of life' by the priests, pastors, and agitators who were his students, who injected these doctrines into religious groups which totally lacked any philosophical schooling, announcing them to be promises of a renewal and elevation of religious life.[35]

Beguines were particularly receptive to the Amaurian heresy because (1) they were regular "targets of [Church] hostility" and suspicion,[36] and (2) they were "unsatisfied with traditional Church piety" and "seized with the will to form their existence in evangelical terms."[37] The heretics seemed to offer something the Church lacked, with the result that beguines "were increasingly drawn to the heretics."[38]

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid. Grundmann attributes the source of this idea to Eriugena.

[35] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 155–6. The promise of a new age of the Holy Spirit Grundmann attributes to the influence of Abbot Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) on Amaury's students and not to Amaury himself. (See Ibid., 156.) The spread of Amaurianism after the condemnation was aided by the likely possibility that before the condemnation the Paris Amaurians already had direct associations with beguine communities. Ibid., 161.

[36] See Ibid., 163.

[37] Ibid. This reflects the general effects of the religious movement of the time. See pp. 177–8, n. 21 above.

[38] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 163.

Once these heretical ideas had been introduced, beguine communities proved to be ideal places for them to flourish. Many of these communities, for example, had no rule to regulate the lives of its members.[39] Grundmann notes that

> time and again the suspicion is heard [in the Medieval sources] that [the beguines'] pious mystical excesses, without rule or discipline, could estrange them from Christian doctrine and morals, leading them into heresy.[40]

Furthermore, the mendicant orders at times resisted assuming pastoral responsibility for women's religious communities,[41] leaving these communities often without orthodox theological guidance. Grundmann argues that

> the threatening growth of heresy in the twelfth century only becomes understandable through this disavowal by the new orders, which alienated them from the religious movement which had given them birth. The more monastic [and withdrawn] the orders became, the more radical grew the sects.[42]

This "disavowal," in conjunction with the other factors mentioned above, made it possible for Amaurian ideas to persist after its official condemnation. As Grundmann points out, "within a few decades" of the condemnation of the Amaurian heretics, new

> heresies reappeared . . . which were surprisingly similar to the views condemned by the Paris synod, once again combining pantheistic philosophy with enthusiastic deifying mysticism, spreading particularly among religious women.[43]

Such heresies, however, did not reflect the continuation of the Amaurian sect as an organized movement, but instead emerged out of a general "religious attitude" inspired by Amaurianism and marked

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[39] Ibid., 151–2, 180, 182; Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 161. For the historical background of women's communities in northern France and Germany, see Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 75ff.

[40] Ibid., 243.

[41] Ibid., 242. In the 13th century, "innumerable women" were choosing lives of "voluntary poverty and chastity," far more than established orders were able to accommodate. This became the population that fed the growth of beguine communities. Grundmann's account gives the impression that the sheer number of beguines made the adequate ecclesiastical supervision of beguine communities a monumental, if not impossible, task.

[42] Ibid., 226. See also 235.

[43] Ibid., 160. See also 178.

by "a tendency to accept pantheistic, mystical, and spiritualistic ideas."[44] The heretical extreme of this attitude was represented by the heresy of the Free Spirit—those who "broke through all the restraints of Christian doctrine and morals . . . in their reverie of the sinlessness and deification of the 'passive person.'"[45] This heresy, founded on the combination of genuine mystical impulses, antinomianism, pantheistic philosophy, and monism, "was not organized in a sect or order, but rather haunted the mystical movement of the beguines."[46]

Grundmann cites the mid-13th century Ries heresy of southern Germany as one example of the continued influence of Amaurian[47] doctrine.[48] The Ries heresy did not constitute a formalized or consistent set of doctrines, but certain themes seem more or less representative of the heresy as a whole. On a general level, the Ries heresy was a radical form of affective mysticism[49] that emphasized "personal deification" through "nature" as opposed to grace.[50] The Ries heretics insisted that "a person can become God . . ., and the soul can become divine in its union with God."[51] The Ries heresy also displayed strong pantheistic leanings. One of the heresy's central doctrines was "the identity of God with all His creatures and the substantial identity of the soul with God" (apparently, the Ries heretics understood deification as the recognition of this already-existing "substantial identity").[52] As in Amaurianism, this pantheism extended to the interpretation of events. The Ries heretics considered "all events and all acts of people [to be] . . . God's work," though not in the speculative, Amaurian sense, but in an experiential sense, "as meant for the person united with God."[53] This dynamic pantheism encouraged the practice of utter passivity in the face of all occurrences, "a surrender of all personal desire and will to the will

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[44] Ibid., 161.
[45] Ibid., 241. See also Tobin, introduction to *Henry Suso*, 17.
[46] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 160, 244–5.
[47] The Cathars and Waldensians were other influences on this heretical movement. Ibid., 179.
[48] Ibid.
[49] These took two major forms: experiences of physical/erotic union with Christ or of "suckling Jesus" as the mother of Christ. See Ibid., 175–6.
[50] Ibid., 176.
[51] Ibid. See 180.
[52] Ibid., 178.
[53] Ibid., 180.

of God and to events which are due to His will."[54] Pantheism also
supported a de-emphasis on Christ and the saints.[55] As in Amaurianism,
for the Ries heretics Christ's importance diminished "in the pres-
ence of the divinity of the perfect person, . . . not only as an inter-
mediary but also as the only begotten son of God, and the sole
person bearing God's nature."[56] This devaluing of Christ extended
to the devaluing of orthodox practices in general.[57] Both the eucharist
and the practice of "meditation on the passion of Christ" were under-
mined.[58] As Grundmann explains,

> confessions, fasts, and prayers and all priestly mediation are things
> overcome by the 'good person,' who has been united with God, things
> no longer needed, which would even hinder that person on the way
> to God.[59]

The Ries heretics rejected "monastic regulation" in favor of serving
God "in the freedom of the Spirit," and were indifferent to "works
of virtue" in general.[60] Additional aspects of the Ries heresy included
the rejection of belief in hell and purgatory, the sinlessness of the
perfected person, an emphasis on contemplation as opposed to active
work, and the idea that true "religious perfection" requires one to
go "beyond God" Himself.[61]

These heresies confirm the spread of Amaurian doctrine, and sup-
port Grundmann's thesis that Amaurianism, promulgated in the con-
text of the religions movement of the time, played an important role
in the emergence of 13th–14th century mystical movements (both
heretical and orthodox).[62] Though Amaurianism as an organized sect
did not survive its condemnation, Amaurian ideas lived on as a
"religious attitude" of openness toward heretical and quasi-heretical
doctrine, especially pantheism. As Robert Lerner explains, "Neo-
platonic-pantheistic theses" were "appropriated and refashioned" by

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[54] Ibid., 182.
[55] Ibid., 178, 181.
[56] Ibid., 180.
[57] Ibid., 181.
[58] Ibid., 180–1. Statements by the Ries heretics are not consistent, however. Some
statements reflect an intensified emphasis on *imitatio Christi*. Ibid., 181.
[59] Ibid. See Grundmann's comments on Margarete Porete. (Ibid., 183) Here
Grundmann makes it clear that the rejection of "ways" and "virtues" was not neces-
sarily antinomian, even though it was interpreted as such by church inquisitors.
Ibid., 184.
[60] Ibid., 167, 182. See 178.
[61] Ibid., 179, 182–3.
[62] Ibid., 159–60. See also 154.

beguines in order "to animate their meditations and devotions."[63]
The result "was a daring affective mysticism that hovered between
orthodoxy and heresy and might seem more the one or more the
other depending on the speaker or viewer."[64]

The German mystical school itself emerged through Dominican
interaction with this Amaurian-influenced mysticism. Though the
Dominicans were officially the instructors, they were simultaneously
influenced by their female (especially beguine) audience,[65] and through
them, by Amaurian/Free Spirit doctrine and spirituality.[66] In other
words, German mysticism was the product of the confluence of
scholastic theology and women's affective mysticism. Lerner even
describes the German school as a continuation of the latter.[67]
Grundmann sums up his analysis of the origins of German mysti-
cism as follows:

> the theological system and speculative doctrines of German mystics
> were not the foundation, the starting-point, or the source, but rather
> they are intellectual justifications and efforts at the theoretically order-
> ing and theologically digesting of the religious experiences which first
> arose from the mystical activities of the women's religious movement.[68]

German Mysticism and the Nature of God

The German mystics do not articulate a clear or systematic theol-
ogy of God. They say different and sometimes conflicting things
about God—what we might expect given the ineffability of the 'ref-
erent' and the fact that many German mystical writings are tran-
scribed sermons intended to inspire an audience more than explicate

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[63] Lerner, introduction to *Religious Movements*, xxi.

[64] Ibid. Two well-known representatives of this women's mysticism are Mechthild
of Magdeburg and Marguirite Porete.

[65] *Sister Catherine* seems to be a record of just such an influence.

[66] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 241, 244. The connection of the German mys-
tics and women's heretical mysticism was of course the perception of many Church
authorities at the time, and the basis for Eckhart's eventual condemnation. (See
McGinn, "God Beyond God," 17.) Though the influence of heretical (sometimes
Free Spirit) mysticism on the German school is unmistakable, it should be noted
that Suso and Tauler took great pains to distinguish themselves from the heresies
of the Free Spirit. On Eckhart's stance in this regard, see Grundmann, *Religious
Movements*, 241.

[67] Lerner, introduction to *Religious Movements*, xxi. See also McGinn, "God Beyond
God," 17.

[68] Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, 183.

a precise philosophical view. Eckhart in particular seems to engage in two distinct discourses on God: (1) the soteriologically-inspired language of his vernacular sermons[69] (addressed to contemplatives), and (2) the philosophically more precise language of his scholastic, Latin works.[70]

The pivotal concept of the first is the distinction between God/Trinity and the "God beyond God" (also referred to as the Godhead,[71] ground,[72] or abyss[73]).[74] All these terms distinguish the God/Trinity that is named, has qualities, acts, creates, etc. from a profound divine abyss, sometimes described as pure unity or being, sometimes claimed to be "without mode or property."[75] The significance of this distinction may be explained in different ways. To some degree, undermining

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[69] During his trial on charges of heresy, Eckhart defends many of his more radical statements by arguing that his intention was "to rouse his hearers to some good resolve or action." McGinn, "Eckhart's Condemnation Reconsidered," 403.

[70] See Beverley J. Lanzetta, "Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart," *The Journal of Religion* 72 (1992): 257.

[71] Tobin explains the distinction between 'Godhead' and 'God' as follows: "'Godhead' is the divinity in its purity and immutability. 'God' is this divinity conceived as capable of acting and giving birth." He goes on to remark that this distinction is made by "our minds," while in the divinity there is no distinction. Frank Tobin, trans., *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons* [translated selections from the works of Henry Suso (Heinrich Seuse), b.1295], The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 399, nn. 15–6.

[72] MHG: *grunt*. McGinn describes the ground as (among other things), "the pure potentiality of the hidden divine mystery." (McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 42; see also McGinn, "God Beyond God," 13) The term itself indicates the distinctiveness of the concept. As McGinn emphasizes, *grunt* is a "new creation" and not simply a translation of a Latin scholastic term. See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 44.

[73] See, for example, Maria Shrady, trans., *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, by John Tauler [Johannes Tauler, b. 1300], The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 36. "Abyss" seems to function as an evocative term, to emphasize the hidden, "dark" mystery of the ground or Godhead.

[74] As Eckhart remarks, "God and Godhead are as *different* as heaven and earth." (Quoted in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 80) See McGinn's comments on this distinction in Bernard McGinn, "Theological Summary," in *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* [translated selections from the work of Meister Eckhart, b.1260.], trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 35–6. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 79. Eckhart's account of the God/Godhead distinction and its relation to the Trinity is not entirely consistent. In some passages he follows the tradition of Augustine and Bonaventure, identifying the Father with the Godhead. More often, however, the Godhead, the "hidden ground," the "God beyond God" is distinguished from the Trinity and beyond the Trinity. See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 85; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 11–12.

[75] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 141. See also M. O'C. Walshe, trans., *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2 [translated selections from the works of Meister Eckhart, b.1260] (Longmead, U.K.: Element Books, 1979), 39.

'God' as signifier reflects standard Christian doctrine and apophatic/ mystical teaching; it is a basic, theological given that God is incommensurate with any term, concept, or image. The 'God beyond God' emphasizes this point by distinguishing the Reality of God from signifying terms. This general inadequacy of language takes a more specific form for the German mystics, based on their understanding of God as Absolute Unity or the One—a "silent desert where distinction never gazed."[76] This Unity renders the term 'God' problematic since the meaning of 'God' is generally construed (1) in the context of the Trinity and (2) in relation to creatures ('God' vs. 'that which is not-God'). In other words, 'God' connotes distinction/duality and therefore negates the true essence of God.

Ultimately, however, the purpose of this distinction is not to identify a 'higher' level of divinity. From Eckhart's perspective, the absolute Unity of God negates such distinctions—God and Godhead are human constructions that have no correspondence in the being of God.[77] Rather, the 'God beyond God' serves a specifically soteriological function. According to Eckhart, "as long as the soul has God, knows God and is aware of God, she is far from God. . . . The greatest honor the soul can pay to God [is] to leave God to himself and to be free of him."[78] The 'God beyond God' is intended to help the contemplative "pay to God" this "greatest honor" by distinguishing the Real from signifiers of the Real, and so orienting her beyond names and concepts of God to the living, nameless Reality that *is* God. Paradoxically, going beyond names is accomplished by constructing a new name (even if that name is "nothing"). But the name (ground, abyss, nothing) is un-named in its absolute ineffability and transcendence of mode or quality. In this sense, the 'God beyond God' is a signifier intended to point beyond signification, opening the way to the unknown where Reality/God can actually be encountered. As Michael Sells states,

> apophasis moves toward the transreferential. It cannot dispense with reference, but through the constant turning back upon its own referential delimitation, it seeks a momentary liberation from such delimitations.[79]

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[76] Eckhart, in McGinn, "God Beyond God," 12.

[77] Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 399, n. 16. This does not mean that distinguishing levels or aspects of God may not be valuable for heuristic and/or soteriological reasons.

[78] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 145.

[79] Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8–9.

Eckhart tends to take a different approach to describing God in his Latin works, distinguishing four "levels" of divinity (God's 'essential nature' and the three Persons of the Trinity) and correlating these with the four transcendental predicates (unity, being, truth/intellect, and goodness). This scholastic analysis may ultimately converge with his vernacular discourse. In both, God is fundamentally unnameable. The "essential nature" of God as discussed in Eckhart's Latin works may even be correlated with the "ground" of his sermons.[80] Still, the theological/philosophical concerns of the Latin works entail different language and a different emphasis—in particular, a greater willingness to talk about the nature of God, however problematic language may be.

Eckhart's modern interpreters note the apparent contradictions in his use of the transcendental predicates to describe the essential nature of God. As Bernard McGinn points out, in some sources Eckhart "places *esse est Deus* ('God is existence') as the first theological axiom from which all else flows."[81] According to Eckhart, "*anything we ascribe to [God] except pure being . . . encloses Him.*"[82] Elsewhere Eckhart claims that God is most properly defined by unity (*unum*).[83] In one passage "Eckhart tells us that if we could see God's essence, the name that we would give it would be *unum*, Absolute Unity."[84] Echoing Eckhart, Suso states that God "has absolutely no differences within itself"—in His "ground and foundation" God is "one simple unity" with no trace of multiplicity.[85] In the *Parisian Questions*, however, Eckhart describes God's essential nature as intellect.[86] Eckhart states

[80] This is McGinn's position. See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 41–2. Lanzetta sees the abyss and the Trinity as distinct poles unified by their relation of "dynamic reciprocity." Lanzetta, "Three Categories of Nothingness," 257.

[81] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 6. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 98; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 35. According to McGinn, *esse* is in fact "Eckhart's most frequently employed term for God." (McGinn, "Theological Summary," 35) Eckhart's phrasing—literally, "existence is God"—may be a deliberate and significant reversal of Aquinas' "God is existence." See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 97.

[82] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 22.

[83] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 84, 97; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 13; Donald Duclow, "My Suffering Is God: Meister Eckhart's *Book of Divine Consolation*," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 576. See also John Caputo, "Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," *The Thomist* 42 (1978): 197.

[84] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 13. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 97.

[85] Henry Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 327, 310.

[86] See Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 23. See also McGinn, "Theological Summary," 32, 34; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 4, 151; Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 577.

that "God is an intellect and an act of understanding, and his under-
standing is the ground of his existence."[87] Finally, Eckhart also gives
"goodness some degree of equality with the other transcendentals."[88]

Given these apparently conflicting views, is it possible to identify
one predicate as essential? The answer seems to be yes and no. On
one level, none can be considered more essential than another because
they are all (with the possible exception of goodness) equally applic-
able to God. Eckhart's various statements regarding God's essence—
as either being, unity, or intellect—do not conflict. Rather, they
reflect the fact that from Eckhart's perspective each is equally essen-
tial to God's nature.[89] The mysterious unification or coincidence of
predicates in God is to some degree what defines God.[90] In addi-
tion, being, unity, and intelligence (if not goodness) are so mutually
co-signifying that none can be privileged over the others as ultimate
or essential. This co-signification is particularly evident in the rela-
tion between unity and being.[91] For Eckhart, being directly and
immediately implies unity/oneness. Eckhart states that "the idea of
being (*ens*) is that it is something common and indistinct."[92] Conversely,
unity, by indicating that something "is not other than itself," con-
stitutes the "negation of negation," and thereby affirms "absolute
and undetermined" being.[93] According to Eckhart, *unum*

> signifies the purity and core and height of existence itself, something
> which even the term *esse* does not do. The term 'one' signifies Existence
> Itself (*ipsum esse*) in itself along with the negation and exclusion of all
> nonbeing. . . . The negation of negation (which the term 'one' signifies)
> denotes that everything which belongs to the term is present in the
> signified and everything which is opposed to it is absent.[94]

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[87] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 97. See also John Caputo, "The Nothingness
of the Intellect in Meister Eckhart's 'Parisian Questions,'" *The Thomist* 39 (1975):
89ff.

[88] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 98. On Eckhart's general inconsistency in this area,
see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 97; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 6.

[89] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 98. This is not to say that God is not, in some
way, "good," but that for Eckhart, goodness does not seem to have the same sta-
tus as the other transcendental predicates.

[90] For Eckhart, the predicates in fact only appear distinct because of our own,
limited perspective. More on this below.

[91] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 7.

[92] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 35.

[93] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 34–5.

[94] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 94.

Here, unity "signifies" an existence already established (privileging existence over unity), and yet at the same time unity goes beyond existence in its capacity to point out the essential nature of the divine. As "the negation of negation," unity is more affirming of God's being than being itself! And yet "being" remains the criteria of unity's ultimacy. Which term, then, can be considered ultimate? In addition, intellect is co-signified by both unity and being, as suggested by Eckhart's claim that "the one God is intellect and intellect is the one God"[95] and Suso's remark that God's "being is the same as knowing, and . . . the highest activity within God is his knowing himself."[96]

In spite of the apparent equality of the predicates and Eckhart's sometimes contradictory claims, McGinn argues that unity seems to stand out from the other predicates in its power to signify God's essence.[97] On what grounds is unity ultimate, given that Eckhart also describes being and intellect as essential to God's nature? The question itself suggests an answer. No single predicate may be considered more essential than any other because all are unified within the essence of God. Eckhart even goes so far as to maintain that the identification of distinguishable predicates is nothing but a human construction. According to McGinn, "for Eckhart, any plurality [of attributes] is solely from the point of view of our own manner of conceiving."[98] In God all "predicates" are one. And it is this very unification that identifies which of the predicates is most essential: unity.[99] Ultimately, "the true meaning of divine existence . . . is rooted in an incomprehensible dialectical mystery of Absolute Unity."[100]

With unity as the divine essence, the other predicates are in turn hierarchically arranged in relation to the Persons of the Trinity: the

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[95] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 151. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 98; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 8; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 34.

[96] Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 399, n. 13. On Eckhart's understanding of the coincidence of being and knowing in God, see Kelley, "Meister Eckhart's Doctrine of Divine Subjectivity," 73–4.

[97] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 97; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 13.

[98] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 13.

[99] As Caputo states, "for Eckhart, the highest name one can give to God is to call Him a nameless One, a unity in which all the divine attributes interfuse." (Caputo, "Fundamental Themes," 197) If a plurality of predicates is a mental construction, unity not only becomes the most essential predicate—it becomes the *only* predicate.

[100] Bernard McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* [translated selections from the works of Meister Eckhart, b. 1260], ed. Bernard McGinn, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 5.

Father becomes being/existence, the Son truth/intelligence (or intellect), and the Holy Spirit goodness.[101] Again, Eckhart is not entirely consistent. In some sources he explicitly identifies the Father with unity rather than being.[102] This may simply reflect those instances where the Father assumes the position of Godhead[103] or, as McGinn argues, the unity of the Father may refer to a different type of unity that pertains to the creative emanation of God as the *bullitio* (to be discussed below) as distinct from the pure unity of God's essence (the unity of the ground).[104] Neither of these explanations is satisfactory, however, in those instances where Eckhart also specifies the Godhead as being. At that point, McGinn is probably correct that

> it is not so much whether we choose to use *esse*, *unum*, or *intelligere* as the most appropriate transcendental predicate for the divine ground or essence . . .; it is rather that in making use of each we grasp the ineluctably dialectical character of their application to God.[105]

Another inconsistency is raised by the identification of the Son with intellect/understanding. In the *Parisian Questions* Eckhart claims that God "exists because he understands."[106] If understanding is privileged over existence, and existence is identified with the Father, then intellect (rather that unity) should in turn be most properly ascribed to the God's essence. This discrepancy may be explained in two ways. The *Parisian Questions* is one of Eckhart's earlier works, and it is possible that his privileging of intellect over being is an early view he later abandoned. Another explanation is suggested by McGinn: Eckhart's preference of intellect over being only pertains to created reality, where intellect directly connotes unity (as opposed to being, which in created reality "implies division and posteriority").[107] This does not apply at the transcendental level, however, where unity is more directly implied by being. Transcendentally, being remains privileged over intellect.

Though in some respects problematic, the hierarchical correspondence of the Persons with the transcendental predicates suggests a

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[101] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 35.
[102] See McGinn, "Theological Summary," 35.
[103] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 85.
[104] Ibid., 84.
[105] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 35.
[106] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 4. This is in opposition to Aquinas, who reverses the claim, i.e., God understands because He exists.
[107] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 7.

solution to the problem discussed by McGinn of Eckhart's description of God as both "pure being" and "beyond being." McGinn resolves the paradox by arguing that "beyond being" in this context refers only to the created, formal being of creatures; Eckhart is not, he contends, claiming that God is beyond uncreated, transcendental being.[108] McGinn may be correct, though Eckhart's reference to God as "beyond being" may refer to God's essence as unity, transcending the being of the Father.

God's Ineffability

In spite of the philosophical subtlety and terminological abundance of Eckhart's scholastic analysis, the German school's approach to God consistently returns to its emphasis on ineffability. As McGinn notes, "the pure ineffability of the divine nature will always be the most fundamental theme of . . . [Eckhart's] message."[109] From the German mystical perspective, any attempt to envision God/Godhead with form is misguided.[110] Neither can anything be predicated of God, even goodness.[111] Eckhart states that "God is neither good, nor better, nor best; hence I speak as incorrectly when I call God good as if I were to call white black."[112] On the Trinity, Eckhart remarks that "everything that is said or written about the Holy Trinity is in no way really so or true."[113] More generally, he claims that "all things . . . positively said of God, even though they are perfections in us, are no longer so in God and are no more perfect than their opposites."[114] Ultimately, God is most appropriately called "the eternal nothing."[115]

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[108] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 98, 101. See 6.

[109] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 5. See, for example, Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 38. See also McGinn, "God Beyond God," 10–11; Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 160–1.

[110] *Sister Catherine*, in Elvira Borgstädt, trans., *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn, The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 381.

[111] See, for example, Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 319; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 32.

[112] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 92.

[113] Ibid., 81.

[114] Eckhart, in Laura Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis/Deus omninominabilis: Meister Eckhart's Way to God* (M.A. thesis, The Graduate Theological Union, 1989), 25.

[115] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 309.

God, as Eckhart never tired of saying, is strictly speaking "unnameable to us because of the infinity of all existence in him". . . . Hence, Eckhart qualifies the predicating of any names, even *esse indistinctum, intelligere,* and *unum,* of God with frequent proclamations that God is really "Nothing"—"God is nothing at all"; "God is a nothing and God is a something"; "God is uncreated 'Isness' and unnamed Nothingness."[116]

Based on statements like these, McGinn and Frank Tobin consider Eckhart's position on naming God to be fundamentally apophatic. Laura Mellinger disputes this interpretation. She argues that Eckhart's approach to divine predication is in fact more positive than negative. Specifically, she claims that Eckhart advocates the way of eminence through the positive affirmation of God as a "unified ingathering of perfections."[117] According to her, Eckhart's emphasis on negative predication only applies to our human mode of signification, not to the "perfections as they exist in God himself."[118] In other words, in relation to the "perfections as they actually exist in God," Eckhart's stance is affirmative.[119] Mellinger admits, however, that the way of eminence is "outside the realm of the human mode of signification."[120] The meaning of any predicate will necessarily be construed according to our limited "creaturely" mode of understanding regardless of what it may "really" mean in God.[121] This leads Mellinger to the conclusion that in "practical terms" Eckhart's "stance" *is* apophatic.[122] The way of eminence becomes irrelevant in actual practice—from the human standpoint, God remains unnameable.

This apophatic way, however, still contains and presumes an affirmative, cataphatic element. For the German mystics, the reality and being of God is never called into question—God as "nothing" is not nihilism. Even though God is "the nothing of all things that one can conceive or put into words," this nothing "is in itself a something existing to an incomparable degree."[123] For Eckhart, God's

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[116] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 99.
[117] Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 21, 65. See Ibid., 30ff. for a summary of scholarly opinion regarding Eckhart's use of negative and positive predication. On the scholastic distinction of cause, eminence, and negation as three ways of talking about God, see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 95.
[118] Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 62. See also 67.
[119] Ibid., 71.
[120] Ibid., 70.
[121] See, for example, Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 309.
[122] Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 70.
[123] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 319. See also 327.

self-designation in Exodus as "I am who (or what) I am" signifies "the purity of affirmation excluding all negation from God."[124] It is only in relation to this positive, cataphatic element that the apophatic mysticism of the German mystics can be understood. God is not a concept or a term, but Reality, that in its own 'is-ness' (*isticheit*) is nameless. Any predicate only dims our appreciation of that pure Is-ness residing in the eternal now. As Eckhart remarks, "to think of goodness or wisdom or power dissembles the essence and dims it in thought. The mere thought obscures the essence."[125] The apophatic path therefore centers on the negation of all concepts, images, and names because they are incommensurable with the divine. In other words, the mystic empties herself *because* of God's fullness of being, which no concept, image, or name can ever approximate. Emptying and negation are both premised on affirmation and function as a means of realizing the highest mode of affirmation, God Himself.

Affirmation, however, is not only a presupposition and goal of apophasis—it also plays a vital role in shaping the thematic context of German mystical contemplation. The soteriology of apophatic emptying depends on simultaneous affirmation. According to McGinn, Eckhart's language about God generates a dialectical tension between Maimonides' way of negative predication and Aquinas' more positive way of eminence.[126] In German mystical practice, each pole of this dialectic has specific implications in regard to thematizing the contemplative attitude. The cataphatic functions to establish a referent outside this world and outside the known—in other words, a goal to be strived for. The apophatic functions to empty this referent of content. The result is a state of empty and open yearning: a deepening unfoldment into the expectant un-knowing where God is finally found. This dialectical interaction of the cataphatic and apophatic is reflected in Eckhart's statement that

> not-knowing draws [the soul] . . . into amazement and keeps her on the hunt for she clearly recognizes 'that he is,' but she does not know 'what' or 'how' he is. . . . Unknown-knowing . . . keeps the soul constant and still on the hunt.[127]

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[124] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 73. See also McGinn, "God Beyond God," 7–8.

[125] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 32.

[126] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 96. According to Mellinger, this is Alois Haas' position as well. See Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 21.

[127] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 58.

God's Activity, Creativity, and Relation to Creatures

God's nature is not only explained in reference to the transcendental predicates. Central to God's nature is His creative power as "emanator" of the Trinity and natural world. Though the Godhead (and sometimes God)[128] is often described as passive, motionless, and inactive,[129] paradoxically inherent within this stillness is a creative impulse. McGinn notes that for Eckhart, the "divine unity . . . can never be considered alone as standing in some sort of frozen immobility."[130] The ground is "birth-giving," the source "from which all the outflowings arise."[131] In other words, creativity is the Godhead's nature.[132] However, as the Godhead flows out from Itself, It ceases to be the Godhead as such. As McGinn states, "the Godhead *becomes* 'God' in the flowing of creation."[133] From this perspective, creativity is identified with God, while absolute, unqualified unity and inactivity is the essential characteristic of the Godhead.[134] This distinction, however, leaves intact the paradoxical dialectic of "inactive activity," since the Godhead still acts in its flowing forth as God.[135]

On the most general level, the German mystics share a Neoplatonic vision of God's creative activity as a continuous[136] process of emanation and return.[137] McGinn calls this Eckhart's "metaphysics of flow," which he describes as

> the dynamic reciprocity of the 'flowing-forth' (*exitus-emanatio/ûzganc-uzfliessen*) of all things from the hidden ground of God and the 'flowing-back,' or 'breaking-through' (*reditus-resoratio/inganc-durchbrechen*), of the universe into essential identity with this divine source.[138]

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[128] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 43.

[129] See Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 310; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 35.

[130] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 15.

[131] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 327, 310. See also McGinn, "Theological Summary," 31.

[132] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 310. God's "fruitfulness" is in some passages more specifically associated with the Father, though even the Godhead is "fruitful" in its act of "spring[ing] across into God." (Ibid.) See Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 36.

[133] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 46.

[134] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 46, 81–2.

[135] This is even more the case given that the God/Godhead distinction is a human construction.

[136] As Eckhart states, "God is creating the whole world now in this instant." Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 102. See also 115.

[137] See, for example, Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 36–7; Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 323; *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 350.

[138] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 71. See also McGinn, "Theological Summary," 30.

Eckhart describes the divine "outflow" as a two-stage process. The first he calls the *bullitio* ("boiling"), or *ûzbruch* ("break-out"), referring to "the inner emanation of the Trinitarian Persons."[139] The second, the *ebullitio* ("boiling over"), constitutes the "creation of all things" out of the Trinity. As Tauler puts it, "the Father pours Himself forth in the procession of the divine Persons and then on into creatures."[140]

The term *bullitio* represents Eckhart's attempt to evocatively describe the One's production of Itself as the Trinity. This "boiling" takes place as a "reflexive turning back of [God's] existence into itself," God "glowing in itself, and melting and boiling in and into itself."[141] God's creativity or "pushing out" begins as "something [which] swells up [*intumescere*] in itself and first breaks out totally in itself, each part into each part."[142] The "turning-into-itself" of this process expresses its fundamental interiority, often equated with divine self-knowing. In this sense, God's self-knowing as Father[143] generates the Son (or Word), and Father and Son together produce the Holy Spirit.[144] As Tauler remarks, God "turns inward, comprehending Himself," and "the act whereby He knows Himself is the generation of the Son in eternity. Thus he rests within Himself in the unity of essence, and He flows out in the distinction of Persons."[145]

For Eckhart, the *bullitio*'s essence rests in its self-duplicating character. The relation between the Trinity and the Godhead is one of "absolute identity": "the One ... does not produce something like itself, but what is one and the same as itself."[146] The *bullitio*, then,

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[139] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 31.

[140] Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 36.

[141] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 37. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 73.

[142] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 37. See also 38.

[143] For Eckhart, "God" in this context may also refer to the Godhead. See McGinn, "Theological Summary," 38.

[144] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 75; Richard Schneider, "The Functional Christology of Meister Eckhart," *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 35 (1968): 294–5. Eckhart also describes God's first "melting forth" as the Son, which then returns to the Father. This seems to imply that the Son precedes the Father, though more likely Eckhart is using 'God' and 'Father' interchangeably. See McGinn, "Theological Summary," 37–8. Eckhart identifies the emergence of the Holy Spirit with God's love as well. See Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 2.

[145] Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 36. For a similar passage in Eckhart., see McGinn, "Theological Summary," 38.

[146] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 36; Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 75. See also Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 310.

is "a conversion of the principle in itself and upon itself—a silent inner reduplication."[147] Eckhart presumably uses the metaphor of *bullitio* for this very reason, since a boiling liquid does not stray (as liquid) from its substance. In standard paradoxical fashion, however, this identity of Godhead and Trinity does not negate their distinction or the Godhead's priority within that distinction.[148] Following Gilbert of Poitiers, Eckhart maintains "that in God the relations that constitute the Trinity do not enter into the divine essence but remain 'as if they were standing on the outside.'"[149] In other words, the essence of the divine nature as one remains untouched by the division suggested by the Trinity. The Godhead's distinction is paradoxical because it is a function of the indistinguishable unity of Godhead and Trinity—the Godhead's indistinction from the Persons is what simultaneously constitutes its distinct/transcendent character.[150] As Eckhart states,

> distinction comes from Absolute Unity, that is, the distinction in the Trinity. Absolute Unity is the distinction and distinction is the Unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the Unity, for that is the distinction without distinction.[151]

The reduplication of the One as Trinity through the *bullitio* in turn implies the absolute Unity of the Trinity itself. The three Persons, according to Eckhart, are "simply and absolutely one."[152] Suso is more conservative in that he locates the Trinity's unity specifically at the level of being: the Persons are one in their ground (i.e., the Godhead, the level of pure being) but distinct in their emergence as the *bullitio*. As he explains, the Godhead

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[147] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 14.
[148] Ibid., 13; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 36. As McGinn notes, the priority of the Godhead is particular evident in the sermons where Eckhart refers to the soul's yearning to go beyond the Trinity.
[149] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 36.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Eckhart, in McGinn, "God Beyond God," 13. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 80; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 36–7. The dialectical relationship between unity and distinction extends to God's relation to creatures as well. See p. 201, n. 185 below.
[152] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 37. See also Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 36. Eckhart's references to the absolute unity of the Persons may be another way of privileging the Godhead, unity being the Godhead's essential nature.

is one in its ground because in the divine nature there is nothing but being and the concomitant qualities, which nowhere add anything to being. . . . Divine nature, understood in this same ground, is not the least bit simpler in itself than the Father is when conceived in this same nature, or any other Person.[153]

For Eckhart, the *bullitio* represents the "total transmission of the pure essence of reality"[154] from Godhead to Trinity. This transmission, however, does not stop with the Trinity, but continues as God's creation of the world. Specifically, the interiorized "boiling" of the Trinity becomes externalized, "pour[ing] itself forth" as it "boils over [*ebullitio*] on the outside."[155] Through the *ebullitio* "creation arises . . . as something that is different in number and reality from its principle"[156]—in other words, the One becomes many. The *ebullitio*, then, marks the actual "fall" of the One into multiplicity.[157]

Bullitio and *ebullitio* may be distinguished in relation to Eckhart's understanding of efficient vs. essential or formal causality.[158] For Eckhart, efficient causality involved an extrinsic relation between cause and effect. Essential causality, on the other hand, he defined as "an agent 'that is a principle in which there is Logos and Idea, . . . an essential agent that precontains its effect in a higher way and exercises causality over the whole species of its effect.'"[159] Since for Eckhart "nothing can be really extrinsic to God,"[160] both *bullitio* and *ebullitio* fall into the second category of essential cause.[161] This essential causality takes two forms: *univocal*, in the case of God's production of the Trinity, and *analogous*, in relation to God's creation of

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[153] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 310. Tauler seems to share Suso's reluctance to blur the distinction of Persons through an unqualified emphasis on God's absolute identity. See Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 36.

[154] McGinn, "God Beyond God," 14.

[155] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 37.

[156] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 38.

[157] Ibid., 39; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 105.

[158] These different approaches to causality are derived from Aristotle and Neoplatonism respectively.

[159] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 101–2.

[160] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 102.

[161] McGinn notes that Eckhart never explicitly rejects the idea of God as "efficient cause of the universe," but points out that "the notion of *causa essentialis* is more congenial to him." McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 102. This apparently represents a shift in McGinn's understanding of Eckhart. In earlier sources McGinn considers the *ebullitio* to be a species of efficient cause. See McGinn, "God Beyond God," 14; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 38.

the universe.[162] 'Univocal' implies the reduplication that is the essen-
tial characteristic of the *bullitio*. The concept of 'analogy' in relation
to the *ebullitio*, however, has much more complex implications and
introduces yet another paradox of Eckhart's thought. On the one
hand, it supports a Platonic understanding of God's creative activ-
ity. For Eckhart, everything that is produced is precontained as "vir-
tual existence . . . in a prior reality."[163] In his own words, "'before
the foundation of the World' [John 17:24] everything in the uni-
verse was not mere nothing, but was in possession of virtual exis-
tence."[164] God, according to Eckhart, is "'eternally pregnant in his
foreknowledge' of creation."[165] This dimension of virtual existence is
specifically associated with the Son, identified "with *Logos* [the Word]
or Reason," and functioning as "'the Image or Ideal Reason' within
God in which the essences of all things are precontained in a higher,
or virtual way."[166] Suso expresses the same idea when he asserts that
all creatures have existed eternally in God with respect to their
"exemplar."[167] This virtual existence—the ideal image of all things
in God—functions as the essential cause of a thing's formal exis-
tence "in the natural world."[168] As Eckhart states, it is in the Son
that the Father "has poured out and formed all creatures."[169] But a
creature's formal being in the natural world is not its true existence.
For Eckhart, it is "virtual existence . . . [that] is 'really real' in any
creature."[170]

   Even though the virtual reality of things—God's Word—is identified
with the Son/Intellect, this Word is ultimately grounded in the Father
as what Eckhart sometimes calls the "silent Word," i.e., a

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[162] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 101–2.
[163] Ibid., 77.
[164] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 78.
[165] Ibid., 84.
[166] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 76. See also 5; McGinn, "Theological Summary,"
40; Karl G. Kertz, "Meister Eckhart's Teaching on the Birth of the Divine Word
in the Soul," *Traditio* 15 (1959): 329.
[167] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 311.
[168] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 103–4.
[169] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 14.
[170] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 40. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 103,
147; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 34. This point is the basis for Eckhart's
condemned view regarding the eternity of the created world. As McGinn explains,
"since God's Word has been [and 'is being'] spoken from all eternity . . ., then the
virtual existence of all things, when viewed in the Principle, is always being spo-
ken by the Father in the one and the same eternal act in which he speaks the
Son." McGinn, "Theological Summary," 40.

kind of word that is not brought forth and not thought out, that never comes forth. Rather, it remains eternally in him who speaks it. It is continually being conceived in the Father who speaks it, and it remains within.[171]

This Word is first manifested as "thought," identified with the Son and the ideal images of things as discussed above. The Image then becomes "fully brought forth" as "speech": the formal being of things.[172]

The above scenario points to a fundamental similarity between God and creatures, based on the continuity of God's outflowing as *bullitio* and *ebullitio*. As Eckhart explains, "the forms of things would not be produced by God unless they were in him. Everything that comes to be comes to be through something similar. . . . And so every creature is similar to God."[173] This picture is complicated, however, by another aspect of Eckhart's approach to analogy. Unlike his scholastic colleagues who understood analogy in terms of attribution or proportionality, Eckhart considered analogy as signifying the *formal opposition* of the analogates.[174] As he put it, "analogates have nothing of the form according to which they are analogically ordered rooted in positive fashion in themselves."[175] From this perspective, even though created beings *are* "ordered to God in being, truth, and goodness" (ultimately, God is "the existence of all things . . . in the absolute sense"),[176] they only possess these attributes "from and in God" and not in their formal being as distinct things.[177] According to Tobin,

> the spiritual qualities that can be attributed to [creatures, such as being,] are not really their own; they are, rather, divine qualities filling up the emptiness or darkness which creatures are in themselves.[178]

Creatures, then, have no being of their own but only exist through "pure receiving" in absolute dependence on God.[179] The implications

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[171] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 87.
[172] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 87. On these different level of the Word, see also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 122; Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 91.
[173] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 104.
[174] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 92.
[175] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 91. See also 4.
[176] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 33.
[177] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 91.
[178] Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language*, 93.
[179] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 6, 91–2, 105.

of this are twofold. First, it reinforces the idea that God is actually the absolute or virtual existence of creatures, distinct from their formal existence in the natural world. This distinction of absolute existence from formal existence—and God's identity with the former—is the basis for Eckhart's statement that "if one takes a flea in God, then it is nobler in God than is the highest angel in itself [i.e., in its formal being]. Now all things in God are equal and are God Himself."[180] The same idea is echoed in *Sister Catherine*, where the Confessor remarks: "he who recognizes the being of a pear stem in its highest aspect knows God in all of his might and knows everything God has ever created according to being."[181]

Second, a creature's radical dependence on God means that the creature in itself—in its formal being—has no ontological foundation of its own. According to Eckhart, "all creatures have no being, because their being is suspended (*swebet*) in God's presence (*gegenwerticheit*)."[182] This idea takes its most extreme form in Eckhart's claim that "all creatures are one pure nothing. I do not say that they are a little something or anything, but that they are a pure nothing."[183] Eckhart even went so far as to assert that "to say that the world is not nothing in itself and from itself, but is some slight bit of existence, is open blasphemy."[184]

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[180] Eckhart, in Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 577.

[181] *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 369.

[182] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 132.

[183] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 92. This statement became Article 26 of *In agro dominico*—the Papal Bull that shortly after Eckhart's death condemned as heretical (or quasi-heretical) twenty-eight articles taken from Eckhart's vernacular and Latin works. For an historical summary of the events surrounding Eckhart's condemnation, see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 14–19. For an extended discussion of Eckhart's condemnation, see McGinn, "Eckhart's Condemnation Reconsidered," 390–414. For an English translation of Eckhart's defense, see Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, trans., *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* [translated selections from the work of Meister Eckhart, b. 1260], The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 71–7.

[184] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 105. Eckhart, rarely being entirely consistent, sometimes qualifies this claim by stating that all creatures are a "mere nothing *compared* with God." (Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 38–9, my emphasis) Suso avoids following Eckhart to this radical conclusion. Careful to avoid heresy, he asserts that with respect to their formal existence creatures have their own being distinct from God's. (Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 311) Creatures exist on two planes: in form, and therefore differentiated (according to how they appear to ordinary consciousness) and "in God . . ., without any differentiation, free of all forms and similarity in the One." Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 322.

The implications of Eckhart's position on the relation between God and creatures appear paradoxical. On the one hand, God and creatures are continuous. God's immanence—His "abiding indistinction"—is the "*true* reality" of things.[185] A creature's real, absolute being is its virtual existence in God and as God,[186] and even its formal existence is related (by similarity) to God through the *ebullitio*. On the other hand, formal, distinguishable being is necessarily "outside" the indistinction that is God.[187] From this perspective, the relation between God and creation is one of "radical difference."[188] "The divine being is not the stone's being," according to Suso, while Eckhart states, "whatever is created is not God";[189] "the created thing and the form through which it has its name exists in itself but in no way in God."[190] What does this paradox ultimately entail? If (1) the formal being of a creature is outside God and (2) its absolute existence is God, then it would seem that the existence of the creature collapses back into its absolute existence as God while the creature that is the object of ordinary experience (defined by formal being) ceases to exist as such. God may be the creature's being in

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[185] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 147 (my emphasis). For Eckhart, the indistinction between God and the creature is correlated to God's unity. (See McGinn, "Theological Summary," 34.) But since the formal being of created things is marked by 'distinguishableness,' God's indistinction makes Him ultimately distinct from (or transcendent to) all creatures. In other words, indistinction/immanence *is* distinction/transcendence. God is collapsed into the here and now, and yet this collapse simultaneously affirms His transcendent otherness. On the co-inherence of distinction/indistinction, see McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 5; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 34; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 94–5; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 7; Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 576.

[186] The indistinction between God and creatures also dissolves the distinctions between creatures themselves. As Eckhart states, "when we say that all things are in God [that means that] just as he is indistinct in his nature and nevertheless most distinct from all things, so in him all things in a most distinct way are also indistinct." (Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 88) Eckhart seems to be making a similar point when he remarks (following Anaxagoras) that "in divine matters 'everything is in everything.'" Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 169.

[187] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 103.

[188] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 32.

[189] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 328; Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 151. See also Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 92, 104; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 7; Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 76.

[190] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 104. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 4–5. According to McGinn, Eckhart maintained that "nothing can be outside of, or distinct from, the *esse* that is God." (McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 102) If this is true, then Eckhart's exclusion of formal being from God must have been a logical point rather than an affirmation of the ontological status of created, formal being.

terms of its real existence, the same as *His* real existence, but as
such, this real being utterly transcends anything we would associate
with creatureliness in the context of ordinary experience. According
to Suso, all things derive their being from God and in this sense
cannot be "separate from the simple being (of God)."[191] But in this
state of unity/divinity, creatures cease to be creatures, since what
defines creatureliness is distinctiveness. The claim that the creature's
true nature is God simultaneously implies the unreality of the crea-
ture in its formal being; it logically entails two propositions: (1) only
God is, and (2) the creature as we experience it does not exist, re-
affirming Eckhart's claim that creatures are a "pure nothing." Perhaps
this understanding inspired Eckhart's remark that "whatever we under-
stand *here* [in this world] is as different from the way it really is, and
the way it is in God, as if it did not exist at all."[192] McGinn asserts
that Eckhart is not a pantheist, since for Eckhart God is by definition
transcendent. For Eckhart, however, transcendence is defined by
*in*distinction. The logical mode of God's transcendence of 'the dis-
tinct' (i.e., creatures) is indistinction. In this sense, God's transcen-
dence is his immanence—an apparent affirmation of pantheism that
seems to contradict McGinn's analysis. On the other hand, Eckhart
may indeed avoid pantheism in the sense that there are no things
for God to be immanent within or transcendent to. The paradox of
God's relation to creatures is resolved because there is no relation-
ship: "nothing can be outside of, or distinct from, the *esse* that is
God."[193]

   This reasoning may be valid in an ontological sense, but it still
leaves the similarity of formal being and virtual existence, as well as
the *experience* of such similarity, unexplained. According to Eckhart,
"the man who has God essentially present to him grasps God divinely,
and to him God shines in all things; for everything tastes to him of
God."[194] Elsewhere he remarks, "once the birth [of the Son/Word
in the soul] has really occurred, . . . all things become simply God
to you, for in all things you notice and love only God."[195] Describing
his own experience of rapture, Suso explains that

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[191] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 328.
[192] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 250.
[193] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 102.
[194] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 253. See
Sister Catherine, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 379; Suso, in Tobin, *Henry
Suso*, 329.
[195] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 64.

when he was using his senses, these were hindered in their proper action so much that only the One answered him everywhere and in all things, and all things in the One, without the multiplicity which is in this or that.[196]

In general, since God is one and atemporal, the mystical experience of His immanence likewise includes the apprehension of creatures as eternal, individually indistinct, and/or collectively one.[197] Formal being may be outside God, but there seems to be no doubt that it also expresses the divine. This raises again the paradox of simultaneous immanence/transcendence, expressing a mystery that seems to be ultimately unresolvable in logical terms. In the pastoral, soteriological context of Eckhart's sermons, however, this paradox is glossed over in favor of a simple emphasis on immanence. As Eckhart remarks in one sermon, "God is unseparated from all things, for God is in all things and is more inwardly in them than they are in themselves."[198] According to Eckhart, "all creatures have flowed out of God's will."[199] Suso asserts that not only is God "in things," but "all things are in [God] as in their primordial freshness and eternal source."[200] For the practicing contemplative, what seems to matter is the affirmation of God's immediacy rather than the philosophical nuances (and problems) of immanence and transcendence. Immanence is essential as a way to orient contemplative practice to the here and now, as well as support an attitude of detachment, since immanence affirms the presence of God's will and being in all things and in all that occurs.[201]

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[196] Suso, in Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 161.
[197] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 325, 320, 318; Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*, 245.
[198] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 39.
[199] Ibid., 49.
[200] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 309. See also *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 363.
[201] To elaborate, attachment depends on distinguishing the desirable from the undesirable. If everything is God, there is no context for attachment to take hold. Detachment becomes automatic. Eckhart's affirmation of God's immanence even in evil human action is reflected in Article 4 of *In agro dominico*: "in every work, even in an evil one, an evil I say both of punishment and of fault, God's glory is revealed and shines forth and gleams in equal measure." Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 106.

The Nature of the Soul

Based on Augustine, the German mystics have an essentially dual-istic understanding of human nature. The person has an "inner" and "outer" aspect.[202] His outer aspect represents the senses and the "lower reason directed to externals."[203] The inner man represents the "higher reason directed to God."[204] However, just as God con-stitutes the real existence of all things, so God in some way consti-tutes the real existence of the soul. As Eckhart reasons, "if my life is God's being, then God's existence (*sîn*) must be my existence, and God's is-ness (*isticheit*) is my is-ness, neither less nor more."[205] This passage points to German mysticism's distinctive emphasis on the soul's "innermost" divine nature. As Tauler states, a person's "inner-most abyss . . . is [God] Himself."[206] Eckhart describes the ultimate "power in the spirit" in this way:

> I have sometimes said that there is a power in the spirit that alone is free. Sometimes I have said that it is a guard of the spirit; sometimes I have said that it is a light of the spirit; sometimes I have said that it is a spark. But now I say that it is neither this nor that, and yet it is something that is higher above this and that than heaven is above the earth. And therefore I now give it finer names than I have ever given it before, and yet whatever fine names, whatever words we use, they are telling lies, and it is far above them. It is free of all names, it is bare of all forms, wholly empty and free, as God in himself is empty and free. It is so utterly one and simple, as God is one and simple, that man can not in any way look into it.[207] . . . [T]he Father . . . truly lives in this power.[208]

This power represents the most "inward part of the spirit," where "God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground."[209]

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[202] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 273. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 109; Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 91–2.

[203] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 43.

[204] Ibid. See also Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 37.

[205] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 33.

[206] Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 60.

[207] An odd assertion, considering that further below he states: "whoever has looked for an instant into this ground, to such a man a thousand marks of red, minted gold are no more than a counterfeit penny." Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 183.

[208] Ibid., 180–1. See also Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 5.

[209] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 183. See

In other words, at the core of a person's natural being is a point of absolute identity between the soul and God.[210] There "God and the soul are so entirely one that God cannot have a single distinctive feature separating Him from the soul and making Him different."[211] This ground, where the soul and God are one, is sometimes identified with the higher intellect, which is nothing other than the Son/Word or God's image[212] in the soul.[213] From this perspective, the higher (or most inward) part of our being is in univocal relation to God; the intellect has no existence of its own "apart from its inherence in the Word."[214]

None of this means that the person is God. The person is a creature and therefore exists in analogous relation to God. Eckhart did claim that "God's being is my life,"[215] but it is clear from other passages that the divine ground of the soul is not properly identifiable with the person as 'I.' The ground of the soul—the image of God within—is in formal opposition to the 'I' as the person's created being.[216] In that ground there is no person as creature, only God.

Eckhart makes other claims about the soul's ground that are also worth noting. First, this ground, through its identity with God, constitutes an uncreated element within the soul.[217] This uncreated aspect preexists a person's birth (in this sense, salvation is a return to where we have already been).[218] Even more radical, our creation as a person was initiated, in some sense, by the soul (or the soul's ground) rather than by God, "for in the same being of God where God is above being and above distinction, there I myself was, there I willed

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also Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 42; Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 28; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 41, 44–5, 144.

[210] See Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 29.

[211] Ibid., 38.

[212] Eckhart asserts that man, being created in the image of God, "is not 'like [God]' but he is altogether identical with Him and the very same as He is." Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 40.

[213] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 112–3; 107–10. See also 5.

[214] Ibid., 5, 11; see also 102; 112; 140–1.

[215] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 15.

[216] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 110–1.

[217] Eckhart denied making this claim in his defense, but the evidence of his sermons seems to indicate otherwise. See McGinn, "Theological Summary," 42; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 45.

[218] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 52. See also Josef Schmidt, introduction to *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, by John Tauler [Johannes Tauler, b.1300], trans. Maria Shrady, The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 29; *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 361.

myself and committed myself to create this man [i.e., myself].”[219]
Finally, to the extent that we dwell in this ground and are “in God,”
we are (like God) utterly indistinct from all things. And yet just as
God's immanence is the basis of his transcendence, our “indistinc-
tion” entails that we are “completely distinct from all things” as
well.[220] Becoming one, the mystic likewise becomes completely other.

Mystical Practice in German Mysticism

The goal of German mysticism is conscious union with God, vari-
ously described as a “return to one's original ground or source,”[221]
a “birth” of the Son, God, or Word in the soul, or a “break-through”
into the hidden Godhead. The nature of the mystical path that leads
to this goal is directly shaped by the goal itself. God is pure unity/being,
all-pervasive in His immanence and absolute in His freedom. He is
unconditioned by any dualistic distinctions or trace of multiplicity.
In His unconditioned is-ness, God even excludes the discrimination
‘God.’[222] From the German mystical perspective, becoming one with
God therefore requires cultivating a similar unconditioned mode of
being. A basic principle of German mysticism is that “only the like-
ness of the like establishes union.”[223] Eckhart seems to take this a
step further, suggesting that one has to be God to know God: “if I
am to know God without medium, . . . without image, and without
likeness, God actually has to become me and I have to become
God.”[224] The mystic must, therefore, realize a pure, empty, uncon-
trived, non-discriminating mode of experience. She must become
unconditioned unity herself in order to experience the unconditioned
unity that is God.[225] As Eckhart advises, “be one, so that you can

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[219] Eckhart, in McGinn, “Theological Summary,” 52.

[220] Ibid., 42.

[221] McGinn, “Theological Summary,” 45. See *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The
“Sister Catherine” Treatise*, 350.

[222] As Eckhart states, God must be loved “as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a
nonperson, a nonimage, . . . as . . . a pure, unmixed, bright ‘One,’ separated from
all duality.” Eckhart, in McGinn, “Theological Summary,” 49.

[223] Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher*, 4.

[224] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 111. See also 135. An extension of this
idea is Eckhart's claim that God only loves the soul to the extent that he finds
Himself in the soul. See Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*,
vol. 2, 1.

[225] According to Sister Catherine, “nothing can be in God but God.” *Sister Catherine*,

find God."[226] In typical paradoxical fashion, the mystic must already be the goal to realize the goal.

In German mysticism, this state of unconditioned unity is cultivated through a wide range of practices and attitudes. Most of these, however, seem to be expressions of two more basic and closely related practices/processes: detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) and self-effacement.[227] Detachment and self-effacement are functionally inseparable: detachment involves a 'letting go' of what the self wants (a type of self-effacement) while self-effacement is necessarily a release (or detachment) of what the self wants. Both undermine the duality inherent in attachment and the experience of distinct selfhood. Attachment is dualistic because it depends on the discrimination of the desirable from the undesirable or 'the good' from 'the bad,'[228] i.e., the evaluative dualism that defines (in conjunction with perceptual dualism) ordinary consciousness. Furthermore, attachment only functions in relation to a self, while the self is in turn constructed in relation to evaluative conditions[229] that manifest as attachments. God being one, the duality inherent in attachment/self negates the experience of God. In the context of German mysticism, attachment/self could be described as existential atheism. Detachment and self-abnegation, as antidotes to the duality inherent in attachment/self, therefore become the means of realizing the unity that is God. In German mysticism, detachment is a mystical practice, involving the "radical deconstruction of the created self."[230] Through it, "man is actually expected to transcend the boundaries of his categorical being in some way."[231]

As indicated above, detachment/self-effacement translates into a wide range of methods, attitudes, and virtues. For Eckhart, it ultimately

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in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 364. See also Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 244; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 15.

[226] Eckhart, McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 97. This "becoming one" is simultaneously the transcendence of all created things, since created things are defined by distinctiveness. See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 44.

[227] On the centrality of detachment, see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 133. See also McGinn's summation of the German path into three, basic steps: detachment, the birth of the Son/Word in the soul, and breakthrough. (McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 147) On self-effacement, see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 134, 138.

[228] 'Good' and 'bad' are used throughout in an evaluative (rather than moral) sense, unless otherwise specified.

[229] Any aspect of our self-image presumes an evaluative context, whether positive or negative.

[230] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 135–6.

[231] Frank Tobin, "Eckhart's Mystical Use of Language: The Contexts of *eigenschaft*," *Seminar* 8 (1972): 164.

entails the rejection of methods (or "ways") altogether. Attachment
to any particular way imposes a condition on experience and there-
fore denies the experience of God. Detachment necessitates follow-
ing a non-way of uncontrived spontaneity: what Eckhart describes
as "living without a why."[232] But this type of pure and surrendered
detachment is radically counter to the habitual processes of ordinary
experience, which are dedicated to *maintaining* a dualistic, conditional
perspective on life (the very perspective that maintains the bound-
aries of the self). "Living without a why" has to be preceded by
preliminary practices. The German mystics (including Eckhart)[233]
therefore advocate the practice of external works and the cultivation
of basic Christian virtues,[234] while emphasizing that at some point
such works and virtues must be abandoned (or become spontaneous
"non-virtues")[235] if the goal of union is actually to be realized.

   These preliminaries are comprised of the standard external works
and virtues of Christian piety. The first category includes sacramental
observance, penance/asceticism, prayer, good works (such as feed-
ing the poor), etc. The second encompasses such virtues as faith,
hope, loving without distinction (especially those who harm you),
humility, patience, obedience, compassion, generosity, and forgive-
ness.[236] All of these involve some level of detachment/self-abandon-
ment since all, to varying degrees, oppose the immediate self-serving
agenda of the ego.[237] Such works and virtues refine grosser forms of
attachment and self-absorption, and thereby function as an essential
foundation and context for contemplative practice.

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[232] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 154−5; McGinn, "God Beyond God," 18; Amy
M. Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and
Meister Eckhart*, Studies in Spirituality and Theology Series (Notre Dame: University
of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 4.

[233] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 255.

[234] See McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 14; *Sister
Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 368; Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*,
308, 330; Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 152.

[235] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 49. Duclow states: "Eckhart claims that the
sons of God 'are strangers of goodness, truth, and everything that tolerates any dis-
tinction." Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 576.

[236] See Ibid., 573.

[237] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 69. At least this is the case at the beginning of the
path. At more advanced stages, such practices may function to reinforce the ego
by feeding a "spiritual" self-image—a problem German mystics address by stress-
ing the need to go beyond them as self-consciously enacted practices. This has noth-
ing to do with whether or not such practices are performed. It means that the
virtues become spontaneous expressions of union, becoming as Eckhart puts it, "non-
virtues."

Contemplation in German mysticism involves the cultivation of a state of interiorized, objectless concentration[238] based on two basic elements: disengaging attention from the senses by turning attention within,[239] and emptying[240] consciousness of all content. Both these processes promote a state of unity by negating the multiplicity associated with sense experience[241] as well as the multiplicity of concepts and images that comprise ordinary consciousness. Both also require detachment: attention has to be interiorized and detached from its habitual involvement in the external, and once internalized, it has to be further detached from passing thoughts, sensations and mental images.

The apophatic emptying of consciousness—sometimes described as "unknowing"[242] or inner silence—is perhaps the definitive aspect of German contemplation. The logic of apophatic contemplation is simple and persuasive (at least if certain theological premises are accepted). If God is unlimited and unconditioned, mental images and concepts (which are limited and conditioned) must necessarily obscure the experience of God. The experience of God therefore requires that such images and concepts be negated. As Eckhart explains, mental images come "between you and the whole of God. As soon as the image comes in, God and all his divinity have to give way. But as the image goes out, God goes in."[243] For this reason, *all* distinguishable mental content must go, including visionary experiences[244]

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[238] As Tauler insists, "there must be a definite introversion, a gathering up, an inward recollection of faculties without any dispersal." Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 37. See also 39.

[239] This interiorization of attention is sometimes described as a shift from the "inferior part of the soul" (the senses) to the "superior powers, in the ground." Tauler, in Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 149–50.

[240] See *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 358.

[241] On the association of sense experience with multiplicity, see Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 66.

[242] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 23; Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 318.

[243] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 184. In another passage Eckhart explains the emptying of all "alien images" slightly differently, asserting that "imagelessness" is really about "nonpossessiveness" toward images, not utter bareness of images. (Ibid., 177) In a different sense, Suso also rejects complete apophatic negation. As Suso explains, "good intellectual perception . . . and . . . sensible ideas which bear within them the testimony of a life of perfection should not be shunned. For these things refine a person and reveal to him his own nobility, the incomparability of the divine being, and the nothingness of all other things." Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 308.

[244] *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 374–5; Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 10; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 50–1.

and even the concept 'God.' The soul must stand "naked and empty
of all expressible things," and become "one in the One, so that it
can go forward in the naked Godhead."[245] Tauler makes a similar
point, though he uses different terminology. According to Tauler, it
is only through inner silence that

> the Word can be uttered and heard within. . . . There is no better way
> of serving the Word than by silence and by listening. If you go out
> of yourself, you may be certain that God will enter and fill you wholly:
> the greater the void, the greater the divine influx.[246]

This passage points to an important feature of interior silence and
contemplation in general: 'going within' is in actuality going *out* of
oneself, because in the ground of one's being (where the soul and
God are one) there is no trace of individuated selfhood.[247]

   Becoming 'one' through contemplation is not solely a function of
negating mental content. Because God's ground is the soul's ground,
turning within and away from external multiplicity is ideally to
embrace an interior unity. In this sense, oneness as the absence of
multiplicity is a prelude to oneness as the experience of a positive
Reality. This experience seems to be initiated through the intellect,
as the special power of the soul through which God is realized. This
power Eckhart often specifies as the "higher intellect," which may
be activated once the sense-based and image-based activity of the
lower intellect is pacified. As Eckhart explains,

> the soul has something in it, a spark of intelligence, which never goes
> out, and in this spark, as the highest part of the mind, one places the
> image of the soul. There also exists in our souls a capacity for know-
> ing external things. This is a knowing through the senses and through
> reason, that is, a knowing through sensible images and through con-
> cepts. Such knowing conceals this other knowing from us.[248]

In some passages the intellect seems less a means to God than the
abode of God Himself.[249] According to McGinn,

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[245] *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 362.

[246] Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 38.

[247] The process of stilling the mind undermines the self in a more direct sense
as well. The experience of selfhood, being to some extent a construction of mind,
is naturally eroded when the mind's activity is pacified.

[248] Eckhart, in Mellinger, *Deus innominabilis*, 91–2. See also McGinn, *Mystical
Thought*, 99, 152.

[249] As discussed above, intellect is sometimes described as a univocal creation of
God residing in the soul. See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 102.

because the intellect is capable of being one with all things in coming to know them, it is more than just the formal existence of some divine idea in the world—it is the very presence of God as indistinct One in his creation.[250]

More specifically, it is the presence of God in the human soul. This presence, once stripped of distinguishable objects, is then able to receive the pure beingness of God. In Eckhart's own words, when the intellect is "bare of all things and having nothing in common with anything," it "receives into itself nothing less than God Himself, in all the vastness and fullness of His being."[251] In other words, "to rise up to intellect, and to be subordinated to it, is to be united to God."[252]

'Releasement' and Self-annihilation

Though contemplation and other works and methods are essential as preliminary practices on the German mystical path, becoming free and one (i.e., unconditioned) like God ultimately requires a deep and radical level of detachment/self-abnegation[253] that negates any specific way. The ultimacy of these practices within the German school may seem puzzling. Detachment and self-abnegation are standard, universally recommended attitudes for Christians in general (particularly as expressed through such virtues like humility, patience, generosity, etc.). How can they be considered the most advanced practices of a mystical school, the ultimate means for attaining experiential union with God? An answer is suggested by the extreme way that the German mystics understood and practiced them. For the German mystics, true detachment/self-abnegation was understood to require a continuous, interior abandonment of self in the face of all circumstances.[254] The term sometimes used for this advanced form of

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[250] Ibid., 108.

[251] Eckhart, in Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 577.

[252] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 151.

[253] The centrality of self-abnegation is reflected in its many synonymous: self-annihilation, self-forgetfulness, self-abandonment, self-denial, becoming nothing, inner self-detachment, etc.

[254] For Sister Catherine, this is the "fast" way, as opposed to the "slow" way of conventional Christian piety. (*Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 349) Tauler also identifies two "ways" in terms of two levels of detachment: a "preparatory stage" and "the decisive, all-embracing act enabling one to become immersed in the ground of the soul, the divine abyss." (Schmidt, introduction to *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 32) The first stage would correspond with Suso's

detachment is *gelassenheit*, variously translated/interpreted as "release-ment," "letting be," "resignation," or "joyful endurance and patience in the face of adversity."[255] The nature of *gelassenheit* was described to Suso in a vision as follows:

> the advanced school [of practice] . . . is nothing other than complete and perfect detachment from oneself, so that a person becomes so utterly nothing, no matter how God treats him . . . that he strives con-tinually to be in the state of going away from his 'self.'[256]

Gelassenheit requires that one is "always . . . disposed, both outwardly and inwardly, to self-surrender in everything that God wants [one] to endure, no matter where it comes from."[257]

Suso's *The Life of the Servant* provides an example of *gelassenheit* in practice. The context of the story is Suso's effort to live Jesus' com-mand to "love those who harm you." Initially, Suso's obedience is external. When attacked, he manages to restrain the impulse to retal-iate. Internally, however, he experiences all the typical feelings of hurt and resentment associated with an offended ego. God eventu-ally intervenes, telling Suso,

> when you are mistreated by someone's words and conduct, you must not just suffer it patiently. You must forget yourself so utterly that you do not go to bed until you have approached those who mistreat you and, as far as you are able, calm their raging hearts with your sweet and humble words and actions.[258]

If we assume that this correct course of action is intended to express a transformed interior state of mind, God's advice implies that the self must be so abandoned that 'being offended' becomes an expe-riential impossibility (there is, in a sense, no self to be offended).

Self-annihilation is in turn the basis for the spontaneous virtue expressed by the inward soul. Self-annihilation means there is no self to protect, or, using modern psychological terms, that events are no longer interpreted relative to the safety or abandonment of the self. Once the self's well-being ceases to be the driving force of psychic

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detachment from external things, the second with an interiorized "inner" detach-ment equatable with self-abandonment. Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 307.

[255] Clark, *Great German Mystics*, 59; Caputo, "Fundamental Themes," 210; Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher*, xii.

[256] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 98.

[257] Ibid., 316. See also 313–4; Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 47.

[258] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 123.

life, the ordinary boundaries and defenses that obstruct our capacity for empathy are eliminated. Self-annihilation entails that the locus of one's concern is free to expand beyond the self; it awakens the capacity for compassion, and so becomes the inspiration for natural and spontaneous service based on the direct intuition of the inner life and suffering of others. In this context, being attacked no longer carries the same semantic associations. One may actually be able to appreciate the suffering experienced by the attacker and respond based on a sense of empathy or concern for her well-being. Self-annihilation, then, essentially represents an erosion of the ego's boundaries and a delocalization of consciousness, preparing the ground for mystical experience.

Rejection of 'Ways'

This type of radical detachment/self-abnegation is the basis for several additional aspects of the German mystical path. One of these has been mentioned above, but it warrants further comment because of its importance: the necessity to be detached from works or 'ways.' From the German mystical perspective, 'ways' represent conditions that necessarily negate the unconditioned being of God. As Eckhart explains, "whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden. But whoever seeks for God without ways will find him as he is in himself."[259] In other words, identifying God with any sort of practice, location, etc. denies God since God is beyond any form or mode. Eckhart expresses this idea with particular charm in the following passage:

> when people think that they are acquiring more of God in inwardness, in devotion, in sweetness and in various approaches than they do by the fireside or in the stable, you are acting just as if you took God and muffled his head up in a cloak and pushed him under a bench.[260]

This type of reasoning seems to be the basis for Eckhart's rejection of supplicatory prayer. Article 7 of *In agro dominico* reads: "whoever prays for this or that, prays for something evil and in evil wise, for he prays for the denial of good and the denial of God, and he prays

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[259] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 183.
[260] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 60.

for God to deny Himself to him."[261] This extreme statement may express the recognition that prayer "for this or that" is by definition premised upon the distinction between the desirable and the undesirable, a distinction that by its very nature reflects a conditioned frame of reference that denies the unconditioned presence of God.

For Eckhart, works may be beneficial, but only if they refer back to God alone[262] or are performed in utter "non-possessiveness." In practice, however, works tend to be appropriated by the self to serve its own ends (e.g., to reinforce a spiritual self-image), negating their value. In addition,

> every attachment to every work [such as prayers, fasting, vigils, penances, etc.] deprives one of the freedom to wait upon God in the present and to follow him alone in the light with which he would guide you in what to do and what to leave alone, free and renewed in every present moment. . . . Every attachment or every work you propose deprives you again and again of this freedom.[263]

Eckhart is therefore emphatic that "the just person seeks nothing in his works . . ., neither in time nor in eternity, neither reward nor blessedness, neither this nor that."[264] Rather, works and virtues should be grounded in the interior freedom realized through a moment by moment "waiting on God."[265] From the German mystical perspective, true virtue expresses an interior state of being[266] that in its spontaneity is "free of virtue."[267] Conversely, once that interior state is realized, any act becomes virtuous.[268] The "fruitfulness" of works performed with this type of "freedom" and inwardness far surpasses works performed in a conventional sense.[269]

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[261] *In agro dominico*, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1, xlvii–xlviii.

[262] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 255.

[263] Ibid., 178.

[264] Eckhart, in Hollywood, *Soul as Virgin Wife*, 4.

[265] Tauler does not go to this extreme. According to him, even in the highest state of union one must still "regulate the lower powers" through works and virtues. See Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 152.

[266] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 250, 265, 277. See also 183; *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 371; Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 322; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 58.

[267] Eckhart, McGinn, "Mystical Thought," 144.

[268] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 250; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 155–6. An extension of this idea is that once "inwardness" is attained one can (and should) "drop all outward disciplines." Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 69. See also Blamires, "Tauler and Eckhart Marginalia," 102.

[269] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 178–9.

Regarding Eckhart's rejection of ways, it should be emphasized that he is more often rejecting *attachment* to ways, or ways as self-consciously performed activities. This distinction is crucial for understanding Eckhart's position on activity vs. contemplation. In some sermons Eckhart seems to reject contemplation in favor of activity.[270] But this rejection is contextual. Eckhart is speaking to an audience of contemplatives for whom contemplation may become a way that negates the unconditioned freedom of God. Eckhart's real critique is not directed to either activity or contemplation, but to the "outwardness" of ways enacted in a self-conscious manner. In contrast, Eckhart's ideal is inwardness, which reflects an inner attunement to the divine that may express itself as either "contemplation" or "activity" as spontaneous, uncontrived manifestations of that interior state.

Detachment not only applies to ways, it also applies to goals. The natural tendency to engage in spiritual practice in order to gain some type of reward or consolation has to be entirely eradicated. As Eckhart explains, "the purest form of detachment raises us above all desire and prayer for any particular reward . . ., even that of sanctity."[271] While active in the world, Jesus has to be followed "without a question" (or as Eckhart would put it, "without a why"),[272] i.e., spontaneously and without the desire to attain consolation.[273] In contemplation, one must seek absolutely nothing beyond non-seeking itself, applying the most strenuous effort[274] to attain the goal of goalessness and remain detached from the desire for any type of experience or reward.[275] Paradoxically, 'seeking nothing' is practiced *as a method leading to a goal* (union). In one sermon Eckhart reassures his audience that it is in abandoning all desire for the goal that the goal is reached, "for the less we seek or desire it, the more God gives."[276]

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[270] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 158–9.

[271] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 48.

[272] See Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 170.

[273] *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 354.

[274] As McGinn notes, "Eckhart says that although the birth can only take place by a withdrawing of the senses to a state of inner passivity, this 'requires a mighty effort to drive back the powers of the soul and inhibit their functioning.'" (McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 65) Eckhart's references to "ardent detachment" would seem to reflect the same dichotomy of "effortful" passivity. See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 70.

[275] See Caputo's comments on Eckhart's understanding of "spiritual poverty" as the complete cessation of desire: "the poor man . . . wills nothing." Caputo, "Fundamental Themes," 200–1.

[276] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 6–7. See also Tauler's comments in Ancelet, *Master Eckhart*, 150.

'Seeking a goal' automatically sets up a dualistic frame of reference that negates realizing the goal (since God is one). The German mystics understood that a strenuous renunciation of goals is therefore the ultimate and perhaps only method for achieving the goal of union.

Another facet of German mysticism's understanding of radical detachment is reflected in its approach to consolation and suffering. The ordinary meaning of these categories is straightforward: what the self wants is consoling, what it does not want is suffering. The first category includes physical comfort, esteem from others, spiritually gratifying experiences, and pleasant conditions in general. The second encompasses physical pain, scorn from others, spiritual dryness, etc. German mysticism redefines these categories. Consolation is identified with self-annihilation/detachment while suffering is identified with self-will/attachment. Eckhart is emphatic that self-annihilation is true consolation. As he puts it,

> for truly, if anyone had denied himself and had wholly forsaken himself, nothing could be for him a cross or sorrow or suffering; . . . just as nothing can grieve or afflict God, so nothing can make such a man rueful or sad.[277]

In other words, true consolation consists of the absence of self as an orienting referent to distinguish consolation and suffering. It is the very absence of conditions defining 'consolation vs. suffering' that *is* consolation, while suffering is inherent in the act of distinguishing consolation and suffering. This view implies that neither consolation nor suffering have anything to do with external circumstances, but instead reflect the conditional (or non-conditional) perspective of the individual. This seems to be the basis of Eckhart's assertion that

> if all is well with a man, then truly, wherever he may be, whomever he may be with, it is well with him. But if things are not right with him, then everywhere and with everybody it is all wrong with him.[278]

Ultimately, "the only thing that the suffering Christian has to lament is the fact itself that he is lamenting his suffering at all."[279]

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[277] Eckhart, in Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 580.
[278] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 251.
[279] John Margetts, "Observations on Meister Eckhart's Views Concerning Eternity and the Here-and-now," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 27/2 (April 1991): 115.

This re-framing of the consolation/suffering distinction is necessary because the conditional approach to consolation denies the unconditional presence of God/Goodness. Such conditions are dualistic (in the evaluative sense) and so negate God/Unity. The experience of union therefore requires that these conditions be released. Since suffering and consolation are (ordinarily) defined in relation to the self's perceived well-being, this 'releasement' is fundamentally an act of self-abnegation. The context considered ideal for practicing releasement is suffering. Suffering manifests the presence of these conditions (and attachment to self) in their most active and compelling form. It represents areas in which we are still attached, i.e., where we still hold our conditional point of view (and so negate the possibility of experiencing God's unconditioned presence). From the German mystical perspective, avoiding suffering functions to affirm the power of the conditions (ultimately, attachment to self) that create suffering to begin with. On the other hand, non-avoidance (or even immersion) in suffering—being directly counter to the self's natural inclinations—functions as a radical act of self-abnegation, releasing the conditions that cause suffering and separation from God. In this sense, self-abnegation becomes one of the most powerful means of purifying consciousness of its conditional associations.

According to Eckhart, for the true Christian all suffering becomes joy.[280] Surrender and releasement of self in the face of suffering transforms suffering by deconditioning evaluative constructs. Embracing suffering deconstructs the conditions that cause suffering. This process is the justification for ascetical practice among the German mystics (especially Suso): seeking out suffering in order to further expose and release the attachments/conditions that are the ultimate cause of suffering.

To sum up, *gelassenheit*, in all its aspects and implications, is based on the view that the distinction inherent in attachment and the sense of self denies the unity of God. Based on attachment/self, one's relationship to life is defined by dualistic conditions rather than by unconditioned unity (the presence of God). Detachment and the releasement

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[280] See *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 378. Eckhart also denies that a true Christian could ever be without consolation in any experience since whatever happens is always God's will (and a Christian should want nothing other than what God wills). Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 259; Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 4.

of self in the face of all circumstances therefore becomes a radical
method of deconditioning consciousness. Detachment/self-abnegation
entails that one no longer defines well-being in terms of distinct sets
of conditions. This is why Eckhart considers detachment a higher
practice than love. Love, according to him, implies suffering and
therefore continued involvement in created, distinct things. Detachment,
on the other hand, "can apprehend nothing except God"[281] because
it aims at an experience of life without discriminations or distinc-
tions. *Gelassenheit*, then, functions to decondition the dualism inher-
ent in the evaluative responses of ordinary experience. If consciousness
depends on the interdependent interaction of a system of cognitive
factors and processes, *gelassenheit* functions to destabilize the system.
This destabilization in turn opens the way for the potential evolu-
tion of the cognitive system.

   For the German mystics, every released condition functions to
awaken the soul to God's presence. This makes perfect sense since
God is understood as unconditioned being. The awakening process
suggests a direct correlation between self-annihilation and union. As
Eckhart puts it, "where the creature stops, there God begins to be."[282]
If God is unconditionally present[283] in His absolute unity, eliminat-
ing the distinctions represented by the self and its attachments is
identified with union itself. This type of language indicates that the
divine influx takes place as a natural process, undermining the image
of God bestowing grace as a distinct act of free will. Union is under-
stood through a more naturalistic model:

> everything longs to achieve its own natural place. Now God's own
> natural place is unity and purity, and that comes from detachment.
> Therefore God must of necessity give himself to a heart that has
> detachment.[284]

Just as air will naturally fill a vacuum, God has no choice but
to fill the void of the annihilated soul.[285] This is the basis of Eck-

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[281] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 286. See
Schmidt, introduction to *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 19, 32.

[282] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 184.

[283] Ibid., 266.

[284] Ibid., 286. See also Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 38.

[285] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 137–8. As an interesting side note, Eckhart seems
to imply that this process can take place instantaneously. In one sermon Eckhart
tells his audience, "but I say yet more (do not be afraid, for this joy is close to
you and is in you): there is not one of you who is so coarse-grained, so feeble of
understanding, or so far off but that he can find this joy within himself, in truth,
as it is, with joy and understanding, before you leave this church today, indeed

hart's radical claim that detachment "compels God to love [the soul]."[286]

'Birth' and 'Breakthrough'

The transformation leading to union takes place in stages. The German mystics' accounts of these stages are not entirely consistent,[287] but most seem to identify four basic stages in the transformation of the soul. The first is emptying: denuding the soul of all images, concepts, attachments, and self through the various virtues and practices described above. Through strenuous and constant discipline, these processes eventually lead to the second stage, a state Eckhart often refers to as the "desert." The mystic has finally become empty and is able to rest in a state of quiet, unmoving stillness.[288] As she progresses deeper into this desert, the next stage is realized—"the birth of the Word or Son in the soul."[289] At this point description becomes more difficult, because the mystic is embracing a positive Reality that transcends ordinary experience. In a general sense, the birth of the Son/Word in the soul marks the awakening of an "uncreated light" in the soul that "comprehends God without a medium."[290] More specifically, through the "birth," the mystic is "taken up into the immanent activity of the Trinity."[291] On the one hand, this may be described as the soul's *becoming* the Son. As Eckhart insists,

> when our Lord, the Son, says, 'Let him deny himself and lift up his cross and come to me,' that means: Let him become a Son, as I am Son . . ., God-begotten, and let him become that same one which I am.[292]

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before I have finished preaching." Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 150.

[286] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 286. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 137. Closely related to this idea is Eckhart's claim that the "humble man" controls God. See Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 45, 50.

[287] See McGinn on the different positions regarding the relationship of the birth to the breakthrough. McGinn, "God Beyond God," 9–10.

[288] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 64.

[289] The relationship between the desert and the birth is indicated by Eckhart's remark that it is "in . . . perfect rest, [that] the Father gives His only-begotten Son to the soul." (Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 33) Eckhart's assertion that God is "born in Nothingness" seems to make the same point. Eckhart, in McGinn, "God Beyond God," 10. See also McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 57–8, 61, 139; Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 163.

[290] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 45.

[291] Tobin, *Thought and Language*, 99; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 73–4, 148; Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 149; Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 580.

[292] Eckhart, in Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 580.

On the other hand, the birth may be portrayed as the soul's realization of a process that is already going on, since the eternal begetting of the Son through the *bullitio* is simultaneously the begetting of the intellect as the univocal presence of God within the soul.[293] The birth in eternity already is a ceaseless birth in the soul.[294] In this context, 'the birth' as a stage of the mystical journey seems to refer to the birth of an awareness of the intellect's univocal identity with God through the Son.[295]

This birth includes an additional aspect. According to Eckhart,

> the noble and humble man is not satisfied to be born as the only-begotten Son whom the Father has eternally born, but he wants to be also the Father and to enter into the same equality of eternal paternity and to bear him, from whom I am eternally born.[296]

Through the birth, then, God

> gives birth not only to me, his Son, but he gives birth to me as himself and himself as me.... [The Father] everlastingly bore me, his only born Son, into that same image of his eternal Fatherhood, that I may be Father and give birth to him of whom I am born.[297]

In other words, the birth is identified with conscious participation in the Trinity, not only as the Son being begotten by the Father, but as the Father begetting the Son.

Beyond the birth is the final stage of transformation, the "break-through" (*durchbruch*) or "penetration of the soul into the divine ground that is the God beyond God."[298] The soul, according to Eckhart,

> is not content with Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, nor even with 'the simple divine essence in its repose . . .; . . . it wants to know the source

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[293] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 142.

[294] Ibid., 141.

[295] For Eckhart, becoming the Son makes the perfected person essentially equal to Christ, based on an element of the soul that in some sense already is Christ. Other German mystics, however, are more conservative. In *Sister Catherine*, the soul assumes by grace what Christ already is by nature. (*Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 365) Suso is told that the soul only takes "on the form of [Christ's] image." Christ always remains "the first and only-begotten Son by his being preeminently taken up into the subsistence of the divine Person." Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 316.

[296] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 46.

[297] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 51.

[298] McGinn, "Theological Summary," 31.

of this essence, it wants to go into the simple ground, into the quiet desert,[299] into which distinction never gazed.'[300]

In this simple ground "I am neither God nor creature, but I am what I was and what I shall remain, now and eternally."[301] As indicated above, the 'God beyond God' is not another level of divinity in the ontological sense. Rather, it represents a refinement of awareness beyond all distinction. Within the pure unity of God, all distinctions cease, including 'God.' As McGinn explains, "God *unbecomes* when the mystic is not content to return to the 'God' who acts, but effects a 'breaking through' . . . to the silent unmoving Godhead."[302]

As the last stage on the path, the breakthrough is also the German mystic's goal: union with God. For Eckhart, this union involved absolute (or almost absolute) identity with God: "without any difference (or distinction) we become the same being and substance and nature as [God] is himself."[303] Eckhart uses the image of a drop of water poured into a cask of wine, claiming that even this analogy does not adequately express the extent to which the soul and God are merged as one.[304] Sister Catherine expresses this oneness more bluntly and more radically in her ecstatic exclamation "I have become God!"[305] For her, the soul assumes, through this identification, the qualities of the divine (or recovers qualities already innate within it):

> The soul which comes into God has neither place nor time, nor any nameable feature. . . . Furthermore, . . . if one were to mark the place which is occupied by [that] soul, it would be much larger than heaven and earth and everything that God ever created. . . . If God had created as many heavens and earths and as many worlds as he created creatures, it would still be less than the point of a pin compared to the place which is the allotted share of the soul that is united in God.[306]

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[299] Here Eckhart uses the term "desert" in a different sense than described in stage two. In both contexts, "desert" is used to evoke a sense of unbroken unity, but in stage two it is the unity of empty barrenness, whereas in stage four it refers to the positive unity of God.

[300] Eckhart, in McGinn, "Theological Summary," 55.

[301] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 143.

[302] McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 46. See also, 29, 34.

[303] Eckhart, in Tobin, *Thought and Language*, 98. See also 95; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 89.

[304] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 272. Suso uses the same image. See Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 314. For an in-depth discussion of Eckhart's understanding of union see Richard Kieckhefer, "Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God," *Harvard Theological Review* 71 (1978): 203–225.

[305] *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 358.

[306] Ibid., 382–3.

This passage seems to suggest that the soul, through union, "expands" into the all-pervasive, non-localized Reality of God's being.

Regarding union, Suso takes a more conservative position. His own comments on union reflect a clear concern to preserve the ontological distinction between God and the soul. He is careful to assert that even though the soul may experience absolute identity with God, ontologically, the soul and God remain distinct.[307] "The soul always remains a creature."[308] Suso also denies that union can become permanent, in contrast to the more radical position maintained by Sister Catherine (and apparently by Eckhart as well) that one can in fact become permanently "established."[309]

Grace and Effort

Given its central importance in Christian soteriological theory, I close this chapter with a few brief remarks on the role of grace on the German mystical path. For the most part, the German mystics stress effort over grace. According to Eckhart, cultivating a sense of the presence of God requires sustained and disciplined effort, though eventually it becomes effortless.[310] In his own words, "at the beginning there must be attentiveness and a careful formation within [oneself], like a schoolboy setting himself to learn."[311] Tauler describes contemplation as a skill acquired through repeated practice:

> cherish this deep silence within, nourish it frequently, so that it may become a habit, and by becoming a habit, a mighty possession. For what seems quite impossible to an unpracticed person becomes easy to a practiced one. It is habit which creates skill.[312]

This does not mean that the German mystics would not also insist that union is attained by grace.[313] But in the context of the German mystical path, what does this actually mean? If it means the mystic has to allow God to act in the soul to affect its salvation, then grace

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[307] Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 312, 320, 321.

[308] Ibid., 321.

[309] *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 361; McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 12.

[310] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 253–4.

[311] Ibid., 254. See 275; Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 46.

[312] Ibid., 40. See also 46. On Eckhart's understanding of contemplation as a practiced skill, see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 135.

[313] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 129; McGinn, "Theological Summary," 45–6. See also *Sister Catherine*, in Borgstädt, *The "Sister Catherine" Treatise*, 354.

requires strenuous effort. Eckhart is quite clear that for God to act in the mystic's soul, she must achieve a state of complete emptiness and "non-doing,"[314] and this takes work. In this sense, grace functions as a context to encourage effort, i.e., the practice of doing nothing.

On the other hand, the effort of doing nothing sets in motion certain transformative processes that take on a momentum of their own.[315] Eckhart states that "when the spirit strives with all its might and with real sincerity . . ., then God's Spirit takes charge of the spirit an its work, and then the spirit sees and experiences . . . God."[316] At this point, practice does become effortless,[317] and grace becomes more than a doctrine. As Eckhart puts it, "when grace is perfected in the highest, it is not grace: it is a divine light in which one sees God."[318]

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[314] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 117.
[315] See Tauler, in Shrady, *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, 46.
[316] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 66.
[317] See McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 135.
[318] Eckhart, in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 130.

MYSTICAL PLURALISM, SYSTEMS THEORY, AND THE UNITY OF MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

The purpose of this book has been to articulate and defend a mystical pluralist theory of mysticism. This theory maintains that the doctrines and practices of mystical traditions have common effects on the consciousness of the practitioner. Mystical traditions share an essential commonality by provoking similar processes of cognitive transformation. The mystical pluralist claim is not that mystical traditions are all the same or even that they necessarily produce phenomenologically identical mystical experiences. Its claim is that mystical traditions trigger cognitive processes that are essentially alike. From a systems perspective, these processes involve breaking down the structure of ordinary consciousness, opening system boundaries, and initiating self-organizing or evolutionary processes in the cognitive system. In a general sense, these processes are characterized by an erosion of self and a corresponding transparency of consciousness in relation to the Real.

Chapter Two presented a negative argument for this theory through a critique of the constructivist approach to mysticism. Constructivism is both epistemologically flawed and unable to account for important aspects of the mystical data. Constructivism's failure as a viable theory of mysticism, as well as the general impasse in the philosophical study of mysticism, justifies serious consideration of alternative theories.

Chapters Three through Five laid the foundation for the positive arguments in favor of mystical pluralism. As discussed in the Introduction, theories of mysticism may be supported on two levels: (1) the logical and epistemological coherence of the theory itself, and (2) the evidence of the mystical data, interpreted from the perspective of some type of cognitive or psychological model. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to present positive arguments for mystical pluralism on both these levels. First, mystical pluralism will be supported by the evidence of the traditions themselves. The systems model of mind presented in Chapter Three will be used to interpret

the data presented in Chapters Four and Five, i.e., the doctrines and practices of Dzogchen and German mysticism respectively. A systems approach to these two mystical traditions will show how both induce similar transformative processes in the consciousness of the mystic. This analysis of the traditions will be supplemented by a general consideration of mystical pluralism's ability to accommodate aspects of the data either ignored or misunderstood by other theories, and by a discussion of certain epistemological issues that further support a mystical pluralist understanding of mysticism.

Dzogchen and German Mysticism: General Comparative Observations

Before considering the traditions from a systems perspective, a straightforward juxtaposition of Dzogchen and German mysticism points to significant similarities. Both traditions posit an ultimate, absolute Reality that is both the 'ground' (a term that both traditions use: Tib., *gzhi*, MHG, *grunt*) and source of the world as ordinarily experienced. Both traditions tend to describe the Real in similar ways: ultimately ineffable and inaccessible to our ordinary cognitive faculties, yet at the same time manifesting certain qualities such as unity, intelligence, and goodness. In both traditions these qualities tend to be correlated with the Real's manifestations, i.e., the Bodies of the Buddha (in Dzogchen) and the Persons of the Trinity (in German mysticism). For both, the Real as source "pours forth" or emanates the created world, and the mystical path is in some way characterized as a return to that primordial origin. How the Real manifests is described in similar ways. The primordial, unmoving Source "moves," described in both traditions as a type of "interiorized glow." And though Its manifestation as the Kāyas or Trinity implies distinction, both traditions emphasize that the unity of the Real remains uncompromised in its initial "flowing forth." Both traditions also use the metaphor of "breaking" to describe how this interiority becomes externalized and manifests as the world.

For both, this "metaphysics of flow" implies that all of creation is by nature intimately connected to or related to its Source, and yet at the same time unreal. In Dzogchen, things are nothing but the 'lighting up' (*gzhi-snang*) of Being itself (suggesting absolute continuity between the ground and phenomenal appearances) and also 'empty' (*stong-pa*) of inherent existence. In German mysticism, the

things of this world are identified with God in their absolute or virtual existence while their formal being is outside God, depriving creatures of any independent existence of their own (for Eckhart, this ultimately makes them a "pure nothing"). Both views therefore construct a similar paradox: "things" do not really exist, and at the same time, things "presence" the Real. Though each tradition may explain this paradox in different ways,[1] both views function within each tradition to encourage (1) detachment from the world and/or (2) a sense of the immanence and immediacy of the Absolute within this world. Though these may seem to be conflicting goals, they are in fact complementary: detachment promotes an unconditioned perspective on life (in other words, the presence of the Good is not qualified by any particular thing but is absolutely present or immanent) while immanence declares the Good to be unconditionally present by definition, in direct opposition to the discriminating processes intrinsic to attachment.

The above remarks regarding the relationship between the Real and the world also apply to each tradition's understanding of the person. Having originated from the Real, both traditions view the person as inherently related to ultimate Reality. Though we have "strayed" from Being or "fallen" from the One, we are still, in some way, naturally connected to our Source. For Dzogchen, the person is ultimately nothing other than Being itself. For the German mystics, the identity is less pronounced. The divine is associated with the core or ground of the soul, which Eckhart seems to consider a person's true nature. Either way, for both traditions, the Real is, or is within, the self.

Both traditions are mystical in the sense that the goal is to experientially recover the Real. For the Dzogchen practitioner or the German mystic (as for mystics in general), intellectual understanding or faith in a religious belief system is not enough. Rather, these traditions emphasize practice for the purpose of effecting a radical transformation of the person—a transformation that entails experiencing/knowing Reality directly.[2] This value may be represented

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[1] The Buddhist understanding of emptiness is certainly different from Eckhart's "nothingness," especially with regard to the Buddhist emphasis on the role of mental construction (*vikalpa*) in creating the appearance of inherently existing things.

[2] In German mysticism, this emphasis on direct experience may sometimes be covert since emptying and self-negation ultimately requires rejecting any attempt to

differently depending on the tradition. For the German mystic, it may involve a visionary encounter with a personal God or Jesus, the birth of God's Son in the soul, or a penetration into the abyss or desert of the Godhead. For the Dzogchen practitioner, experiencing Reality is discovering what one has already been all along, i.e., an expression of the spontaneous, creative, and compassionate activity of the Ground. However it may be expressed, the realization of such a value is generally considered synonymous with a recovery of lost wholeness, knowledge of one's true nature, bliss,[3] the expansion of concern beyond the ego, a universal, non-discriminating and unconditional love for others, and/or the full realization of one's potential as a human being.

In trying to experientially recover one's true nature/self, both paths consider multiplicity, duality, and separation to be the fundamental human problem. This problem is reflected in our sense of individual selfhood, as well as in the conditional nature of our relationship to life (expressed through our attachments and desires). The practices of both traditions, then, function in various ways to undermine the individuated self (ego) by undermining the behaviors, concepts, attachments, etc. that function to support and protect the self. For example, both traditions encourage similar virtues and values: renunciation/detachment, compassion, acceptance, and surrender. Both paths use meditative/contemplative practices, and though tantric practice is unique to Buddhism and Hinduism, the formless approach of Dzogchen seems to have certain commonalities with the apophatic contemplation of the German mystics. Both have elements of mental pacification, emptying, and/or non-clinging to thoughts, mental images, sensations, feelings, etc. In addition, some of Eckhart's descriptions of the intellect and its relation to God sound very much like Dzogchen accounts of awareness and its immediate connection to Being. "The simple intellect," Eckhart states, "is so pure in itself that it comprehends the pure bare divine being immediately."[4] Elsewhere Eckhart even claims that "God is in this power as in the eternal

cultivate a personal, ecstatic experience. On the other hand, there is no doubt that this type of self-negation, to the extent that it is practiced, has experiential ramifications, i.e., it generates mystical realization.

   [3] Suso describes this as divine intoxication. As he states, "when the good and loyal servant is led into the joy of his Lord, he becomes drunk from the limitless overabundance of God's house." Suso, in Tobin, *Henry Suso*, 314.

   [4] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 52.

now."[5] Eckhart then asks, "why do you not stay in yourself and hold on to your own good? After all, you are carrying all truth in you in an essential manner."[6] The Dzogchen practice of resting in one's own intrinsic awareness, and the ultimate identification of this practice with Being itself, seems to express a similar type of contemplative approach. As Longchenpa counsels, "seek for the Buddha nowhere else than in . . . the pure fact of being aware right now."[7] These apophatic-type practices are also based on a common, naturalistic metaphor: a container, once emptied, *has* to be filled; the sun, once all obscuring clouds have been removed, *has* to shine forth. According to Longchenpa, once *saṃsāra* has been abandoned, "there is no need to search for Nirvāṇā."[8] In other words, there is an automatic, natural correspondence between the cessation of ordinary mind and its processes and the awakening of direct experience of the Real.

Dzogchen and German mysticism hold similar views regarding religious works and contemplative practices: that ultimately these practices (or any attachment to them) must be rejected since such practices or 'ways' constitute conditions that are inherently opposed to the experience of the Real (which is unconditioned). This rejection of 'ways' is further extended to a common rejection of goals. For the German mystics, goalessness expresses the self-abandonment required to know God. In Dzogchen, goalessness is founded on the view that we are already buddhas. In either context, abandoning a goal functions in a similar way: to undermine the residue of duality that is implicit in structured, preliminary practices (which presume the dualism of a practitioner seeking a goal).

Both paths seem to converge regarding what constitutes ultimate spiritual practice: complete 'releasement' or 'letting be.' In Dzogchen, one 'lets be' because there is nowhere to go. One already is the Buddha; everything already is the play of Being. In German mysticism, releasement tends to be construed in more negative terms (at least initially), as the ultimate crucifixion of self that has to occur if one is to know God. It may also express the sense of God's immediacy both in the world and in the soul, as well as the view that salvation depends on grace. However it is understood, both traditions

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[5] Eckhart, in Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher*, 5.
[6] Eckhart, in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Essential Sermons*, 184.
[7] Longchenpa, in Lipman and Peterson, *You are the Eyes of the World*, 47.
[8] Longchenpa, in Berzin, *Four-Themed Precious Garland*, 48.

consider this 'letting be' the foundation of true virtue. Virtue should spontaneously arise out of an attunement to the Real rather than as an attempt to meet a conceptual ideal of goodness. Ultimately, for both traditions all action (or non-action) should be spontaneous or "without a why," to such a degree that even the distinction of "contemplation" vs. "activity" is transcended.

This list, while suggestive, is admittedly impressionistic and general. Any of these similarities, considered in terms of the precise philosophical formulations of either tradition, would yield numerous points of divergence. For example, Dzogchen considers Reality to be ultimately one and the duality of ordinary experience a mentally constructed illusion. With the possible exception of Eckhart, the German mystics tend to view the created world as having some kind of ontological foundation of its own (however tenuous). Furthermore, Dzogchen sees the return to Source as an awakening to what we already are. To some degree, certain German mystics would seem to share this view, in the sense that the divine is regarded as an inherent part of one's being. For the most part, however, the German mystic sees the return as a transformation of the soul, conforming itself to the image of Christ or back to the nature it enjoyed before it was created.

Relative to the mystical pluralist thesis, however, these differences may not be significant. This book is specifically concerned with how mystical doctrines and practices affect consciousness. In a straightforward comparison of doctrines, practices, and/or experiences, the differences matter. But in a comparison of transformative processes, they may matter or they may not, simply because different doctrines/practices may impact consciousness in similar ways. Likewise, similar practices engaged within quite different theological or conceptual frameworks may also have similar effects on consciousness. As Harold Roth notes in a discussion of Hindu and Taoist yoga, the philosophical and cultural differences in these two traditions do not negate the possibility that "systematically deconstructing cognitive structures through sitting breath meditation . . . yield[s] similar experiences of tranquility and of a unified awareness."[9] From this perspective, the German mystic's interpretation of events as 'God's

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[9] Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 137–8.

will' and the Dzogchen practitioner's interpretation of events as the 'play of the Ground' may encourage a similar existential stance. Both views promote an unconditional relationship to life. Both undermine the discriminating tendency of mind to reject certain things and to accept others. Both tend to deconstruct dualistic thinking and perception. Both views ultimately support a common process of surrender or 'letting be.' Likewise, though early stages of meditation or contemplation may be thematized in quite different ways in each tradition, later stages seem to converge in a common practice of deepening surrender, non-striving, and goalessness that in turn may have similar transformative effects on consciousness.

Cognitive Deconstruction through Dzogchen and German Mysticism

Showing that Dzogchen and German mysticism have similar effects on consciousness requires closer attention to the nature of mind itself. As discussed in Chapter Three, from the systems perspective the mind may be viewed as a system of variables and processes (the cognitive system) that functions to (1) constrain awareness by constructing the state of consciousness called ordinary experience, and (2) homeostatically maintain that state in the face of stresses and perturbations. The essential feature of this state is duality, expressed as the dualistic (or intentional) structure of perception and as the dualistic evaluative associations that underlie the attraction, aversion or indifference that defines our response to any given stimulus. These two types of duality overlap in the sense that the localization of awareness as a self defines one pole of perceptual dualism, while the attachment that binds together all the various images and concepts that define the self-image depends on underlying evaluative associations linked to those images/concepts. In other words, I may define myself as 'spiritual' because of the positive, evaluative associations linked to that concept (i.e., the correlation between being spiritual and feelings of safety, belonging, and love), and this in turn functions as one factor within a larger system that constructs the boundaries that localize a self and so perpetuate a dualistic perceptual context.[10]

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[10] This suggests an inverse correlation between defining one's self-image as 'spiritual' and actually being spiritual.

Some of the variables and processes that make up the cognitive system were described in Chapter Three. Among these were listed the inventory of concepts that define objects and self-image, evaluative associations, the internal narrative, attentional orientation (either abstracted or unabstracted), defense mechanisms (such as repression, projection, etc.), and distraction-seeking behavior. Evaluative conditions in particular function to generate the continuous dis-locating processes of ordinary consciousness. Once the good is defined in terms of a specific set of conditions, the mind has to continuously 'seek it,' straying from the immediacy of awareness as it grasps at thoughts, feelings, and circumstances. Again, these variables, as a system, are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, and together function to both construct and defend a dualistic state of consciousness (what is ordinarily taken for granted as reality).

Implicit in the systems approach to mind is an additional possibility: the cognitive system may evolve. If any one or more of the variables or processes in the system are disrupted beyond a critical threshold, the integrity of the system's structure is compromised. The system, to some degree, 'breaks down.' Its boundaries are disturbed (i.e., opened), allowing an increase of information input (negentropy) into the system and thereby prompting the system's evolution. A new pattern of cognitive organization emerges, setting different parameters on awareness. Experience becomes less dualistic. The boundaries of self and object weaken, and evaluative associations are damped as the central concern of ordinary mind (protecting a self) becomes less a concern. Based on this model, Dzogchen and German mysticism may be assessed and compared in terms of how their respective doctrines and practices affect the variables that comprise the cognitive system and maintain ordinary, dualistic/egocentric experience.

A core variable of the cognitive system is the set of unconscious perceptual constructs that provide the template for the world as ordinarily experienced—both the background dimensions of experience (for example, spatial and temporal orientation and the concept of substance) as well as the focal aspects of the perceptual field, e.g., 'objects,' 'persons,' and 'self.' Certain aspects of both Dzogchen and German doctrine and/or practice may function to undermine these constructs and so destabilize the cognitive system by presenting views of the world that counter the taken-for-granted assumptions and perceptions of ordinary experience. In Dzogchen, this may occur in one of two basic ways: (1) by internalizing concepts that conflict with the

constructs of the cognitive system, and (2) analytical methods intended to directly deconstruct reifying projections. In the first sense, Buddhism has a long tradition of considering this world (especially the self and things in the world) as illusory, in direct opposition to the presupposition of ordinary experience that the objects of perception are real. In the second sense, Buddhism also encompasses philosophical traditions (Abhidharma and Madhyamaka) that seek to analytically deconstruct the mind's ordinary reifying tendencies. For the Mahāyāna, this is particularly reflected in the doctrine of emptiness, which Dzogchen (as a Mahāyāna tradition) inherits.

German mysticism generally does not question the presumed reality of ordinarily experienced things. It disrupts the cognitive system by undermining other variables, particularly through detachment/self-effacement. These attitudes, if embraced deeply enough, do deconstruct the self, though the German mystics (for the most part) do not question the self's existence as an entity. On the other hand, some of German mysticism's doctrines do challenge the "reality" of ordinary appearances, to the degree that they may function to destabilize established, dualistic constructs. Eckhart, for example, identifies the true reality of things as in some way distinct from their formal being as creatures and "in God," blurring the boundaries of things through their identity with God's unity. This view is also the basis for Eckhart's claim that things as they appear are "pure nothing," suggesting a fundamental level of misperception in the context of ordinary experience. According to Eckhart, "whatever we understand *here* [in this world] is as different from the way it really is, and the way it is in God, as if it did not exist at all."[11]

Evaluative constructs are another important aspect of the conceptual inventory that generates ordinary experience. The experience of an object as either desirable or repellent is ordinarily caused by the semantic overtones of safety/belonging or abandonment/death associated with that object and rooted in unconscious evaluative constructs. Dzogchen and German mystical doctrine and practice constitute sustained challenges to evaluative associations, thereby undermining the cognitive system as a whole. In terms of doctrine, both Dzogchen and German mysticism are founded on the concept of an unconditioned Good that is either the only Reality or the only Reality that

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[11] Eckhart, in Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 2, 250.

matters. Though the Ground of Dzogchen may be explicated quite differently from the God of German mysticism, both concepts entail that the Real (and therefore, the Good) is unconditionally present, in the world and/or within (or as) a person's own being. This view not only contradicts the concepts that define the good in conditional terms, it also encourages a re-orientation of awareness to the present moment that directly opposes the continuous dislocating processes of ordinary consciousness. The Dzogchen and German mystical understanding of the Good as unconditioned—in conjunction with contemplative/meditative practice aimed at immediacy or goalessness—functions to counter the dualizing grasping intrinsic to ordinary consciousness. View and practice function together to orient awareness to a state of non-dual immediacy in direct opposition to the dualistic structure of ordinary cognition.[12]

Evaluative conditions are also undermined by attitudes and practices aimed at self-effacement and detachment. As discussed above, evaluative constructs are the basis for the emergence of attachment and aversion, as well as the highly charged emotional reactions that operate in the wake of attachment. Based on evaluative constructs, cognitive and psychological processes become oriented around an ongoing attempt to regulate experience in order to satisfy positive images (representing safety), avoid negative ones (representing abandonment), and numb or distract consciousness in the face of the inevitable dissonance between ideal images of the desirable (in relation to both self-image and environmental circumstances) and actual conditions. This entire process is inextricably associated with the construction of a self (the self-image is defined based on evaluative associations) and maintenance/protection of a self (evaluative conditions link self-image to a semantic/affective context of safety or abandonment).

Again, this conditional and self-referential mode of experience is undermined by simply believing in a God or Ground, understood as unconditional Goodness. To the degree this idea is internalized, it has radical repercussions on consciousness because it conflicts with the evaluative conditions that define the self and support attachment,

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[12] The emphasis in both traditions on the unsatisfactoriness of worldly life helps support this process as well. See Deikman and Forman on the deconstructive effects of renunciation. Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 251; Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 262–3.

aversion, and much of a person's ego-generated, emotional life. In this context, deep and abiding belief in the Ground or God becomes a transformative/mystical practice. On the other hand, to *live* according to the conditions that ordinarily distinguish the desirable from the undesirable becomes a form of radical ignorance, alienation from the Real, or 'existential atheism,' regardless of a person's intellectual convictions.

As discussed in previous chapters, detachment is a core value emphasized in both Dzogchen and German mysticism. In German mysticism, self-effacement tends to be cultivated specifically in relation to detachment: an immediate 'releasement' of what the self wants in any moment of dissonance between personal desires and actual conditions. In Dzogchen, detachment has the same implications, though Dzogchen also includes a direct form of self-effacement through its insistence on the self's lack of inherent existence. Meditation and contemplation in both traditions also involve a detachment from self: calming the internal narrative undermines the self since the self is to some degree an ongoing construction of that narrative.[13] Dzogchen seems to particularly rely on the deconstructive power of view, since the more deeply one internalizes the conviction that everything constitutes the unconditional presencing of Being (*gzhi*), the more this subverts the discriminating tendencies that support attachment and self.

In both traditions, detachment is not just a matter of trying to 'be detached' (though this is important), but of constructing a conceptual framework that reorients attitudes and behaviors in ways that deconstruct the ordinary, conditional perspective that is at the root of attachment. On the bodhisattva path, for example, the suffering of being publicly insulted (generated by one's attachment to a self-image) is reframed as a precious opportunity to practice one's bodhisattva vows toward the achievement of enlightenment. The entire bodhisattva path encourages (among other things) an attitude of embracing the discomfort created by dissonance, which ultimately functions as a way to deconstruct the conditions/attachments that cause dissonance. Eckhart's counsels on consolation and suffering function in a similar way: a means of re-framing our orientation to suffering in a way that deconstructs the dualistic, self-reinforcing conditions of ordinary consciousness. Because the detached person cannot

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[13] See Engler, "Therapeutic Aims in Psychotherapy and Meditation," 21–2, 42.

suffer, the experience of suffering immediately marks out the path of detachment and therefore the path of finding God. As Donald Duclow remarks, "the radical disorientation of pain and suffering is modified and perhaps overcome as these experiences are integrated into a shared mythic, religious, or speculative pattern."[14]

Releasement is generally practiced in the moment that an attachment arises, but it may take a more proactive form. Because any moment of discomfort is nothing but an externalized reflection of separation from the Good, practice may involve seeking out discomfort as a more active means of deconditioning evaluative constructs. This seems to be the basis for ascetical practices in German mysticism: active confrontation with discomfort in order to release the internal conditions that construct discomfort to begin with. Basic virtues also function as means of undermining evaluative conditions. Because evaluative conditions are externally represented by judgement and hostility toward others (through the projection of the shadow), to express love, forgiveness, or compassion toward those persons is to undermine one's own evaluative conditions, and in the process allow the re-integration of repressed material back into the psyche.

Another important variable of the cognitive system is the internal narrative. By continuously reiterating various aspects of the mind's conceptual inventory, it helps to construct the self-image as well as our perception of 'things' in a 'world.' The internal narrative also functions as a homeostatic process by regulating dissonance in order to preserve cognitive constructs. In this respect, the internal narrative inhibits awareness of dissonant inputs, or may function to "load" (to use Tart's term) consciousness with images and concepts to counteract dissonant inputs. Both processes are aspects of the more general tendency to be mentally abstracted, i.e., removed from the immediacy of the present moment and engrossed in fantasy and the ongoing plots and plans of the ego. Both Dzogchen and German mysticism encompass meditative/contemplative practices that involve efforts to pacify and empty the mind and orient attention to the present moment, directly undermining this cognitive variable.

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[14] Duclow, "My Suffering is God," 570. See also 583–4. Duclow relates Eckhart's understanding of suffering to his views on principial vs. formal existence. My sense is that Eckhart's approach to suffering is not directly related to his ontological theory.

Both traditions subvert homeostatic processes associated with another dissonance-reduction strategy. A common response to the discomfort of dissonance is to numb awareness or dampen pain through distraction-seeking behaviors and/or ingestion of mood-altering substances. The ideal lifestyle of a practitioner in either tradition would tend to minimize both these strategies. Subverting dissonance avoidance in turn increases dissonance/stress on the cognitive system. In other words, the processes and variables that constitute the system are weakened through a general enhancement of awareness of stresses already at hand. Either directly or indirectly, both traditions tend to encourage a process of simply becoming aware of one's current condition and the pain inherent in a dualistic approach to life that limits the desirable to a narrow range of egocentrically defined conditions (in contrast to an unconditioned appreciation of Reality/the Good itself). This awareness may be cultivated in contemplative practice, or it may, as pointed out above, be an outcome of minimizing ordinary distractions. Given the distinction between awareness (sentience-as-such) and mind/consciousness introduced above, being fully in the moment through meditation ('resting' in awareness) bypasses the mind (i.e., the processes of the cognitive system). But the initial stages of cultivating this state often involve the discomfort of encountering the more or less constant subliminal pain associated with the ongoing dissonance between our dreams, ideals, fantasies, etc. and actual conditions (both internal and external).[15] This enhanced awareness of dissonance/pain adds another factor to the totality of system-subverting processes initiated by the Dzogchen and German mystical paths.

Dzogchen and German mysticism, then, both construct contexts for a sustained attack on the cognitive system at multiple levels. For both traditions, the concept of the Real implies a concept of goal (even if realizing this goal ultimately requires goalessness). The two concepts are inherently linked since the goal is nothing other than experiencing/knowing the Real (also identified with knowing oneself). The identification of the Real as goal entails a specific way of interpreting any aspect of one's mental and emotional life that manifests

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[15] On the stress-inducing nature of meditation, see Mark Epstein and Jonathan Lieff, "Psychiatric Complications of Meditation Practice," in *Transformations of Consciousness: Traditional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, Ken Wilber, J. Engler, and D.P. Brown (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 54–5.

duality—since the Real is unconditioned Unity in both traditions, all forms of duality represent separation from the Real. If one's goal is to know God or realize the Ground, the concepts, behaviors, attitudes, etc. that support duality must be eradicated. The goal, then, establishes a context for defining a path: the active cultivation of certain attitudes ('virtues') and the performance of certain practices and behaviors that function to deconstruct the duality/separation that opposes experiencing the Real. Since selfhood and attachment are the most immediate expressions of this duality at both perceptual and evaluative levels, both paths tend to focus on undermining these two crucial expressions of the cognitive system.

Systems Theory and Mystical Evolution

Dzogchen and German mysticism encourage attitudes and practices that function in direct opposition to the ordinary processes of the cognitive system. They undermine the variables that together constrain awareness into the dualistic frame of reference of ordinary experience. The disruption of these cognitive processes, however, leaves an important question unanswered. Why does this disruption prompt cognitive evolution? Chaos does not necessarily guarantee evolution in a positive direction. Psychic disorganization can just as easily precipitate devolution into psychopathological states. What determines which direction the system will take? The systems metaphor suggests at least one possible response to this problem.

The chaos of cognitive disruption constitutes a radical and novel form of unknowing that is naturally experienced as uncomfortable. As Mark Epstein and Jonathan Lieff explain,

> at higher [meditative] stages . . . [a] period characterized by the subjective experience of dissolution is entered where . . . [previously] solid aspects of the personality begin to break up, leaving the meditator no solid ground to stand on. This is traditionally the time of spiritual crisis, characterized by 'a great terror.'[16]

The break-down of the cognitive structures that maintain the hermeneutical circle of ordinary experience is simultaneously an encounter with the unknown. This in turn tends to generate fear and a strong tendency to retreat back into the known—from a systems perspective,

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[16] Epstein and Lieff, "Psychiatric Complications of Meditation Practice," 62.

to close down system boundaries.[17] If this closure is extreme enough, the disassociation that results may result in mild to extreme forms of psychopathology. Another option for the cognitive system is to allow the discomfort, resist the impulse to return to the familiar, and settle more deeply into the unknown, i.e., open system boundaries even more. This may explain the importance of a religious belief system in supporting cognitive evolution. Depending on the tradition, religious belief systems potentially encourage a sense of fundamental, existential trust, of believing that when you 'jump off the cliff' so to speak, someone or something is going to catch you.[18] The risk this entails requires the courage to face death itself—the reason, perhaps, why so few become mystics. Trust or faith in the face of the unknown, in the "trackless desert" as Eckhart calls it, keeps the system open, or opens its boundaries even more.[19] The systems metaphor suggests that this is a crucial variable that connects chaos to growth. From a systems perspective, openness allows the system to evolve,[20] to self-organize into a new pattern of psychic organization characterized by freedom from dualistic conditions— what Dzogchen calls enlightenment and what the German mystics describe as union.

One implication of the above reasoning deserves emphasis. According to the perspective being presented here, mystical views and practices have two basic functions: deconstructing the cognitive system and encouraging an attitude of trust (which can itself be deconstructive in its effects). These two events initiate a natural evolutionary

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[17] See Peter Ainslie, "Chaos, Psychology, and Spirituality," in *Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, ed. Robin Robertson and Allan Combs (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 314.

[18] This sense of trust is also correlated with having been consistently nurtured in early childhood.

[19] See Ainslie, "Chaos, Psychology, and Spirituality," 313–4 on faith as a willingness to be "present" in chaos.

[20] On the connection between openness and personal growth, see Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 66–7. See Combs on Guenther and the relationship between openness and meditative experience. (Combs, *Radiance*, 257; see also 261) See Hunt on meditative openness in relation to the "holding off" of the mind's ordinary semantic frame of reference. (Hunt, *On the Nature of Consciousness*, 40–2, 91) For a similar analysis, see Tyson, "General Systems Theory Approach," 498–9. See Deikman on "perceptual expansion" and the mystical experience of unity. (Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 256) See Tart's description of meditative experience as an opening up of sensory awareness. (Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 85–7) See Brown on the relationship between opening up and qualitative shifts on consciousness. Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," 255.

process but in no way guide that process.[21] 'Guiding' would presume
knowledge of the destination. Knowledge of the destination, how-
ever, would prevent the mystic from ever crossing the threshold into
the unknown that leads to mystical experience. In this sense, mysti-
cal traditions do not function to establish parameters on mystical
states of consciousness, as Tart maintains.[22] Rather, they create the
conditions for mystical states to evolve on their own, a phenomena
that may be the basis for what some mystics refer to as grace.

Mystical Pluralism vs. Alternative Theories of Mysticism

Using systems theory to interpret the doctrines and practices of
Dzogchen and German mysticism reveals the essential unity of the
two traditions and provides strong evidence for the mystical plural-
ist theory of mysticism in general. Some additional reflection on
methodology and the mystical data lend further support to the mys-
tical pluralist thesis.

First, mystical pluralism addresses the effects of doctrines and prac-
tices on consciousness. Other approaches may do this as well, but
usually in limited and/or undeveloped ways. Constructivism, for
example, focuses on the influence of doctrine on the phenomeno-
logical content of mystical experience, but given the full range of
what is subsumed by the term 'mind' this is an extremely limited
area of concern. Furthermore, it tends to neglect the role of mysti-
cal practice or other less-linguistic activities (such as breathing exercises)
since their effects are more difficult to reconcile to the constructivist
model. The result is that entire areas of mystical praxis are ignored.
Some essentialist theorists such as Forman do address the effects of
practice on consciousness in the mystical pluralist sense advocated
here, but then neglect to adequately consider the influence of doctrine
on consciousness.

Another advantage of mystical pluralism is its capacity to explain
and reconcile central aspects of the mystical data. What are these
aspects? This is an important question because agreement on the
basic facts of the data establishes a criterion for evaluating the ade-

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[21] Though the concepts and symbols of a tradition are still likely to mediate the
experience once it occurs.
[22] See Tart's comments on "patterning forces." Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 72.

quacy of theories of mysticism. If scholars cannot agree on what the data indicate in a general sense, there is little hope discourse on mysticism will or can progress. It seems to me that there are three basic facts regarding the data that any adequate theory of mysticism must explain: the heterogeneity of mystical paths and experiences, the similarity of mystical paths and experiences, and the noetic character of mystical experiences. Regarding the last characteristic, mystical experiences are 'noetic' in the sense that they *appear* to mystics to be perception-like encounters with the Real (however a tradition may construe 'ultimate Reality'). This appearance is itself a fact of the data that needs to be taken seriously and explained, regardless of whether or not it is veridical or delusional, mediated or non-mediated.

Mystical pluralism (as well as epistemological essentialist theories in general) provides a coherent explanation of all three aspects. It does this by combining a moderate form of constructivism with epistemological essentialism. Moderate constructivism accounts for the heterogeneity of mystical experiences while the orientation of those experiences toward a common Reality explains both the similarities among mystical traditions/experiences and the strong sense mystics have that they are encountering the Real. In other words, mystics think they are encountering the Real because they are encountering the Real (though not necessarily the Real *an sich*). The combination of moderate constructivism with epistemological essentialism also reconciles this epistemic claim with the phenomenological heterogeneity of mystical experiences; phenomenologically different experiences may still transmit common knowledge about the Real. Two mystics may realize an enhanced sensitivity to the Real, and in that state they may both experience/know some quality of the Real (e.g., the Real as unconditionally nurturing). Yet because their experiences are mediated by concepts derived from their respective traditions, the same Real may be apprehended as Jesus by a Christian and as Avalokiteśvara by a Buddhist. Common qualities associated with these different symbols may express common insights about Reality. This explanation of the data affirms the common intuition (by scholars as well as believers) that mystics are not psychopathologically delusional.

Other approaches to mysticism lack the explanatory elegance of mystical pluralism in relation to these three aspects of the data. Essentialists take the similarities among mystical traditions and the

noetic character of mystical experience seriously, but tend to distort the data by minimizing the heterogeneity of mystical paths and experiences.[23] Constructivists, on the other hand, account for heterogeneity (that is, after all, the central concern of the constructivist approach), but their emphasis on the constructed, conditioned nature of experience makes it difficult to explain the similarities among mystical experiences and traditions. Constructivists, of course, deny that such similarities exist. They argue that mystical "similarities" are an illusion, conjured through the distorting influence of essentialist biases and presuppositions. Te evidence, however, indicates otherwise. I have demonstrated in this book that there are clear and significant similarities between Dzogchen and German mysticism. Many scholars also find substantial similarities across mystical traditions.[24] As Kats notes, "at some point reality must be allowed to count.[25]

The constructivist explanation of the noetic character of mystical experiences is plausible: if mystical experiences are constructed according to the concepts of a tradition, then it makes sense that the experience gives the appearance of an encounter with the Real. However, the claim that the noetic quality of the experience derives from conceptual construction or mediation implies that mystics are delusional, and the conflicts with the intuition of at least some constructivists. Katz, for example, resists an *a priori* determination

> that mystical claims are mumbo-jumbo, especially given the wide variety of such claims by men of genius and/or intense religious sensitivity over the centuries as well as across all cultural divisions. Nor does it seem reasonable to reduce these multiple and variegated claims to mere projected 'psychological states' which are solely the product of interior states of consciousness.[26]

A purely constructivist interpretation of the noetic quality of mystical experiences is difficult to reconcile with these remarks. In sum, both essentialist and constructivist approaches sacrifice crucial aspects of the data. Mystical pluralism does not.

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[23] The essentialist treatment of the relationship between mystical heterogeneity and mystical transformation also tends to be weak. Instead of explaining transformation in relation to the heterogeneity of mystical traditions, essentialists often approach transformation independent of (or in opposition to) heterogeneity.

[24] See Chapter Two, pp. 74–7.

[25] Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 754.

[26] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 23.

Several additional points favor mystical pluralism over other approaches. First, it does not focus exclusively on introvertive, contentless states,[27] but includes visionary mystical experiences as part of the data to be explained. Second, it explains the content of mystical experience in relation to both the object and the mediating influence of mind. This may be contrasted to Katz, who considers mystical experience to be the mediated experience of an object, and yet whose actual explanation of the content of mystical experiences places exclusive emphasis on mediation. Third, because mystical pluralism explains the content of mystical experience in relation to an object, it is likewise able to account for the novel aspects of mystical experience—aspects that constructivism cannot explain.

Mystical pluralism addresses another important and neglected aspect of the data. Central to mystical practice in many traditions is morality, both as integral to the mystical path and as an outcome of mystical realization. Few approaches to mysticism adequately address this issue. For example, constructivism's exclusive emphasis on the doctrinal shaping of experience would seem to give it no capacity for considering the role that compassion might play on the mystical path. On the other hand, morality may be easily integrated within mystical pluralist theory, in the sense that morality (i.e., attitudes and behaviors often inconvenient to the immediate agenda and desires of the ego) functions as one element in the broader deconstructive program of the mystical path. Furthermore, the implications of cognitive evolution—a more sensitive, less-dualistic appreciation of life—naturally imply some ethical or moral outcome of mystical experience.[28] Mystical states of consciousness are marked by greater openness (relative to ordinary consciousness) and therefore an enhanced capacity for empathy, naturally experienced as spontaneous compassion. In the Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna tradition, one of the most important indications of spiritual progress is an increasing sensitivity to the suffering of others.

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[27] Forman (following Smart) goes so far as to define mysticism to exclude all forms of visionary experience. See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 7.

[28] See Katz, "Ethics and Mysticism," 187–8, 193, 195; Katz, "Mysticism and Ethics in Western Mystical Traditions," 414–5; Katz, "Ethics and Mysticism in Eastern Mystical Traditions," 259, 264, 266.

Mystical pluralism not only accounts for a broader range of the data, its cognitive and epistemological premises are logically consistent. This is in contrast to the logical inconsistency implied by Katz's insistence on absolute mediation. The mystic, according to Katz, is inescapably bound within a culturally conditioned worldview. The constructivist scholar, on the other hand, is able to make objective truth claims about the nature of experience and the nature of mystical experience, which seems to imply that she is somehow able (unlike the mystic) to escape the distorting effects of mediation (which the theory claims is impossible). Mystical pluralism (as well as most other perennialist/essentialist approaches) avoids this logical inconsistency simply by rejecting the thesis of absolute mediation. Perspectives are culturally conditioned, but it is also possible to identify assumptions and cultural biases and see beyond them. Less mediated, less distorted perception is possible. From the systems perspective, this is in fact what mysticism is ultimately about.

In addition, mystical pluralist epistemology is in at least one sense more consistent with current cognitive research than constructivism. Constructivism relies exclusively on cultural conditioning to explain mystical experience. Cognitive research (as well as Kantian epistemology), however, indicates that certain processes governing cognitive functioning are universal—a position shared by mystical pluralism, and one that supports its claim for an essential unity of mystical traditions.

Conclusion

The evidence from Dzogchen and German mysticism supports mystical pluralism. A systems approach to mind shows how the doctrines and practices of both traditions may function in similar ways: each has the potential to disrupt the cognitive system, thereby creating the conditions for the emergence of new patterns of cognitive organization, experientially manifested as mystical states of consciousness and an enhanced attunement to the Real. The fact that certain aspects of Dzogchen and German mysticism (e.g., detachment and the belief in an unconditioned Good) are common to a number of mystical traditions reinforces the broader applicability of this comparative analysis and lends additional support to the mystical pluralist thesis. The relevance of the data, however, is not limited

to direct verification of mystical pluralist theory. A comparison of Dzogchen and German mysticism demonstrates a general principle of mystical pluralism, i.e., the claim that different doctrines and practices may provoke common transformative effects. Two methodological considerations further support the mystical pluralist approach. Mystical pluralism is (1) epistemologically consistent, and (2) able to account for a broad range of the data. To elaborate on the second point, unlike constructivism and most essentialist theories, a systems-based mystical pluralism provides a coherent framework for relating the following aspects of mystical traditions: mystical heterogeneity, the similarities across mystical paths and experiences, the noetic character of mystical experiences, visionary experiences, the transformative function of doctrine and morality at a cognitive level, experiential novelty, and virtue as an expression of mystical realization.

Of course, systems theory and mystical pluralism do not solve every problem in the study of mysticism. Significant issues remain for future research to address. These include: (1) the cognitive mechanisms that reestablish the ordinary state of consciousness after a momentary mystical breakthrough; (2) the cognitive mechanisms that determine when a mystical experience becomes permanently established as a new state of consciousness; (3) an understanding of cognitive organization in relation to different stages and levels of mystical realization; (4) the manner in which variables associated with ordinary consciousness may retain previous functions in new states (such as experiential mediation) or assume different functions in the context of new patterns of cognitive organization; and (5) the relationship between the evolution of the cognitive system and the concern some mystical systems place on awareness/control of subtle energy (e.g., *prāṇa, ch'i*) in the body.[29] Though these areas remain unexplained, mystical pluralism and systems theory together provide a powerful, general theory of mysticism superior to alternative approaches.

Mystical traditions, then, share an essential commonality in terms of how they impact the consciousness of the practitioner and where this impact experientially leads. According to John Collins, "the great variety of spiritual disciplines practiced in the various religious traditions have at least one thing in common—the intentional stressing

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[29] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this last point to my attention.

of the organism."[30] In other words, mystical paths encourage attitudes and practices that function in direct opposition to the ordinary processes of the cognitive system. Since ordinary experience is essentially marked by dualism, mystical doctrines and practices "stress the organism" by deconstructing the most important manifestations of this structure, i.e., 'self' and 'object' related through attachment (the desirable) and aversion (the repellent). Mysticism introduces fluctuations into the egocentrically-organized cognitive system and so undermines the variables that constrain awareness into the dualistic frame of reference of ordinary experience. Since, from a systems perspective, "instability" is the occasion for "new structure,"[31] upsetting the cognitive system has transformative implications. By destabilizing the mind's structure, mystical traditions create the conditions for the emergence of new patterns of cognitive organization, experientially manifested as new states of consciousness[32] and a deepening attunement to the interconnected dynamics of life.[33]

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[30] Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, 197. See also Short's analysis of mystical practices as ways to "'crash' our linguistic system" leading to an experience of the "non-linguistic." Short, "Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic," 665.

[31] Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe*, 73.

[32] Ibid.; Erich Jantsch, "From Self-Reference to Self-Transcendence: The Evolution of Self-Organization Dynamics," in *Self-Organization and Dissipative Structures*, ed. William C. Schieve and Peter M. Allen (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 347. See also Combs, *Radiance of Being*, 251.

[33] On meditative experience as a realization of interconnectedness, see Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," 256, 269.

DEFINING 'MYSTICISM' AND
'MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE'

As Sallie King observes, "there is no generally accepted definition for . . . [the] term ['mysticism']."[1] Scholars have proposed a number of competing definitions or descriptions, most reflecting either constructivist or essentialist orientations to the data.[2] Constructivists, with their emphasis on the historical/cultural distinctiveness of traditions, consider the concept or term 'mysticism' problematic since it implies a universalizable phenomenon. Constructivist scholars either reject the term altogether or refer to mysticism*s*, with an emphasis on the 's.' Hans Penner presents this approach in its strongest form. As he puts it, mysticism "is a false category, unreal, regardless of whether it is taken as the universal essence of religion or as a particular feature of a religious system."[3]

The essentialist or classical approach, on the other hand, is based on the view that there is indeed a universally occurring set of religious phenomena that can legitimately be referred to as mystical. As Wayne Proudfoot remarks, "there do seem to be expressions, experiential reports, and practices that are sufficiently similar across different traditions to warrant use of the term '*mysticism*' and attention to some common characteristics."[4] Identifying the essential feature(s) of these common characteristics is the basis of essentialist definitions of mysticism.[5] To most scholars, the definitive feature of

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[1] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 257.
[2] King also suggests the possibility of a Wittgensteinian, family-resemblance definition of mysticism. (See King, "Two Epistemological Models," 257.) To my knowledge, no one has developed a definition along this line, though Wainwright comes close, at least with respect to extrovertive types of mystical experience. See Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 34.
[3] Penner, "The Mystical Illusion," 96; see also 94; Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 123–4. Though Proudfoot resists completely embracing the constructivist thesis, he is certainly sympathetic to it.
[4] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 124.
[5] See Penner, "The Mystical Illusion," 90.

'the mystical' is the occurrence of particular types of religious experiences and/or the emphasis of certain religious traditions on such experience(s).[6] If faith is 'ultimate concern,' then mysticism is the quest to directly experience the referent of such concern, or it refers to those religious traditions in which such experiences occur (regardless of the tradition's own rhetoric regarding the value of such experiences).[7] From this perspective, defining mysticism becomes primarily a matter of defining mystical experience.

The identification of the distinguishing characteristic(s) of mystical experience is open to a variety of approaches. Essentialist definitions or descriptions of mystical experience may variously emphasize (1) non-phenomenological, general characteristics of the experience (e.g., transiency or paradoxicality), (2) phenomenal or phenomenological properties of the experience, (3) the perceived or actual object of the experience (e.g., the Real), (4) its psychological properties, or (5) some combination of these.[8]

Classic attempts to define the mystical are exemplified by William James' and W.T. Stace's lists of the basic characteristics of mystical experiences. According to James, mystical experiences are ineffable, noetic, transient and passive.[9] The experiences are noetic in the sense that "the mystic believes that, in his experience, he is directly aware of a reality which is normally hidden from us."[10] For Stace, mystical experiences share seven essential features: unity, ineffability, a noetic character, a "feeling of blessedness," "awareness of the holy, sacred, or divine," paradoxicality, and trans-subjectivity.[11] Stace links unity with the noetic property of mystical experience. Mystical expe-

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[6] See King, "Two Epistemological Models," 258.

[7] To clarify, some mystical traditions are explicitly critical of any attempt to have an 'experience.' Nevertheless, within those traditions such experiences occur, and this is the important point as far as identifying mysticism is concerned, especially when it is realized that renouncing the striving for an experience is itself a mystical "practice" (perhaps the ultimate practice).

[8] Frederick Streng's definition of mysticism also takes into account the experience's results. He defines mysticism as "an interior illumination of reality that results in ultimate freedom." Karel Werner, "On Unity and Diversity in the Interpretation of Mysticism," review of *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, by Steven T. Katz, ed., in *Religious Traditions* 4/1 (1981): 69.

[9] James also considers a sense of unity an important characteristic of mystical experience. See Jantzen, "Mysticism and Experience," 299–300.

[10] Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, xii.

[11] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 70, 72. Stace considers the experience paradoxical because it combines both positive and negative qualities, e.g., 'fullness' and 'con-

rience, he claims, is an "experience of unity which the mystic believes to be in some sense ultimate and basic to the world."[12] Wainwright lists three basic characteristics that define mystical experience: unity, a noetic quality, and the absence of any "*specific* empirical content."[13] The latter two characteristics are connected. Because mystical experiences "lack *specific* empirical content" (i.e., they "are not experiences of specific items within the phenomenal world"), their noetic character takes the form of "intuitive apprehensions of the (character of) the space-time world as a whole or of something which transcends it."[14] Some scholars correlate the above qualities and/or characteristics with specific types of mystical experience. For Philip Almond, a sense of unity is specifically associated with extrovertive experience while noetic content (apparent "knowledge of a reality 'beyond', 'behind', or 'within' the world of public phenomena") is the essential feature of introvertive experience.[15]

In contrast to the above approaches, some scholars define mysticism in terms of a single, essential characteristic or two interrelated characteristics. For R.C. Zaehner, it is the experience of unity alone that constitutes the essential, defining characteristic of mysticism, though this unity takes different forms depending on the type of mystical experience (panenhenic, monistic, or theistic).[16] Unity is also a central theme in Sallie King's approach to defining mystical experience. Based on a Buddhist/phenomenological analysis of experience, King claims that "experience is primitively given as a unitary whole whose structure is 'consciousness-of.'"[17] Mystical experience preserves this "primitive unity," whereas ordinary experience (through reflection) bifurcates experience into "a subject perceiving or conceiving an object."[18] Furthermore, this encounter with primitive, experiential unity is simultaneously an encounter with the "ground" of "one's existence," i.e., "an encounter . . . with that which . . . constitutes the ground for the possibility and meaning of my finite existence" or "that into which one fits as a cognizing, valuing, existing

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tentlessness.' He describes the experience as 'trans-subjective' because it is non-dual, i.e., neither subjective nor objective. Ibid., 72–3, 76–8.

[12] Stace, quoted in Barnes, "Walter Stace's Philosophy of Mysticism," 5.

[13] Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 1.

[14] Ibid., 1.

[15] See Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 7–8.

[16] Ibid., 25.

[17] King, "Two Epistemological Models," 271.

[18] Ibid., 273.

individual."[19] King sums up these reflections in the following definition of mystical experience: "a form of primitive experience (a form of experience prior to the division of experience into subject and object) in which there is radical transformation of the experiential self sense, and radical axiological and existential grounding."[20]

Some definitions of mysticism emphasize the perceived object of the experience. Denise and John Carmody define mysticism as "direct experience of ultimate reality"[21] while William Alston defines "the mystical" as "any experience . . . taken by the subject to be a direct awareness of (what is taken to be) Ultimate Reality or . . . an object of religious worship."[22] These definitions not only emphasize the distinctive nature of the (perceived) object (the Real), but also the quality of experiential vividness or immediacy. Agehananda Bharati's definition combines a perceived encounter with the Real with an accompanying sense of unity. According to Bharati, "it is the person's *intuition of numerical oneness with the cosmic absolute, with the universal matrix, or with any essence stipulated by the various theological and speculative systems of the world*" that defines the mystic.[23]

Definitions focusing on the psychological properties of the experience variously characterize mysticism as a return to a non-linguistic, infantile state of mind,[24] or more commonly, as a process of psychological transformation or a change in psychological state. The latter approach may in turn be presented in various ways, either as a transformation of the "self-concept,"[25] an "emptying" of consciousness,[26] or a "turning inward"[27] and quieting of the mind.[28]

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[19] Ibid., 274–5.

[20] Ibid., 275.

[21] Carmody and Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West*, 10.

[22] Alston, "Literal and Nonliteral Reports," 80. See also Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 2.

[23] Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 25. I would emphasize that for Bharati, the experience of a "universal matrix" or theologically stipulated "essence" *must* be monistic in nature for the experience to qualify as mystical. See Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 56–7, 69.

[24] Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, xxiii.

[25] Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, xix–xx. See also King, "Two Epistemological Models," 274.

[26] Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 240.

[27] See Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," 75, where he describes mysticism as an essentially "interior or introvertive quest."

[28] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 1; Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation in Mysticism," 289.

Some of these characteristics derive their significance from what they exclude as much as from what they include. Ninian Smart's emphasis on interiority, for example, entails that visionary experiences as well as extrovertive or panenhenic experiences (experiencing the unity of the natural world) are automatically excluded from the mystical.

For the most part, the above definitions of mysticism and mystical experience identify important aspects of the phenomena. To different degrees, they may also be problematic and/or incomplete. King's definition, for example, is unclear. How exactly does "consciousness-of" constitute an individual's "existential ground"? Why would an experience of "consciousness-of" be experienced as ultimately meaningful and valuable? In addition, how does such an experience contribute to the transformation of the person? The list of experiential characteristics compiled by James is also problematic. Ineffability and transiency may be proper accidents of mystical experience. But because they are proper accidents of other types of experience as well, they fail to identify what is distinctly mystical. Mystical experience may be ineffable, but this reveals little about what distinguishes mysticism as a special category of experience(s), since other types of experiences may be equally ineffable.[29]

Some definitions of mysticism suffer from another problem: the tendency to be too restrictive by excluding or ignoring visionary experiences, either by considering them not really mystical or by identifying them with a particular type of mystical experience that is then marginalized as unimportant to mysticism as a whole.[30] Smart, Forman, and Wainwright all exclude visionary experiences from their analysis of mystical experience, Smart because he considers mystical experience to be interior by definition, Wainwright because visionary experience is non-unitary and based on specific empirical content.[31]

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[29] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 48–9; Penner, "The Mystical Illusion,"96. I would argue that all experience is ineffable. Language cannot meaningfully express the content of any experience. In the context of ordinary experience we do not realize this (and think we can describe experiences in words) because our ineffable experiences are shared. In other words, language becomes meaningful because it is able to function as a marker for commonly shared ineffable experiences (creating the appearance that ordinary experience is not ineffable). Because mystical experience is not common, its ineffability stands out and therefore seems unique.

[30] See, for example, Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 1, 6ff.; Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 149; Franklin, "Experience and Interpretation," 299–300; Alston, "Literal and Nonliteral in Reports," 83; Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience*, 22–3.

[31] For an excellent summation of Smart's criteria for defining the mystical, see Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 44–5. Robert K.C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*

Even the definitions of Alston and Bharati that could easily be construed to include visionary experiences do not: for Alston, an experience of God is necessarily incompatible with sensory content while for Bharati a mystical (or "zero") experience is by definition monistic (a claim that leads to apparently absurd conclusions, such as the remark that Kabbalah is not mystical[32]).[33] Smart's definition is particularly restrictive since he limits mysticism to experiences cultivated through mystical techniques. In other words, not only are extrovertive and panenhenic experiences not mystical, neither is any experience that occurs spontaneously.

As indicated above, scholars cite various reasons for considering visionary experiences non-mystical. Forman, for example, claims that visionary experiences are physiologically distinct from mystical experiences (based on Roland Fischer's questionable "cartography of mystical experiences"). Some scholars seem biased against visionary experiences on philosophical or religious grounds—perhaps they take seriously the claims of some mystical traditions that introvertive theistic or monistic experiences are "higher" or "truer" than visionary ones. Whether or not either position is justified, the study of mysticism must address the full range of the data, and much, if not most, of it is visionary in nature. As Peter Moore points out,

> visions . . . have played rather an important role in the individual lives of many mystics, while in some mystical traditions they have been the focal phenomena and thus deliberately cultivated. . . . Descriptions of the different types and diverse contents of visionary experience account for a large part of mystical writing, and for this reason alone such experiences surely deserve serious attention in the philosophical study of mysticism.[34]

Obviously, a definition of mysticism that ignores an important part of the data will lead to an inadequate theory of the phenomena.

My own definition of mysticism has close affinities to Alston's and Bharati's, without the introvertive or monistic bias. 'Mysticism' encompasses (1) 'mystical experiences,' here defined as those experiences whose 'object' or content appears to be ultimate reality (religiously

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(Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 5–6; Forman, "Construction of Mystical Experience," 254; Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 6–7.

[32] Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 149.

[33] Alston, "Literal and Nonliteral in Reports," 83; Bharati, *Light at the Center*, 41, 45, 56–7, 69.

[34] Moore, "Mystical Experience," 119.

conceived) or some aspect of (or approximation to) ultimate reality, and (2) those aspects of religious traditions (doctrines, practices, texts, institutions, etc.) that promote (intentionally or unintentionally) the occurrence of such experiences. A tradition is mystical if its constituent elements (practices, doctrines, texts, rituals, etc.) form a matrix or context that supports and promotes the occurrence of mystical experiences. In most cases, such an experience is the self-consciously defined goal of the tradition, though this is not necessarily the case. Traditions of extreme self-abnegation (that may be anti-experience) are nevertheless mystical since they constitute contexts for the generation of mystical experiences (perhaps the most potent contexts).

For the purposes of this definition, variations in how mystical traditions conceptualize the nature of ultimate reality are for the most part irrelevant. The mystic's conception of the real is constrained only in the sense that it must be religious, i.e., it must be constituted in the mind of the mystic as (1) ultimately real (in opposition to the less-real or non-real world of ordinary experience, i.e., the profane) and as (2) 'other' to the 'profane' world of ordinary experience.[35]

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[35] I owe this phenomenological description of religion to Mircea Eliade. According to Eliade, these two characteristics (the intentional object constituted in the mind of the believer as 'real' and 'other') define 'the religious' as a *sui generis* category. (See my article "Eliade, Phenomenology, and the Sacred," *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 181.) This definition is not contradicted by the fact that some religious traditions deny the 'otherness' of the sacred by identifying the sacred with the profane, e.g., Nāgārjuna's famous declaration that *saṃsāra* is *nirvāṇā*. In this case, the sacred/profane distinction remains, but is re-framed: 'sacred' constitutes the identification of sacred and profane while 'profane' is identified with both the conventional religious point of view (which posits a distinction) and the non-religious point of view (in which only the profane is real).

The meaning of 'the religious' and 'the mystical' may be refined by addressing two additional questions. First, is it necessary that 'realness' and 'otherness' be self-consciously identified by the experiencer for an experience or phenomena to qualify as 'religious'? Second, is it necessary that 'realness' and 'otherness' be conceived in terms defined by established religious traditions? I would argue that the answer to both questions is no. One might have an intensely meaningful peak experience (to borrow Abraham Maslow's term) that is meaningful precisely because of an enhanced sense of 'realness' associated with the experience. Yet the experiencer herself may not recognize that this is the reason why the experience is so moving, or she may identify the source of the experience's meaningfulness (i.e., "I've had an encounter with the real or something more real than I ordinarily experience") and not define this reality in terms derived from religious traditions. From this perspective, spontaneous, peak experiences occurring outside explicitly religious or mystical contexts may still qualify as religious and/or mystical.

Note that this definition is based on a commonality in the apparent epistemic value of a set of religious experiences. It is simply a fact that experiences that are believed to be experiences of the 'ultimately real' occur across religious traditions. Recognizing this fact has nothing to do with whether or not mystical experiences are phenomenologically similar or heterogeneous. Mystical experiences may all be phenomenologically unique, yet this does not affect this commonality as I have described it. Furthermore, apparent epistemic value leaves open questions concerning whether mystical experiences have any special veridical status, the role of conditioning in the arising of such experiences, the similarity of mystical paths across traditions, etc. This pattern explicitly includes *whatever is experienced as ultimate* to the mystic—a vision of Kṛṣṇa is just as mystical as realizing the Neoplatonic One. In terms of establishing a broadly useful definition of mysticism, it seems to me that this type of definition (i.e., one compatible with a variety of theoretical perspectives) is more helpful than those involving substantive or normative claims (though interpreting the data means that at some point such claims eventually have to be made).

REMARKS ON ESSENTIALIST AND TYPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO MYSTICISM

This book presents in-depth discussions of two approaches to mysticism: mystical pluralism and constructivism. Typological and other types of essentialist theories have been neglected because they are extraneous to the argument of this book. Nevertheless, typological and essentialist approaches have been important in the philosophical discourse on mysticism and deserve some attention in any book on the interpretation of mysticism. Below I outline a few typological and essentialist theories and discuss some of their problems. My remarks are uneven. The views of some scholars are summed up in a few sentences or a paragraph. In contrast, I devote a page or more to the views of Michael Stoeber and Richard Jones. This is not intended to be a reflection on the importance or value of the positions discussed. My uneven treatment simply reflects my own uneven interests, and in some cases, a desire to draw attention to the views of scholars less represented in the literature. In the Introduction I identified five types of essentialism: phenomenological, doctrinal, epistemological, cognitive, and therapeutic/soteriological. Here I focus on only the first two types since most essentialist approaches are either phenomenological or doctrinal in orientation.

Phenomenological essentialism in its strongest and simplest form is the claim that all mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical across mystical traditions. The most well-known defender of this view is Ninian Smart, who argues that all mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical, introvertive, contentless experiences.[1]

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[1] Smart's approach is tautological. Having defined mysticism exclusively as "introvertive, contentless experience," every example of mysticism has to refer to an introvertive, contentless experience. However, Smart's broader understanding of experiential encounters with the divine is more complex than his phenomenological essentialist thesis suggests. Smart recognizes that theistic/numinous experiences occur, though he classifies them as a type of 'religious' experience rather than a different type of mystical experience. In addition, numinous and mystical influences interact to varying degrees within particular religious/mystical traditions. In other words, some traditions are strongly numinous, some strongly mystical, and in some both numinous

W.T. Stace also tends to be associated with this strong form of phenomenological essentialism since he maintains that all introvertive experiences are phenomenologically identical. (Stace's views are discussed in more detail below.) Given that mystical reports seem to describe different experiences, how do phenomenological essentialists justify this position? They propose the following arguments: (1) the heterogeneity of mystical reports results from post-experience interpretation and not from the phenomenological content of mystical experience;[2] (2) heterogeneous mystical reports may (contrary to appearances) refer to a phenomenologically identical experience because mystical experience is ineffable, making the relationship between mystical language and experience contingent;[3] (3) mystical reports vary because mystics naturally use the terminology from their own traditions to describe their experiences; (4) mystical reports vary because ecclesiastical pressure forces mystics to describe their experiences in orthodox terms; (5) mystical reports vary because mystics must use language appropriate to their audiences, i.e., the particularized language of their respective traditions.

Though these arguments have merit, they are insufficient to justify the strong phenomenological essentialist thesis. While it is true that there is a gap between mystical language and experience and that mystical reports are inadequate to describe the content of mystical experiences (even radically inadequate), mystical experience is not ineffable in the strong sense.[4] Mystical language does mean something, and so the differences among mystical reports (and most *are*

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and mystical influences play significant formative roles. This explains (at least in part) the manifest heterogeneity of religious/mystical traditions. For a discussion of this aspect of Smart's thought, see Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 57–68.

    [2] Walter Terence Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1960), 18; Forgie, "Hyper-Kantianism in Recent Discussions of Mystical Experience," 209; Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 10.

    [3] Fenton, "Mystical Experience as a Bridge," 51–2; Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 18, 41–2. This point has been particularly important in the arguments of Stace and Smart against Zaehner's distinction between theistic and monistic experiences. See Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," 75; Horne, "Pure Mysticism and Twofold Typologies," 5. See Wainwright for arguments against Stace, in favor of the theistic-monistic distinction. Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 8–11, 16, 32–3. See also Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?" 57–8.

    On ineffability and the comparison of mystical experiences, Katz points out that strong ineffability makes comparison of mystical experiences impossible. See Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 48.

    [4] As Katz points out, if it was, nothing could be said about mystical experience at all. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 54–5.

different) are strong evidence that the experiences are different as well.[5] In general, an adequate defense of the phenomenological essentialist thesis must depend on actual similarities in mystical reports and an understanding of the processes of mystical transformation. It cannot be based on a hermeneutical strategy designed to gloss over the differences in mystical reports (a strategy that inevitably fails to fully appreciate the phenomenological diversity of mystical experiences).

This critique, however, is not applicable to the approaches of most current phenomenological essentialists, who do not claim that *all* mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical. They acknowledge that the majority of mystical experiences are indeed conditioned and therefore different[6] and/or claim that the phenomenological identity of mystical experiences is limited to one type of mystical experience (usually, contentless, introvertive experience). This is a much more defensible thesis, and it is one supported by the mystical pluralist analysis of mysticism advocated in this book. The commonality of mystical processes suggests the possibility of at least one type of universal mystical experience (however rare this experience may be).

Doctrinal essentialism—the thesis that religious/mystical traditions share certain universal, core doctrines[7]—is closely aligned with the perennial philosophy.[8] As a theory of mysticism it tends to be

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[5] See Fenton, "Mystical Experience as a Bridge," 52. The relationship between mystical experience and the language used to describe that experience is a complex and much contested issue. I tend to be sympathetic with both sides. On the one hand, I think Katz's point is well-taken: mystical language *means* something. On the other hand, I more or less agree with King on the incommensurability of language and experience. King's argument, however, does not succeed in undermining Katz's basic point, though it does justify a less literal read of mystical reports and the possibility that two mystical reports that are somewhat different may still suggest similar or even identical experiences. This issue is addressed in greater detail in Chapter Two, pp. 49–52.

[6] Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" 250; Byrne, "Mysticism, Identity and Realism," 237; King, "Two Epistemological Models," 262–3.

[7] See Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" 248; Jonathan Shear, "On Mystical Experiences as Support for the Perennial Philosophy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62/2 (1994): 332.

[8] The perennial philosophy can take quite different forms depending on the perennialist. For Smith it is exclusively concerned with common doctrines. Many scholars, however, understand the perennial philosophy to be a theory specifically about mystical experience (usually a combination of phenomenological and mystical pluralism). See, for example, Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 3–4, 10–11; Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," 266; Sheldon R. Isenberg and Gene R. Thursby, "Esoteric Anthropology: 'Devolutionary' and 'Evolutionary' Orientations in Perennial Philosophy," *Religious*

problematic. According to Huston Smith, the perennial philosophy is essentially irrelevant to mystical issues. As he remarks, "the perennial philosophy . . . does not turn on assessments of mystical phenomena at all; logically, it doesn't even presuppose their existence."[9] Such doctrinally-oriented perennialists often do use mystical reports to support their claims. However, they invariably do so through some form of phenomenological essentialism, positing either a universal core mystical experience or a particular type(s) of mystical experience as evidence for specific perennialist doctrines.[10] Though I would agree that mystical experiences have epistemic value, this by itself does not constitute a systematic theory of mysticism, particularly one that takes adequate account of the phenomenological diversity of mystical experiences.

In some ways, the typological analysis of mysticism would seem

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Traditions 7–9 (1984–85): 178. See also Almond's comments on Happold, in Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 129.

Other perennialist approaches include Seyyed Hossein Nasr's emphasis on a single Primordial Truth expressed by all religious traditions and Radhakrishnan's focus on an ineffable Absolute towards which all religious doctrines are oriented but which they can never fully express. Seyyed Hossein.Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), 74. On Radhakrishnan, see Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 12–6. Both Nasr and Radhakrishnan see the ultimate resolution of all apparently conflicting doctrine in mystical experience. Steven T. Katz, "Review Article: Recent Work on Mysticism," *History of Religions* 25 (1985–86): 78; Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 13, 16. While I am sympathetic to the broad outlines of these more soteriological forms of the perennial philosophy, they fail, like other forms of perennialism, to provide an adequately developed theory of the nature and causes of mystical experiences.

[9] Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" 248. Smart indirectly makes the same point. See Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," 75. See also Smith's comments in Katz, Smith, and King, "On Mysticism," 758.

[10] Shear, "On Mystical Experiences as Support for the Perennial Philosophy," 320. Shear himself attempts to show how introvertive mystical experience (or IME) supports the perennialist claim that "there is a pure transcendental basis to the self." Ibid., 331.

Smart claims that phenomenological essentialism "does not . . . entail that there is a 'perennial philosophy' common to mystics." (Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," 75) It is true that phenomenological identity by itself is not evidence for the perennial philosophy. The issue at stake, however, is the epistemic value of mystical experience. Smart's point depends on his claim that introvertive mystical experience (which he does consider universal) is semantically neutral—its meaning is almost completely imposed on it by the mystic based on the doctrines of her tradition. Perennialists, on the other hand, see mystical experiences, or at least a type of mystical experience, as revelatory contact with Reality. From this perspective, mystical experience obviously can be considered evidence for perennialist truth claims.

to be a significant improvement over the essentialist since it does acknowledge different types of mystical experience. At minimum, almost all typologists distinguish extrovertive from introvertive experiences, though how each typologist understands this distinction varies.[11] W.T. Stace's articulation of the extrovertive-introvertive distinction is perhaps the most well known and influential. For Stace, extrovertive mystical experience is a sensory experience "involv[ing] the apprehension of a 'One' or 'Universal Self' through a unifying vision of the external world."[12] As William Wainwright elaborates, "the mystic sees trees, people, houses, and so on, [but] they appear to be mysteriously identical and/or rooted in some unity which lies behind them."[13] Introvertive experience is also characterized by unity, though this is the unity of pure consciousness that results from the 'interiorization' of attention and the stripping away of all sensory and conceptual content.[14] Stace's typology involves a normative claim as well: introvertive experience is "higher" than extrovertive experience[15] and "far more important to both 'the history of mysticism and the history of human thought in general.'"[16] Within this framework, visionary experiences are disregarded and theistic mystical experiences simply do not exist—mystical reports of theistic experiences are the result of post-experiential interpretation of introvertive, contentless experiences.

Stace's typology is rejected by other typologists because it fails to recognize theistic mystical experience (an experience of loving

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[11] According to Price, this distinction goes back to Otto's separation of the "unifying vision of God mysticism" from the "introversion of soul mysticism." Price, "Typologies and the Cross-Cultural Analysis of Mysticism," 182. See also Peter Moore, "Recent Studies on Mysticism: A Critical Survey," *Religion* 3 (1973): 149.

[12] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 70.

[13] Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 8. See also Shear, "On Mystical Experiences as Support for the Perennial Philosophy," 320.

[14] See Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 70; Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 9–10; Horne, "Pure Mysticism and Twofold Typologies," 5; Barnes, "Walter Stace's Philosophy of Mysticism," 5–6. This extremely abbreviated account of Stace's typology leaves out significant inconsistencies and problems in his analysis. For example, even though his descriptions of the introvertive (and in some cases, extrovertive) experiences are monistic, he also argues that mystical experiences are best interpreted pantheistically, i.e., they are not experiences of pure unity but "identity in difference." See Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 79–90.

[15] He may even consider it to be the consummation of extrovertive mystical experience. See Moore, "Recent Studies," 149; Green, "Unity in Diversity," 48–9.

[16] Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, xxii. See also Barnes, "Walter Stace's Philosophy of Mysticism," 6; Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience*, 11.

quasi-union with a divine Presence) as a phenomenologically distinct
form of mystical experience. This critique is reflected in R.C. Zaehner's
typology of mystical experiences. For Zaehner, extrovertive, panen-
henic mysticism is an experience of unity between the self and the
natural world. Introvertive experience, on the other hand, is non-
sensory (void of any sense of the external world) and takes two pos-
sible forms: a lower monistic experience (a "coming to rest" in the
ground of one's own soul) and a higher theistic experience (a lov-
ing union with a personal God where the distinction between soul
and God—however tenuous—does remain).[17]

  Though Zaehner's approach goes beyond Stace's by recognizing
the distinction between theistic and monistic experience, it also (as
Ninian Smart points out) ignores the apparent distinctions between
Buddhist, Yogic, and Advaitin experiences by classifying them all
under the monistic rubric.[18] In other words, faced with a variety of
descriptions of what appear to be phenomenologically distinct mys-
tical experiences, Zaehner ignores distinctions in some cases (Buddhist,
Yogic, and Advaitin experiences are all "monistic") and recognizes
them in others (distinguishing theistic and monistic experiences).[19]
According to Smart, if Zaehner is willing to infer a single monistic
experience behind a variety of divergent mystical reports, there seems
little justification for positing a phenomenologically distinct theistic
mystical experience. This is because the difference between a theis-
tic account and a monistic account is no greater than the difference
between (for example) a Buddhist account and a Yogic account. In
a more general sense, Smart argues that Zaehner fails to appreciate
the role of post-experience interpretation in shaping the content of
mystical reports and therefore fails to realize that theistic and monis-
tic reports refer to the same experience. For Smart, the strong effects
of post-experience interpretation suggest that the wide variety of mys-
tical reports all point to the same experience—specifically, an intro-
vertive, contentless experience. From Smart's perspective, then, Zaehner
is correct to classify Buddhist, Yogic, and Advaitin experiences as
monistic. His problem is that he does not apply the same approach
to reports of theistic experience, and realize that they too refer back
to the same introvertive, contentless experience.

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[17] See Green, "Unity in Diversity," 49; Moore, "Recent Studies," 146.
[18] Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," 83.
[19] Ibid.

Though Smart's observation of Zaehner's inconsistency is accurate, Smart's own tendency to negate phenomenological differences is even more problematic. As noted above, a methodologically sounder approach to the interpretation of mystical reports is to assume that different reports indicate phenomenologically different experiences. From this perspective, Smart's critique should be reversed. Zaehner's problem is not that he makes distinctions where he should not—the theistic/monistic distinction is entirely valid. The problem is Zaehner's failure to make enough distinctions by conflating phenomenologically distinct experiences.[20]

Zaehner's inconsistent method of interpreting mystical reports is often attributed to the influence of his theological convictions, i.e., his attempt to conform mystical reports to his Catholic faith. Given the absence of other explanations for Zaehner's approach, the surmise seems reasonable, especially considering certain explicit instances of theological influence on his analysis. For example, Zaehner makes a distinction between "natural mysticism" (corresponding with panenhenic and monistic experience) and theistic mysticism. The distinction in fact presupposes a confessional outlook: natural mysticism is the result of effort whereas theistic mysticism derives from grace. Zaehner also uses his personal faith in a religious doctrine—i.e., only God is omniscient—as a basis for distinguishing these two types of experience. According to Zaehner, any mystic who claims to be omniscient exemplifies natural mysticism (presumably, if God is involved in the experience, the mystic would be incapable of deluding herself).[21] Zaehner cites another dubious criterion for distinguishing natural vs. theistic mysticism. He claims theistic mysticism is demonstrated in a life of holiness whereas natural mysticism is not.[22] At best, this would seem to be pure wishful thinking on Zaehner's part. As Hick points out, "each of the great world faiths . . . has produced its own harvest of saints."[23]

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[20] See Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 16, 32ff.; Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?" 57–8; Pike in Moore, "Recent Studies," 148; Collins, *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology*, xvi; William P. Alston, "Literal and Nonliteral in Reports of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 81.

[21] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 49.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 307.

To be fair to Zaehner, these remarks reflect his earlier thinking
on the subject (e.g., views expressed in his *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*).
In *Concordant Discord* (a later work) his analysis is somewhat different.
For example, instead of seeing panenhenic and monistic experiences
as the result of fundamentally different processes, he maintains that
monistic experience develops from panenhenic.[24] Specifically, it results
from the unification of two different panenhenic modes of experi-
ence: the transcendence of space and the transcendence of time.[25]
In general, Zaehner seems to have a more favorable attitude toward
monistic experience in his later works—so much so that he expresses
an uncharacteristic note of uncertainty regarding the distinction
between monistic and theistic experience.[26] According to Zaehner,
the monistic mystic apprehends "an eternal mode of being" and
experiences the "'dead' essence of this One."[27] In other words, monis-
tic mysticism involves more than experiencing the soul. (This seems
quite similar to Stoeber's view, and suggests that perhaps Stoeber
based his own approach on Zaehner's later reflections on mysticism.)
Zaehner also indicates that this monistic apprehension may be exter-
nalized, in the sense that "the monistic mystic '*sees* the eternal shin-
ing in and illuminating the whole phenomenal world.'"[28] This suggests
two possibilities about the relationship of monistic to panenhenic
experience (it is unclear to me which possibility Zaehner is advocat-
ing): (1) monistic experience (which developed from the panenhenic
experience) may in some cases continue to encompass a panenhenic
perspective or (2) monistic experience may develop back into a panen-
henic experience.

William Wainwright's typology is a refinement of Zaehner's. Like
Zaehner, he posits two types of introvertive experience (monistic and
theistic), though his description of the monistic experience sounds
closer to Stace than Zaehner (i.e., monistic experience is "an expe-
rience of pure, empty consciousness").[29] His analysis of extrovertive
mystical experience is significantly more elaborate than Zaehner's,

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[24] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 34.
[25] See Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 13; Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 34.
[26] Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 41.
[27] Zaehner, quoted in Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 44, n. 27.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 36. See 33–8 for his complete presentation of
the typology.

in the sense that he breaks down the extrovertive experience into four distinct types.[30]

Michael Stoeber's typology is a further development and revision of Zaehner's and Wainwright's. His classification of mystical experiences is based on certain confessional claims he makes about God. For Stoeber, God may be conceived in two senses: (1) the impersonal, static, passive, undifferentiated essence of God (variously referred to as the divine Unity or One, the Ground, or the Godhead) and (2) the active, dynamic, creative, and compassionate expression of the divine essence that embraces and acts in the world.[31] God in his wholeness is best understood in theistic terms as a divine Person comprising both these aspects. As Stoeber puts it, "in the Divine there is an impersonal source and a creative personality—there is a theogonic process at work in what we would nevertheless call a singular divine."[32]

Stoeber's typology of mystical experiences mirrors his cosmology. The most advanced form of mystical experience is a realization of and participation in the full personhood of the divine—both "monistic" essence and overflowing divine creativity. This experience Stoeber refers to as "theo-monistic." As he explains,

> I call it a theo-monistic experience because although it involves an impersonal monistic realization, it issues in a perspective that also reflects an active, creative, and personal Real. It involves the expression of the powers of this Real through dynamic personalist creativity.[33]

Though this experience is theistic in the sense that it involves participation in the "personal Real," the monistic aspect of the experience is the condition for the experience's personal/theistic dimensions.[34] Stoeber states that

> theo-monistic transformative processes are associated with the apophatic, static, and passive monistic experiences of unity with the Real,

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[30] Ibid., 34. Wainwright derives these four extrovertive types from four characteristics often associated with extrovertive experiences (i.e., the experience of "the unity of nature," the unity of self with nature, "nature as a living presence," etc.). This typology seems problematic since any given extrovertive experience may include one or more of these characteristics in variable combinations that may fluctuate within a single mystical experience.

[31] See Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 35–6, 87, 107.

[32] Ibid., 68. See also 19.

[33] Ibid., 35. See also 19, 55.

[34] Ibid., 95.

> a transformative experience which in its negative, monistic mode opens up the very possibility of communal participation in the compassion and creativity essential to the personal Real.[35]

Stoeber's description of the theo-monistic experience points to an important general theme of his approach. For Stoeber, the upper limit of mystical realization is characterized by *positive* qualities: fullness, love, dynamic creativity, compassion, etc. This contrasts sharply with the views of scholars like Almond, Smart, and Forman, who emphasize and/or limit mysticism to semantically neutral, contentless experience.

In addition to theo-monistic experience, Stoeber posits three other types of mystical experience: extrovertive (nature mysticism or panenhenic experience), theistic, and monistic. Stoeber has little to say about either nature mysticism or theistic experience. His views on both are presumably similar to Zaehner's and Wainwright's and therefore require little elaboration. The essential experience of nature mysticism is the experience of the natural world as one. Theistic experience, on the other hand, is an interior, dualistic experience of loving relation to a personal deity. In contrast to Zaehner, Stoeber does not consider theistic experience to be the ultimate form of mystical experience and therefore higher than monistic. Rather, Stoeber views theistic experience as a highly mediated form of mysticism (the divine being conceived in terms derived from the mystic's tradition) that precedes monistic experience. For Stoeber, the monistic experience is an introvertive experience characterized by passivity, stasis, and undifferentiated unity. It can two basic forms: (1) union with one's own "divine Self"[36] (here Stoeber echoes Zaehner), or (2) union with the essence of God. Stoeber emphasizes that this view of monistic experience authenticates the spiritual value of monistic experience in a way that Zaehner's earlier typology does not. In at least one type of monistic experience, the mystic experiences union with God, not just her own soul, as Zaehner maintains. In addition, both forms of monistic experience have the potential to develop into theomonistic experience.[37]

Stoeber's typology, then, is essentially developmental and normative in structure. Depending on the doctrinally-defined parameters

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[35] Ibid., 19.
[36] Ibid., 55.
[37] See, for example, Ibid., 55, 95.

of a particular tradition and the individual capacities of mystics, the-istic experience is preliminary to monistic experience, which is in turn a prelude to theo-monistic experience (it is unclear to me where Stoeber locates extrovertive experience in this developmental pro-gression).[38] Mystical experiences are hierarchically arranged, with theo-monistic experience at the top of the hierarchy.[39] What I find most attractive about Stoeber's typology is his recognition that mys-tical experiences are not empty, contentless, inherently meaningless experiences. In a general sense at least, his analysis does justice to the fact that mystics describe their experiences in positive terms. Stoeber rejects the improbable claim that the intense meaningfulness reported by mystics is solely due to post-experiential interpretation of a contentless experience.

Stoeber defends his approach on a number of grounds. It would be impossible for me to do justice to his arguments here, particu-larly his comparative analysis of mystical traditions (Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Eckhart, and Ruuysbroec). I will only mention the cri-terion Stoeber uses to evaluate theories of mysticism. For Stoeber, an adequate theory of mysticism must recognize the major forms of mystical experience and authenticate their spiritual value. He calls such a theory a "mystic pluralism." A mystic pluralism, for exam-ple, does not deny that theistic experiences occur and/or explain them as erroneous interpretations of monistic experiences. Stoeber argues that his typology qualifies as a mystic pluralism and is there-fore much stronger than the approaches of scholars like Stace and Smart (or monistic philosophies like Śaṃkara's) which deny or de-legitimize theistic experiences. Though Stoeber's mystic pluralism posits theo-monistic as ultimate, it recognizes the spiritual value of both theistic and monistic experiences.[40] On the other hand, Stoeber argues that any typology that posits monistic experience as ultimate must de-legitimize the value of theistic experience and therefore fails to meet the criteria of an adequate mystic pluralism.[41]

Stoeber's reasoning provokes two responses. First, defining the characteristics of a "mystic pluralism" and then using it as a crite-rion for the evaluation of theories about mysticism is problematic.

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[38] Ibid., 17, 95.
[39] Ibid., 59.
[40] Ibid., 40–1, 99.
[41] Ibid., 18, 48.

The approach presupposes the claim that a good theory must in some way validate the spiritual value of all mystical experiences (I would argue that is must simply account for the data). In other words, it presupposes a strong, theological claim about the nature of mystical experiences. The approach seems to be based on an ethical impulse to honor the spiritual value of diverse traditions and experiences. Given the mystical pluralist thesis I have advocated here, this is an impulse I sympathize with. But whether or not a mystical experience is spiritually valuable or psychologically delusional is a thesis or conclusion to be supported by an analysis of the data. To present what should be a conclusion about mysticism as a criterion of adequate theory is methodologically unsound. Second, Stoeber is mistaken when he claims that a monistic-based hierarchy cannot account for theistic experience.[42] All forms of dualistic experience, from ordinary experience to theistic mystical experience, may be explained as resulting from different degrees of conceptual mediation bifurcating the monistic Real, on a spectrum of experiences leading to the most advanced form of mystical experience: unmediated realization of the monistic Real itself.

Just as Stoeber and Wainwright have refined the earlier typology of Zaehner, Richard Jones has proposed a typology of mysticism that builds on Stace's typological approach. Jones posits two types of mystical experiences: "nature-mystical" and "depth-mystical" (roughly corresponding with Stace's extrovertive and introvertive types and Zaehner's panenhenic and monistic types respectively). The depth-mystical experience is a state of pure, non-dual, contentless awareness. The experience's only content is awareness itself (one is fully conscious in the depth-mystical experience) and a non-conceptual, realization of Ultimate Reality (i.e., knowledge of Reality without conceptualizing the experience as 'knowing the Real'). The experience is also characterized by unity, at least in the negative sense that it lacks any sense of differentiation from Reality.[43]

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[42] Ibid., 49.

[43] Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 2–3. According to Jones, a central aspect of depth-mystical experience is its noetic character. The mystic realizes what she perceives to be a non-dual experience of ultimate Reality (though because the experience is conceptless, 'Reality' is not conceptually discriminated as such). (Ibid.) Jones also claims there can be valid philosophical grounds for rejecting mystical knowledge claims. (Ibid., 7) This seems to indicate that he does not consider this perception of the Real to be necessarily veridical, or (if it is veridical) he questions the mys-

In contrast, the nature-mystical experience has two essential characteristics: some type of content (whether conceptual or sensory) and some form of duality.[44] The generality of these constraints indicates that nature-mysticism encompasses a diverse range of experiences. One sub-category of nature-mystical experiences comprises a spectrum of conceptually-mediated sensory experiences. These nature-mystical experiences are distinguished from ordinary experience because (in comparison to ordinary experience) conceptual activity is relatively weak or has completely ceased.[45] Jones considers these experiences epistemic because weaker levels of conceptual mediation constitute a relatively undistorted form of perception. The variation in the degree of conceptual activity (from strong to weak, to entirely absent) as well as in the content of the concepts themselves (e.g., Christian concepts vs. Buddhist concepts) means that these experiences are phenomenologically varied.[46] The progressive reduction of conceptual activity experientially manifests as a progressive "de-structuring" of sensory content[47] and a corresponding "breakdown of differentiation" with respect to the individual's perceptual field. Some sense of unity (of varying degrees of intensity), then, is a central aspect of the experience. The complete cessation of conceptual activity[48] is identified with a state of pure unity (i.e., sensory content is completely undifferentiated). This experience, however, is still subtly dualistic, in the sense that awareness remains localized within a greater "flow of becoming."[49] Jones further equates this experience with "know[ing] things 'as they really are.'"[50]

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tic's ability to formulate true claims based on the experience. For Jones, then, the noetic character of depth-mystical experiences does not seem to coincide with epistemic value.

[44] Ibid., 20. The dualistic nature of the experience requires further comment. Jones, like almost every other writer on mysticism, considers unity to be an essential characteristic of mystical experience. Nature-mystical experience is described as "dualistic" in order to indicate that the unity is not absolute—there is some accompanying sense of duality or differentiation that coincides with the sense of unity. This coincidence of unity and duality is qualitatively distinct from the duality that characterizes ordinary experience.

[45] Ibid., 1.
[46] Ibid., 2.
[47] Ibid., 20–1.
[48] Ibid., 22.
[49] Ibid., 20.
[50] Ibid., 21.

For Jones, all nature-mystical experiences are dualistic and have content. This content, however, does not necessarily have to be sensory. 'Nature-mysticism' therefore includes another class of experiences that are quite different from the sensory-based experiences described above: experiences that are conceptually mediated, have content, and are dualistic, but are also non-sensory. Theistic experiences fall within this category and, in a more general sense, any type of non-sensory experiences of a divine Presence. Again, variation in degrees and types of conceptual mediation lead to phenomenological variation in this class of experiences, accounting for (to give one example) theistic mystical experiences of Kṛṣṇa vs. experiences of Jesus. Unlike the sensory nature-mystical experience, this non-sensory type of nature-mystical experience is never entirely free of conceptual mediation.[51]

Though Jones' approach is sophisticated, his inclusion of both non-sensory theistic mystical experiences and purely sensory extrovertive experiences within a single category (nature mysticism) is problematic. Given the differences between these experiences, theistic mystical experiences are better considered a distinct type of mystical experience (as Zaehner, Wainwright, and Stoeber recognize). On the other hand, Jones' approach is an advance over other typologies in the sense that he relates each type of experience to specific practices. Though both depth-mystical and nature-mystical experiences result from an interiorization of attention and pacification of mental processes,[52] nature-mystical experiences are specifically associated with "receptive" techniques (such as *vipassanā*) "which de-structure our normal conceptual frameworks that structure sensory stimuli."[53] Concentrative or calming techniques, on the other hand, lead to the non-conceptual, non-sensory, non-dual, contentless depth-mystical experience.[54]

The developmental issues raised by typologies of mysticism deserve further comment. According to Jones, the introvertive experience is either preliminary to, or less advanced than, the extrovertive experience, rather than the other way around as Stace maintains.[55] Certain

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[51] Ibid., 22.
[52] Ibid., 1.
[53] Ibid., 19. See also 2.
[54] Ibid., 2, 19.
[55] Ibid., 22. See also Shear, "Mystical Experience, Hermeneutics, and Rationality," 330, n. 14, 398–9; Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 60. Forman agrees, though his under-

mystical reports seem to confirm this claim. Suso's visionary, content-filled experiences are, in some cases at least, preceded by an introvertive, contentless experience. A similar sequence is reflected in some yogic sources, in which expanded, extrovertive experiences of the unity of the natural world are based on the mastery of interior states of contentless awareness. Such examples would seem to render Roland Fischer's cartography of states of consciousness suspect, since according to his model hyperaroused, visionary states are on the opposite end of the experiential spectrum from hypoaroused meditative states.[56] In terms of phenomenological content, Fischer's spectrum may be useful. But it may also be highly misleading in a developmental sense, if meditative states are preliminary to hyperaroused, visionary or introvertive/ecstatic states.

The experiences of mystics like Suso suggest another problem with the typologies outlined above: the conflation of two distinct types of experience under the single category of "monistic" or "introvertive" experience. Zaehner's critique of Stace has already been noted in this regard: Stace's introvertive type fails to acknowledge the real phenomenological differences between theistic and monistic experiences. However, there is another important distinction that Zaehner, Wainwright, and Forman fail to make. Mystical reports indicate that there is a contentful mystical experience that is monistic: an experience of pure unity or oneness embracing the infinite (i.e., nonlocalized) ground of all phenomena, not just one's own "soul" (Zaehner) or consciousness (Forman's PCE). This suggests a distinct series of mystical stages: a preliminary, "hypoaroused" stage of meditative or contemplative experience in which attention has been interiorized and the mind stilled, serving as the means to what may be considered true, "hyperaroused" mystical experience characterized by an expansion of awareness and a deepening contact with Reality.[57] This contact encompasses an entire spectrum of phenomenologically distinct types of experiences, but these may nevertheless be grouped

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standing of the extrovertive experience (*sahaja samādhi*, which he presumably identifies with what he later calls the "dualistic mystical state") is different from the views of Jones and Shear. See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 8.

[56] See Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 6.

[57] To some extent, Classical Yoga would seem to present a similar process. For a discussion of the relation between *nirodha* ("cessation") and *samādhi* ("enstasy") in Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtra* see Georg Feuerstein, trans., *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1979), 37.

into two categories: (1) contact that is mediated (in the constructivist sense) and retains some sense of duality (theistic experiences would fall within this category) and (2) contact that transcends all distinctions to realize a positive Unity that is anything but empty (this latter experience being the most advanced stage of mystical realization).

Many typologists recognize the basic developmental progression from an interior emptiness to a mystical experience of intense meaningfulness and overflowing fullness (either extrovertive, theistic, or theo-monistic experience).[58] This is an important insight given the tendency by some scholars to trivialize mysticism by overestimating the significance of introvertive, contentless experiences[59] or by considering mystical experience to be an introvertive, contentless experience by definition. However, this recognition of the positive qualities of mystical experiences must also include the specific recognition of the positive, monistic realization of the Real. Without this recognition, a typology of mystical experiences is not only descriptively inadequate, it fails to portray the elegant developmental logic of mysticism: the journey from duality (alienation/separation from the Real) to unity. Zaehner, Wainwright, and Stoeber might protest that this model, by privileging monistic experience, ends up trivializing theistic experience. I disagree. First, theistic experience does occur; contra Stace and Smart, it is not just an interpretation of contentless experiences. Second, it occurs as a profound, intimate encounter with the Real, framed in translucent symbols derived from residual constructs in the mystic's own consciousness. The theistic mystic meets and knows the Real in the thinnest of disguises, and stands poised on the threshold of monistic realization.

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[58] As Jones remarks, the "emptiness" achieved through concentrative practices "permits the pouring in of a positive experience." Jones, *Mysticism Examined*, 20. See also Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study*, 36–7; Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 19. See Almond and Stoeber's remarks on Zaehner as well. Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 37; Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 96.

[59] Almond, for example, considers it the "upper limit" of meditative experience. See Almond, *Mystical Experience*, 178.

THE MOTIVATIONAL BASIS OF
COGNITIVE CONFIRMATION

Why does the mind seek confirmation? The common answer is to avoid the discomfort of cognitive dissonance. But this response only begs the question, since it does not explain *why* dissonance is uncomfortable. Below I will discuss two possible explanations for the mind's self-confirming or homeostatic tendencies, both of which address the background conditions that make dissonance so aversive to human beings.

From a biological perspective, the motivation to confirm a view is rooted in the survival instinct. Because survival depends on knowledge of one's environment, 'knowing' is inherently associated with safety and a general sense of well-being (the affective correlate of perceived safety). 'Not knowing' represents just the opposite: negative affective states generated by the survival-jeopardizing implications of not being familiar with the environment. These associations function as a genetically programmed reward/avoidance system: to know means one gets to feel safe/good while to not-know provokes aversive states such as anxiety, fear, etc. Ideally, the reward of knowing promotes exploratory behavior, but generally speaking, avoiding the pain of not knowing seems to exercise the stronger influence on behavior. In other words, it is easier to gain the reward of knowing and avoid the fear of not-knowing (feeling un-safe) by assuming the accuracy of what one already knows, i.e., by confirming current models and concepts and defending them in the face of anomalous or threatening inputs.

Evolutionary biology may be used to explain confirmation in another way. Because survival depends on social relatedness, the survival instinct encompasses the instinctual need for love and belonging and the pleasurable emotional states associated with meeting that need.[1] As children, this instinct constitutes an innate criterion for

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[1] See Gilbert, "Defense, Safe(ty) and Biosocial Goals," 44.

responding to environmental inputs.[2] Depending on the emotional fluctuations of care givers and direct rewards (behaviors met with love/warmth) and punishments (behaviors met with emotional withdrawal, fear, or physical pain), two broad classes of associations are unconsciously constructed in the child's mind: the 'desirable' (those behaviors, events, images, etc. that represent love/belonging) and the 'undesirable' (those that represent abandonment/death). Constructing a self-image, value system, and general view of the world based on these conditions constitutes normal socialization: the striving to meet an ideal image and the repression of everything in the self that contradicts that image.[3] As Glenn Perry explains,

> the current structure of the self-system is a product of accommodation to environmental conditions as they existed in one's family of origin. Accordingly, the psyche introjected (assimilated) certain aspects of the parents' personalities and thereby actualized those aspects of the self which correlated to acceptable behavior. Such introjective processes constitute the child's emerging identity. Conversely, those aspects of self deemed unacceptable and dangerous were repressed.[4]

Who we think we are (our self-image) and what we believe represents—emotionally and cognitively—love/belonging and the avoidance of abandonment/death. In this context, any situation or information that contradicts our images and values becomes a source of intense anxiety, generating the powerful motivation to confirm

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[2] See Ibid., 48. See also 30–44. Gilbert posits two innate "response systems": the "safety system," programmed to respond to positive environmental cues (inputs signaling safety and nurturing) with open, explorative and nurturing behavior (what Gilbert refers to as the "hedonic mode"), and the "defense system," programmed to respond to negative, threatening cues with self-protecting attitudes and behaviors (the coercive, control oriented behaviors of the "agonic mode"). While there is little doubt that the "defense system" (using Gilbert's terminology) is to some degree innate, my approach is to emphasize the naturalness of the "safety system" and the hedonic mode and the secondary, learned nature of agonic behavior.

[3] On Carl Rogers' theory of personality development, see Olds, *Metaphors of Interrelatedness*, 62. Abuse situations—in which almost no behavior is rewarded—set up different, often pathological developmental scenarios. If a child is unable to earn positive rewards from caregivers, the psyche shifts to a default goal of mere attention-seeking, which tends to translate into "acting out" behavior. In addition, abuse forms a strong, unconscious aversion to any form of vulnerability (since vulnerability was only a source of pain), which may create sociopathic behaviors since every normally socialized person (who still retains some degree of vulnerability) becomes, for the abused, an external representation of suffering. The 'other' must then be attacked if one's own vulnerability/pain is to remain repressed.

[4] Perry, "Systems/Perennial Approach," 238–9.

our self-image, our values, etc. and repress all aspects of the self that contradict that image. According to Lawrence Frank, "the individual . . . unceasingly guards his private world with his image of the self."[5] Freud's defense mechanisms, addictive behavior, etc. may all be seen as ways to preserve the self-image (functionally equivalent to preserving denial) in the face of threatening external representations.

Confirmation may also be explained from a religious perspective (either theist or monist). In this case, the human being, as an emanation or creation of a divine Ground, expresses her connection to that Source through an innate need to love and be loved (an expression of the desire to return to the Unity of Source and experience the well-being of ultimate authenticity). Again, as children, this need for oneness/love is met with conditions: some behaviors are rewarded while others encounter emotional withdrawal or less subtle forms of punishment. Love/belonging (oneness or relatedness) and abandonment (separation) becomes defined by these conditions, which in turn define how we construct our self-image and values. In this situation, the natural tendency to realize who we are (i.e., to realize Oneness) becomes expressed as a drive to confirm a set of images and concepts within a dualistic frame of reference that, because of its inherent duality, prevents a sense of Oneness/Unity from being realized.

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[5] Frank, "Organized Complexities," 233.

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