

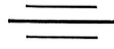
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Diane M. Sharon

The Mystic's Experience of God: A Comparison of the Mystical Techniques and Experiences of a 13th Century Jewish Mystic and a 20th Century Indic Yogi

I. Introduction

Mystical experiences threaten the foundations of religions based on ancient revelation. Ecstatic insight into the nature of the divine implies unmediated access by individuals to the divine source, thereby bypassing established cultic channels.

The ecstatic experience also threatens the uniqueness of any particular religious philosophy. If anyone can achieve a glimpse of the divine by means of specific techniques, then why practice the prescriptions and proscriptions of any particular religion? If all people experience the ecstatic similarly, progressing through similar stages and achieving levels commensurate with their innate capacity for the mystical rather than their relative devotion to a creed, then why bother with a creed at all?

Because of these and other constraints, personal accounts of ecstatic experience, including descriptions of powerful techniques for attaining such experiences, are rare in most cultures, surrounded by taboo, consigned to an esoteric in-group, or whispered privately from master to disciple.

This paper proposes to compare the autobiographical works of two mystics of widely differing cultural backgrounds, religious philosophies, and temporal milieus, and to explore the similarities and differences between their personal ecstatic experiences of the divine. Perhaps an examination of two such widely divergent

accounts may cast some light on the nature of the human experience of God and the stages of mystical development which are independent of dogma and creed.

II. Overview

Abraham Abulafia, who died sometime after 1291, is among the most prolific of Jewish kabbalists. He wrote numerous manuals of mystical technique which serve as instructions for achieving ecstatic mystical experiences, guiding his students upward through the various levels. Many of these works still exist today, and although many of them are in manuscript form, Gershon Scholem and Moshe Idel have published many lengthy segments which are available for study.

Swami Muktananda, who died in 1982, is a yogi in the Siddha tradition who established an international following. He left behind a significant number of written works describing his own spiritual evolution, his mystical experiences, and instructions to his students, as well as explications of his theological and cosmogonic philosophies. These have been translated into English by his disciples and published by the foundation that he established.

In spite of vast cultural, philosophical, and temporal gulfs, the stages of the medieval kabbalist's ecstatic development and experiences of mystical union are remarkably analagous to accounts we have of the contemporary yogic master's. These similarities are paralleled in the broad outlines of their respective lives.

Abraham Abulafia was born in 1240 c.e. in Saragossa, Spain, and studied Torah and Gemara with his father until the elder's death when his son was eighteen. Two years later he left home to begin his temporal wanderings and spiritual search, which was documented in his autobiography. This work, *'Ozar 'Eden Ganuz*, was composed in 1285 for the purpose of edifying and instructing one of his disciples.

Abulafia's seeking took him from the study of the sciences and mathematics, through philosophy, to Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, which was to be one of the central pillars of his spiritual life.

The second pillar was the mystical work *Sefer Yetzirah* which he studied, wrote commentaries upon, and taught, along with Maimonides' *Guide*, during the remainder of his life. At about the time of his introduction to the *Sefer Yetzirah* Abulafia experienced a major ecstatic vision which was the beginning of his development as a master of kabbala. Among his students were Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla and Rabbi Moses ben Simeon of Burgos, who were leading Spanish kabbalists in the late thirteenth century.

Swami Muktananda was born in 1908 in Mangalore, India. At the age of fifteen he left home to practice the spiritual discipline of the wandering mendicant, seeking wisdom from holy men and saints throughout his native land, and studying Vedanta and other systems of Indian philosophy, yoga, Ayurvedic medicine, horticulture, music, and the martial arts.

Muktananda received initiation, or *shaktipat*, from his master in 1947, which resulted in a protracted period of ecstatic experiences. He reports attaining God-realization in 1956 after nine years of intense meditation under the guidance of his master, or Guru, Bhagavan Nityananda. He describes these experiences in his autobiography *Play of Consciousness*. Muktananda toured the world three times, teaching Siddha meditation and initiating disciples. Before his death he passed the power of the Siddha lineage on to his disciple Swami Chidvilasananda who continues as a guru in her own right.

The initial uprooting from the natal home is a significant turning point for each master. It is as though the willingness to explore new climes is an externalization of the willingness to explore new intellectual and spiritual terrain. They each express the significance of this initial departure, as both Abulafia and Muktananda apprehend the work of a divine plan in their initial moves away from home.

Abulafia writes of this first transition: "I remained in the land of my birth for two years after my father passed away. At the age of twenty, God's spirit moved me, and I left, heading straight for the land of Israel by sea and by land."¹

1. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1982), 66; Gershom Scholem, *Ha-Kabbalah Shel Sefer Hatemunah Veshel Abraham Abul'afia* (Jerusalem: Academon, 1969), 193.

Muktananda similarly attributes his abandonment of his natal home to destiny: "I was slightly over fifteen when one day I left the love of my mother and father far behind. I should not have done such a thing. But what could I do? I was destined to behave so callously. It was supposed to happen, so it did."²

III. Philosophy and Approach

Abraham Abulafia stands in the tradition of the Merkava mystics whose roots are based in the visions of the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, and he was profoundly influenced by the Ashkenazic Hasidim of the twelfth century. Abulafia's ecstatic approach differs significantly from that of the better-known Sefirotic kabbalah, which he studied and commented upon.

Moshe Idel distinguishes between these two kabbalistic streams, terming the Sefirotic kabbalah as "theosophical-theurgical" because of its concern with the redemptive effect of properly performed mitzvot.

The "ecstatic" kabbalah, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on the individual's mystical experience of the divine, and concerns itself with techniques for achieving ecstatic experience.

The goal of Abulafia's "Path of Names" is a prophetic encounter with the divine. Muktananda expresses the goal of his practice, Siddha Yoga, in similar terms. He writes: "Siddha Yoga is a broad stream through the forest of the world. This stream leads to the realm of oneness, where the individual soul and the Absolute merge."³

Muktananda professes the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism. Very briefly, this philosophy teaches that everything in the universe is the play of the Supreme Power, and an embodiment of the Supreme Deity, or Shiva. The main duty of a seeker who pursues the Truth is to recognize the Supreme Principle, which is the source of everything. It is not possible to recognize this

2. Muktananda, *Play of Consciousness* (SYDA Foundation, 1978), xxviii.

3. Muktananda, *Secret of the Siddhas*, (SYDA Foundation, 1980), 58.

Supreme Principle through the senses, but only through purified willpower.

The process of purifying one's willpower and realizing this Supreme Principle is facilitated by one's guru, or master, and takes the form of meditation, or inwardly contemplating the Siddha's (seeker's) identity with the Supreme Principle. Meditation is facilitated by the repetition of the mantra, which consists of the name of God and/or a verse from Scripture. This repetition is thought to purify the mind. Hand movements, body postures, and breathing exercises are part of Muktananda's technique.

Abulafia's technique employs oral and written combinations of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and of God's name to achieve mystical states. He also prescribes hand movements, head movements, breathing techniques, and chanting techniques reminiscent of various practices in Eastern yoga.

IV. Parallels of Practice

Among the major elements of Muktananda's spiritual practice are meditation, mantra, and discipleship expressed as devotion to the guru. Central to Abulafia's spiritual practice are isolation, combination and permutation of letters, and the importance of the master or teacher. Abulafia cites a few simple preparations, such as bathing, dressing, and securing a private place, preferably at night.

He continues:⁴

Be careful to abstract all your thought from the vanities of this world. . . . Then take ink, pen and a table to your hand. . . . Now begin to combine a few or many letters, to permute and to combine them until your heart becomes warm.⁵

4. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 136–137; Gershom Scholem, *Ha-Kabbalah Shel Sefer Hatemunah Veshel Abraham Abul'afiah* (Jerusalem: Academ, 1969), 210–211.

5. Compare B. Uffenheimer's third type of ecstatic experience [B. Uffenheimer, "Prolegomenon of the Problem of Prophecy and Ecstasy" in *Annual of Bar-Ilan University: Moshe Schwarcz Memorial Volume* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan, 1987)

Muktananda also prescribes meditative practices to his disciples, and also prefers a time of darkness:

Get up before sunrise, bathe, and sit quietly for meditation. Face east, or any direction, understanding the direction to be God, become quiet, and sit in the posture. . . . Remember your mantra and synchronize it with the incoming and outgoing breath. Let the mantra fill the mind. If the mind starts to wander, bring it back and concentrate.⁶

The need for a master's guidance, the importance of master/disciple relationships, the whole concept, in fact, of a master's obligation to disseminate to disciples what has been divinely received, is central to both accounts.

Gershon Scholem summarizes Abulafia's manifesto for the obligations of master and disciple. Briefly, the teacher's responsibility to the student, if he is worthy, is to teach him everything the teacher knows, holding back nothing. The master must repeat the material to his disciple once orally, once in outline, and once with full explication. The student must be tested. The teacher's will ought to be to help the student until he truly understands, with a minimum of anger, with much tolerance and compassion for all human beings.

These principles are similar to those described by Muktananda:

In every field, one needs a guide. In the same way, in spiritual life, one needs a guide who is wise and compassionate, who observes good conduct, who has studied the Scriptures and spiritual philosophies, and who has understood the Truth . . . He must have complete knowledge and be proficient at transmitting energy and removing all obstacles. He should always be pure, simple, and straightforward, capable of bestowing wisdom and making love flow . . .⁷

59–61], which he terms, loosely translated, as the ecstasy of inner apathy. Both Abulafia and Muktananda fit this category, in which the initiate, individually and in isolation, engages in specific activities or techniques to induce a state of the mind separating from the body, which the initiate hopes will result in revelations or unitive experiences.

6. Muktananda, *Play of Consciousness* (SYDA Foundation, 1978), 44.

7. Muktananda, *Secret of the Siddhas* (South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, 1980), 59–62.

Both Muktananda and Abulafia refer to sacred texts. Abulafia begins with the study of Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud with his father, but Abulafia does not describe intensive grounding in either Jewish Law or traditional sources once he has left home. He focuses instead on Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, which he discovers in the course of his travels, and which he studied with a teacher day and night until he had gone through the entire *Guide* many times.

Muktananda wanders for many years across India, seeking the wise men and saints to learn what he can. He stresses repeatedly that the teachings of a living master are the most significant teachings there are.

In fact, the focus of both ecstasies is on mystical experience rather than on intellectual study. Muktananda is delighted that his experiences confirm the sacred writings, and as a result of his ecstatic visions, his faith in the scriptures is strengthened.

V. Parallels of Experience

Abulafia and Muktananda both experience their spiritual enlightenment in stages over the course of many years, and in both cases anguish, fear, the threat of madness and the threat of death characterize progression through the lower stages. Repeatedly they employ similar descriptions of these experiences, beginning with initiation into the mystical experience.

Abulafia implies that his awakening to mystical experience was at the hand of God while he was studying the mystical text, the *Sefer Yezirah*:

When I was thirty-one years old, in Barcelona, God awakened me from my sleep. . . . My soul awakened within me, and a spirit of God touched my mouth. A spirit of holiness fluttered through me, and I saw many fearsome sights and wonders, through signs and miracles.

But at the same time, spirits of jealousy gathered around me, and I was confronted with fantasy and error. My mind was totally confused, since I could not find anyone else like me, who would

teach me the correct path. I was therefore like a blind man, groping around at noon. For fifteen years, the Satan was at my right hand to mislead me.⁸

Muktananda's initiation is also a profound experience, both euphoric and devastating. Although his initiation is at the hands of his master, which Abulafia lacked, his experience is nonetheless similar. He experiences his initiation as an identification with his guru and with the One:

For a moment I had an intuition of the One in the many, and I lost the ordinary mind that differentiates between the inner and the outer world, that sees the many in the One. . . . I repeatedly opened and closed my eyes. When I shut them I saw innumerable clusters of sparkling rays, and millions of tiny twinkling sparks bursting within me. . . . I was overcome with awe and ecstasy.⁹

But Muktananda the initiate cannot yet stabilize himself in this blissful state. Shortly thereafter, his rapture is replaced by restlessness, torment, and anxiety:

My peace of mind had been destroyed, and all my thoughts were leading me into a deep melancholy. My state of mind was just the opposite of what it had been before. . . . torture and anguish returned and grew.

I cannot write the horrible thoughts that filled my mind, but—it's true—I had them. I was obsessed with impure, hateful, and sinful thoughts. . . . Someone had seated himself in my eyes and was making me see things. . . . It seemed that I was being controlled by some power . . . I no longer had a will of my own. My madness was growing all the time. My intellect was completely unstable.¹⁰

8. This is a difficult passage in the original Hebrew. See Gershom Scholem. I quote here Aryeh Kaplan's reading, in *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1982), 67.

On the subject of keeping the commandments, see Gershom Scholem, *Ha-Kabbalah Shel Sefer Hatemunah Veshel Abraham Abul'afia* (Jerusalem: Academic, 1969), 189.

9. Muktananda, *Play of Consciousness* (SYDA Foundation, 1978), 69–70.

10. *Ibid.*, 72–77.

Muktananda begins to have dramatic visions: the world on fire, the world submerged under water. He is convinced his apocalyptic visions are of reality and is disoriented when he discovers the world is undamaged. He also begins to experience *kriyas*, or involuntary body movements.

Abulafia, too, warns of the emergence of fear and trembling, hair standing on end, and convulsion of limbs in his instructions to the disciple. Mystic disciples in both traditions fear these involuntary effects. Idel writes, "Once the power of the imagination grew, there existed the danger that there would appear before the eyes of the mystic visions which have no connection whatsoever with the intellect. These images, which constitute the primary source of danger in mysticism, are understood as 'messengers of Satan.'"¹¹

According to Idel, Abulafia makes it quite clear that the bliss of ecstatic adventure is the aim of mystical experience, making the risks of torment and anguish a small price to pay. Abulafia tries to describe this bliss:

And you shall feel in yourself an additional spirit arousing you and passing over your entire body and causing you pleasure, and it shall seem to you as if balm has been placed upon you, from your head to your feet, one or more times, and you shall rejoice and enjoy it very much, with gladness and trembling; gladness of your soul and trembling of your body, like one who rides rapidly on a horse, who is happy and joyful, while the horse trembles beneath him.¹²

Other sensuous images abound in Abulafia, the most significant being the feeling that his entire body, from his head to his feet, had been anointed with anointing oil. Muktananda describes the mystical experience with a similar image:

When the sun of knowledge rises in the heart and a person experiences the essence of the Self, the universe of diversity with its countless beings and objects is dissolved for him. Duality perishes. The radiant sun of the Self blazes in his eyes. Its flame radiates

11. Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 121.

12. *Ibid.*, 188.

through every pore of his body. As it flashes, his entire body is filled with the nectar of love. Drops of nectar from the stream of love flow from his eyes.¹³

Muktananda also describes fragrances, tastes, sounds and visions which bring him exquisite pleasure in meditation:

I meditated constantly and always saw the sweet, radiant Blue Pearl in its infinite variations. Its luster was more dazzling at each moment, and my enjoyment was forever growing. I . . . was also hearing the divine *nada* (sound, music) of thunder.

As I listened to this thundering, my meditation became so joyful that the desires which remained in my mind were smashed by the thunder and just disappeared. As I listened to this sound for a while I experienced complete union with the taintless Parabrahman.¹⁴

Abulafia, as a master of ecstatic experience, warns his disciples of what they can expect from their own initiation into his mystical technique. They, too, will experience involuntary physical effects and the fear of death:

All this will happen to you after having flung away tablet and quill . . . because of the intensity of your thought. And know, the stronger the intellectual influx within you, the weaker will become your outer and your inner parts. Your whole body will be seized by an extremely strong trembling, so that you will think that surely you are about to die. . . . And be ready at this moment consciously to choose death.¹⁵

Death, and the fear of death, are, in fact, intimately bound up with the ecstatic encounter. Abulafia reassures a disciple that only God's grace can protect him, and, as Abulafia notes in his instructions, an initiate must be prepared to surrender to death at the moment of divine contact. Indeed this loss of self in the divine

13. Muktananda, *Secret of the Siddhas* (South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, 1980), 61.

14. Muktananda, *Play of Consciousness* (SYDA Foundation, 1978), 173.

15. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 136–137; Gershom Scholem, *Ha-Kabbalah Shel Sefer Hatemunah Veshel Abraham Abul'afiah* (Jerusalem: Academ, 1969), 210–211.

ocean is a danger of the ecstatic experience for both Abulafia and Muktananda. Muktananda writes of his own experience that he felt that he would die at any moment, and recommends to his disciples that the fear of death during meditation may be transcended by opening to knowledge of unity with the One.

The initiate's fear, panic, and terror at the moment of divine contact are apparently to be expected even if this is the very experience he seeks with his entire being. One can speculate that at the instant of *devekut*, which may be defined as that moment of unwavering union, when knower and known are one, fear arises of the loss of individual ego in an ocean of divinity. The transformation which results from that moment is in fact a death to the self that was before. At the same time that this experience is deeply sought, the approaching moment of transition engenders deep anxiety. The image of the two-edged or revolving sword which appears in Abulafia's writings is thus an apt metaphor for the prophetic experience.

Another of the effects of following an ecstatic spiritual path is apparently the acquisition of magical powers. Both authors allude to a variety of these supernatural abilities, including levitation, clairvoyance, and clairsaudience, among others, and both counsel caution in succumbing to the trap of believing these magical abilities to be the goal of the spiritual path.

VI. *Symbols and Images*

In addition to the concepts already reviewed, many symbols and images occur in both Abulafian writings and Muktananda's. For the purpose of this paper, a simple listing must suffice to indicate their scope.

Both masters refer to metaphysical knots that must be cut or loosened for ecstatic union to occur. Both refer to the ocean as an analogy of God, and the individual as a drop or a cup in the ocean, although Abulafia describes a fear of drowning, while Muktananda embraces a merging into the All.

Both recognize a hierarchy of ecstatic experience, striving to reach the highest point themselves and encourage their disciples

to do the same. There is also the idea of the ecstatic encounter as an indicator of salvation or redemption for the individual in both Muktananda and Abulafia. Both counsel the practice of sexual restraint while using sensuous sexual imagery to describe the unitive experience. Both experience visions and hear voices and sounds, but Muktananda emphasizes the value of visual experiences while Abulafia is most comfortable with aural encounters with the divine. Both counsel moderation, and even austerities as part of the spiritual path. And both describe a special kind of meditative sleep that overtakes the seeker at some stages.

This listing is more indicative than inclusive, but it does offer some idea of the variety of parallels between the two mystics in expression and concept of the ecstatic experience.

VII. Conclusion

While the theological and religious frameworks of Abraham Abulafia and Swami Muktananda are very different, and their temporal and cultural milieus could not be further apart, their specific techniques and their descriptions of the stages of mystical growth are remarkably analagous.

Among the many themes in common are the progression through various phases of philosophy and systems of thought, extreme geographic mobility, the importance of the master/disciple relationship in spiritual growth for each, an intimate relationship with God and awareness of divine guidance in the unfolding of spiritual development and achievement of ecstatic experiences as a major transformative experience.

They share an awareness of and exposure to the dangers inherent in these practices; a similarity of imagery in descriptions of ecstatic encounters; and the importance of disseminating the received wisdom in order to lead their students to ecstatic experience.

From a stylistic point of view, the works of both are often autobiographical within the context of illustrating for the reader a model of spiritual evolution, a sampling of the kinds of experiences produced by specific mystical techniques, and a warning of

potential dangers. These dangers are specified, and are remarkably alike for each master. Both authors use their own personal experiences as didactic tools in instructing others who will read their words.

Although these similarities do not by any means minimize the vast differences in theology and mythology between these two ecstatic streams, their number and character raise, among other questions, the issues of whether there is a particularly "Jewish" or "Indic" ecstatic experience; whether there is not a universal process in the human experience of the ecstatic which transcends culture and temporality; and whether postulated direct or indirect opportunities for contact between Kabalists and Yogis are necessary to account for parallels of thought and praxis.

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