




5-2024

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Recommended Citation

Tarasavage, Dana (2024) "Mystical Life and Altered Consciousness: Comparing the Subtle Paths and Trance States of St. Teresa and Patañjali," *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol7/iss1/3>

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Mystical Life and Altered Consciousness: Comparing the Subtle Paths and Trance States of St. Teresa and Patañjali

By Dana Tarasavage

Abstract: The study of mysticism is said to be the study of the ineffable, and thus by its nature, difficult to define. Yet the structured paths and trance states described by St. Teresa of Ávila in *Interior Castle* and Patañjali in the *Yoga Sūtra* demonstrate meticulous and thoughtful explanation of mystical practices and phenomena. This paper situates these texts, mystic guidebooks in their respective traditions, in conversation, examining and comparing the path towards, experience within, and the effect of mystical trances. It employs a balanced approach to essentialism and highlights the shared features of mystical life as a vantage point from which to examine trance. My research demonstrates that these descriptions of mystical life share core similarities: detach from the world, learn and deepen introspective practices, pass through ecstatic states of outward focus, and finally arrive to a version of enstasis within. I identify shared metaphor, imagery, and technique, while acknowledging the difference in language, dating, and literary style. My investigation demonstrates that although each tradition's trances manifest differently, they result from a path of interiorization that leads to the awakening. After examining initial, outward-focused states of consciousness typified by absorption on an external object in the yogic path, and instances of visions and rapture in the Catholic, I move to their respective destinations, interiorly focused states of life-altering consciousness, which leave each mystic permanently transformed. Thus, this paper will argue that ultimately, the two mystical texts demonstrate remarkably similar processes which are molded by their own religious and cosmological contexts.

Keywords: Comparative Mysticism, Yoga, St. Teresa of Ávila, Patañjali, Trance State

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Volume 7, Issue 1, May 2024

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



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Introduction

The study of mysticism is said to be the study of the ineffable, those deepest of spiritual experiences, and thus by its very nature, difficult to define. Yet the structured paths and trance states described by St. Teresa of Ávila in *Interior Castle* and Patañjali in the *Yoga Sūtra* demonstrate meticulous and thoughtful explanation of mystical practices and phenomena. This paper will put these texts, mystic guidebooks in their respective traditions, in conversation, examining and comparing the path towards, experience within, and the effect of mystical trances. Though each tradition's trances manifest differently, both result from a progressive path of interiorization – a mystical life – leading to the awakening. In each case there are initial, outward-focused altered states of consciousness which, though not the final goal of the method, are nevertheless an important moment along the journey. Their respective destinations, interiorly focused states of life-altering consciousness, leave each mystic permanently transformed. Thus, this paper will argue that ultimately, the two mystics demonstrate remarkably similar processes which are molded by their own religious and cosmological contexts. It will begin by situating each mystical tradition in its historical and cultural context and give a synopsis of the structure of the texts, highlighting their shared imagery of the luminosity of a jewel to describe spiritual experience. Having done so, it will proceed to examine the subject in three sections: the first will look at mystical life, the subtle interior path of each method including detachment, ethics, and progressive states of interiorization, the second will survey the occurrence and descriptions of trance states, and the final section will investigate the result of the trance, the transformational element, and the final goal of each mystic's path, again examining their mutually described imagery of a cloud to describe the moment.

This paper will employ the method advocated by Michael Stoeber of balancing essentialism and constructivism as it examines the parallels within mystic life and experience across these two traditions without conflating them.¹ The focus here is not to claim that the specific events, practices, or cosmologies in mystical Catholicism and Yoga are essentially the same, but rather, to highlight a similar mystic life that leads to these transformative trance experiences. Bernard McGinn posits understanding mysticism within Christianity as “that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for,

¹ Michael Stoeber, “Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision,” *Religious Studies* 28, no. 1 (1992): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20019526>.

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the consciousness of, and reaction to (or effect of) what mystics claim is the immediate or direct presence of God.”² His approach shows the importance of examining the entire life of the mystic, including the preparation that leads to the transformative contact with God and the resulting effects on the mystic. Taking cue from his definition then, this paper will claim that a mystic life in both traditions is one in which austerity is vital, the practices and preparations are as important as the transformational experience of ultimate insight, and the results of that insight have the potential to deeply impact the experiencer. This definition of Christian mysticism is useful because it allows us to step back and appreciate the full spectrum of the mystical life, not just the singular mystical experience – when done responsibly, this can apply across traditions. This paper will engage in viewing mysticism from this expanded perspective, taking note not to project the final goal of Christian mystics, union with the divine, onto traditions where that may be inappropriate or irrelevant, in this instance Yoga.

Shining Jewels: Context for Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* and St. Teresa’s *Interior Castle*

Though little is known about the historical figure Patañjali, scholars date his *Yoga Sūtra* to approximately 200 – 400 CE. This text, a compendium drawing on systems that had been brewing in India for some centuries, collects and codifies practices into a matrix of interwoven techniques with roots in *Vedic* ritual and early Hinduism, and a close relationship to Buddhism, Jainism, and *Sāṃkhya* philosophy. It offers “practices for mystical religious experience without specifying a fixed theological perspective,” and does so in a sparse form of Sanskrit literature called *sūtra*, short aphoristic verses which were often committed to memory.³ Various methods to still the mind are offered throughout (a process called *nirodha*) from its normal state of ignorance using progressively subtler techniques, including an eight-limbed path (*aṣṭāṅgayoga*).⁴ Several states of trance are detailed including varieties of *samādhi* (meditative absorption or enlightenment) that range from ecstatic (*samprajñāta*) to enstatic (*asamprajñāta*), and a final liberated aloneness (*kaivalya*, the description of which can be understood as

² Bernard McGinn, “Christian Mysticism: An Introduction,” in *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 158.

³ Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali’s Spiritual Path to Freedom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 2.

⁴ *Yoga Sūtra (YS)* 2.29.

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a synonym for *asamprajñāta samādhi*).⁵ This all-encompassing yogic manual of mystical practice is a treatise on the predisposition for the human mind to suffer which provides a progressive path towards the liberatory relief from that suffering.

St. Teresa of Ávila, born in 1515, was a Spanish Catholic nun, founder of the Carmelite order of nuns, and well-known Christian mystic. She recorded her ecstatic experiences in an intensely personal spiritual autobiography called *Life (Vida)*, and later wrote *Interior Castle (Castillo Interior)* as a guide for her fellow sisters on questions of prayer.⁶ She was gifted with great observational skill and had a profound understanding of human psychology from her religious point of view, which, as Lance Cousins notes, “is evident particularly in the *Interior Castle*, the work of her maturity. It contains a wealth of fine detail and exact description which is obviously the product of many years of introspection and careful recollection of her own experiences.”⁷ She used these experiences to give spiritual guidance and create a pathway for mystical life that others might follow. The work is full of similes, metaphor, and imagery, demonstrating a deep personal connection to the subject. Indeed, her prowess at describing mystical experience is so well regarded that Moritz Deecke has called her the “expert of experts in describing such conditions as ecstasy.”⁸ *Interior Castle* envisions mystical life in seven stages of inward development, which she calls Castles or Mansions, described phenomenologically in great detail, beginning with three in the natural realm of the ordinary, and the final four in the supernatural, which are only available to those sufficiently prepared through rigorous practice.⁹ The first three Mansions deal with the beginning of this mystical path, during which the practitioner may encounter doubts and have to dedicate themselves to true detachment.¹⁰ The Fourth Mansion denotes a turning point towards deeper inward forms of supernatural prayer,¹¹ and the final Mansions detail trance experience, ultimately

⁵ Ian Whicher, “The Final Stages of Purification in Classical Yoga,” *Asian Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (July 1998): 96.

⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, trans. Reverend John Dalton (London: Thomas Baker, 1893), 24.

⁷ Lance S. Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification: Interior Castle of St. Teresa of Ávila and the Path of Purification of Buddhaghosa,” in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd, 1989), 104.

⁸ Moritz Deecke, “A Critical Assessment of Psychological Theories of Ecstasy: Towards an Integrative Model for Theorising Ecstasy,” *Studia Religiosa* 46, No. 1 (2013): 49-50.

⁹ Deecke, “A Critical Assessment of Psychological Theories of Ecstasy,” 49-50.

¹⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 63.

¹¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, 73.



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leading to a decisive state of Spiritual Marriage with God.¹² The work shows not only her dedication to the mystical path itself, but also to revealing it for others.

How might these two mystical manuals, separated by centuries, language, style, and religious context, demonstrate any fundamental connection? After all, one is a sparse set of Sanskrit aphorisms, the other a first-person Spanish-Catholic narrative full of passionate imagery. Yet they each teach an active path of purification which leaves practitioners transformed, and early in each text, envision that transformational purification using the image of a clear jewel.

St. Teresa opens *Interior Castle* with the image of a diamond, elaborated in poetic detail throughout the text: “Let us consider our soul as a castle, composed entirely of diamonds or very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions.”¹³ She goes on to lament the tragedy of not knowing the miracle of the human soul’s connection to God, reminding her fellow nuns that: “All our interest is fixed on the roughness of the case, or the walls of this castle, which are our bodies.”¹⁴ Her explanation immediately requires the aspirant to begin an inward journey, to commit a life of nonattachment in which the body and the physical world are of little importance, and in which the inner world of the soul is a dwelling place of God. She also situates herself within her Catholic context, acknowledging the existence of the soul “because our faith tells us,” and using scripture to explain that God made the soul “after His own image.”¹⁵ She continues: “Let us imagine, then, that this castle...has several rooms, some above, some below, and others on the sides, and that at the center of all these is the *principle* room in which subjects of the greatest secrecy are discussed between God and the soul.”¹⁶ Her simile details an inward spiral of awareness through various states of consciousness which leads toward the crucial shift to a union with God.¹⁷ Pushing past the mundane activities of religious dogma, she requires that her path is undertaken only by those with full dedication to the cause.¹⁸

¹² Lance S. Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 118.

¹³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 33.

¹⁴ Saint Teresa of Ávila, 34.

¹⁵ Saint Teresa of Ávila, 34.

¹⁶ Saint Teresa of Ávila, 34.

¹⁷ Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 105.

¹⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 36-37.

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Patañjali begins his text with a definition: “Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations of the mind,”¹⁹ and explains the normal human error of identifying with the movements of the mind, which in the *Sāṃkhya* philosophical cosmology the text is based on, constitute a part of the material realm called *prakṛti*.²⁰ In keeping with the context of this philosophical understanding, his method allows the soul, or “Seer” (*draṣṭu* or *puruṣa*), to realize and abide in its own true nature, becoming unconcerned with the exterior movements of the world, and stilling the thoughts and movements of the mind (*vṛtti*).²¹ This state is contrasted with the normal state in which the mind believes it *is* its fluctuations.²² One of the first instances that details the reality of arriving at a place of stillness uses rare and striking imagery, comparable to the central diamond image of St. Teresa. *Sūtra* 1.41 says: “[The accomplished mind] of diminished fluctuations, like a precious or clear jewel assuming the color of any near object, has unity among grasper, grasping, and grasped.”²³

This idea, that the true nature of those most interior places of the human shine like a clear jewel, is postulated by both mystics. Their respective paths move through a purification that allows for this luminosity to be revealed. Though each uses metaphor in a distinctive manner that fits the religious explanations and terminology of their culture, they share in the claim of a mistaken attachment to transitory objects. Normally humans pay exclusive attention to the external world, but the truth of the soul is accessible, and is a place of great knowledge, either, as St. Teresa explains, because it is the crystalline dwelling place of God, or as Patañjali understands, because it is eternal pure conscious awareness.

The Progressive Path Inward

The mystic paths presented by these figures demonstrate the importance of the movement from external occupation to inner contemplative awareness, and the active participation on the journey towards luminosity. Patañjali’s subtle path takes several forms including the progressively more refined

¹⁹ YS 1.2.

²⁰ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 19.

²¹ YS 1.3.

²² YS 1.4.

²³ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 120.

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objects and varieties of meditation offered in the first chapter,²⁴ the eight-limbed path in the second,²⁵ and the variety of special powers listed in the third.²⁶ The eight limbs take practitioners from preliminary external limbs (*bahirāṅga*), which include the ethical restraints and observances, *yama* and *niyama*,²⁷ which will be elaborated on shortly, plus attention to the physical body through creating an appropriate posture for meditative practice (*āsana*).²⁸ They progress from the gross external to the subtle internal, using the breath to focus the mind and harness inner energetic movements (*prāṇāyāma*).²⁹ The turning point along this path is the fifth limb, *pratyāhāra*, translated by Christopher Chapple as “inwardness,”³⁰ which acts as the gateway from these foundational practices towards the more subtle. Inwardness is when one learns to disengage from following the movement of the senses,³¹ as if returning towards the natural state of the mind. This process is related to *pariṇāma*, the reverse propagation or involution back to pure consciousness.³²

For St. Teresa, the first three Mansions still see the practitioner involved in mundane life. Purifying one’s interactions with others takes on high importance, and a true examination of how one interacts with the external world is vital to moving inward. “Let us remember, daughter,” she says, “that true perfection consists in the love of God and our neighbour; the more perfectly we observe these two precepts, the more perfect we shall be.”³³ The turning point occurs in the Fourth Castle, in which she describes the Prayer of Quiet and the Prayer of Recollection, where, as Lance Cousins explains, “the natural and the supernatural are mingled. These mansions are nearer the King’s dwelling and very beautiful; so subtle are the things seen and heard in them that the mind cannot give a sufficiently lucid description of them to make them clear to the inexperienced...”³⁴ These moments of deepening

²⁴ Chapple, 5-6.

²⁵ YS 2.29.

²⁶ Frederick M. Smith, “The Fulcrum of Experience in Indian Yoga and Possession Trance,” *Religions* 10, no. 5 (May 2019): 5.

²⁷ YS 2.30-2.32.

²⁸ YS 2.46.

²⁹ YS 2.49.

³⁰ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 24.

³¹ YS 2.54.

³² Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 78.

³³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 48.

³⁴ Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 109.



awareness are exemplified by the increased ability to discern the difference between what St. Teresa calls spiritual enjoyments and spiritual joy: the first are pleasurable emotions stimulated by normal religious activities, while the latter is true spiritual bliss that expands the heart.³⁵ Further, this stage also results in a profound change in personality and identity including a predilection for inward focus.³⁶

A significant divergence between these two paths arises in the role of attachment to God. St. Teresa's Catholic position sees an active and personified God, present in the cosmos, but also at the heart of each human soul, with whom, through mystical experience brought on by the life of spiritual development, one can eventually enter into union with.³⁷ Human effort is not solely sufficient in this though, and despite the rigorous contemplative practices advised, she reminds aspirants that they are ultimately at the mercy of divine grace to make spiritual progress towards that attachment.³⁸ Patañjali, in converse, presents a non-sectarian version of god, *īśvara*, and although mention of this divine figure comes up repeatedly in the text indicating its importance, it is mostly used a tool for meditative focus.³⁹ Attachment to *īśvara* is advantageous for the *yogi* because it is a special soul that has not been corrupted by actions or afflictions, and can therefore act as an aspirational model of the purity and knowledge one seeks.⁴⁰ Surrender to this divine being may yield meditative attention, but ultimately, it is an option on the path.⁴¹ Patañjali does not describe union with *īśvara* at the point of liberated aloneness, *kaivalya*; instead, it is a state in which all cognitive foci are released.⁴²

Despite those significant contextual differences regarding attachment to a higher power, the shared importance of nonattachment to the material world in both cases cannot be overstated. In each mystic's life and path, it acts as an impetus for the unfolding process of inwardness. Early in the first chapter, Patañjali gives the dual recommendation of embarking on a steady path of practice alongside detachment as a means towards liberation.⁴³ He says nonattachment is a release from desire and declares

³⁵ Cousins, 110.

³⁶ Deecke, "A Critical Assessment of Psychological Theories of Ecstasy," 50.

³⁷ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 204.

³⁸ Saint Teresa of Ávila, 206.

³⁹ YS 1.23.

⁴⁰ YS 1.24.

⁴¹ YS 1.23.

⁴² YS 4.34.

⁴³ YS 1.12.



that its highest form is a complete detachment from clinging to the changing nature of material reality.⁴⁴ The process of this ultimate detachment unfolds as the *yogi* gradually retrains his mind to release old patterns, thoughts, and behaviors in favor of new, pure patterns. The ability to detach, reduce unhelpful mental impressions, and move away from the pull of the material world is negatively influenced by five afflictions (*kleśa*), including spiritual ignorance of the nature of the soul, attachment, aversion, ego, and the desire to continue living.⁴⁵ The path further encourages this detachment through the taking of ethical vows and the eight-limbed path begins with *yama* and *niyama*, restraints and observances. These include steps such as vowing against performing violence, vowing to live truthfully, practicing celibacy, and not stealing, among others.⁴⁶ As Glenn Young observes: “It is especially important that this is the first of the eight limbs of yoga. This suggests the foundational role of the moral principles for the mystical practice as a whole.”⁴⁷

As a Catholic nun, St. Teresa was intimately familiar with taking vows of chastity and poverty, as they would have been required for any of her direct audience of sisters, and thus spends little time suggesting them in *Interior Castle*.⁴⁸ However, the first three Mansions stress the importance of nonattachment and detail the initial practices one undertakes in joining the ascetic life. The First Mansion requires self-knowledge and humility, and the Second Mansion requires deeper withdrawal from worldly activities “and the bad example of friends.”⁴⁹ This establishes the need for strong ethical observances and a healthy community of fellow seekers. The Third Mansion describes aspirants living in a disciplined and well-ordered way but says that they may lack real detachment, which will eventually necessitate cultivation.⁵⁰ Her mystical life is one where the process for spiritual experience is constantly being refined. She shows compassion for the person learning to withdraw from the world, acknowledging that it is a gradual process involving an examination of those around you, and of your true motives for prayer.

⁴⁴ YS 1.15-1.16.

⁴⁵ YS 2.3.

⁴⁶ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 31.

⁴⁷ Glenn Young, “Practice and the Comparative Study of Mysticism: The Yoga Sūtra and The Cloud of Unknowing,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 29 (2016): 55.

⁴⁸ Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 105.

⁴⁹ Cousins, 105.

⁵⁰ Cousins, 105.



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Thus, a major theme of mystical life of both Patañjali and St. Teresa is the increasingly subtle awareness obtained through learning deeper techniques, detachment from the world, and personal commitment to the path through vows and observances. Though the context for nonattachment in each mystic's path fits in to their own religious and cultural understanding, this process of moving from gross to subtle is present throughout both texts.

Altered Consciousness: The Trance States

The life of renunciation, ethical vows, refined detachment, and sincere, dedicated practice has wound each mystic to a place of important change: altered consciousness. In their positive manifestations, these cumulative states are the natural destination of healthy spiritual development.⁵¹ Roland Fischer attempted to chart and categorize mystical consciousness through what he called a 'cartography' of mystical states.⁵² This map, which was reworked several times throughout the 1960's – 1980's,⁵³ envisioned states of hyperarousal (ecstasy), such as visions on one end of the scale, and states of hypo-arousal (enstasy), such as meditative *samādhi* on the opposite end.⁵⁴ Although it is productive to view the differences in quality of mystical states (more outwardly active versus more inwardly passive), the maps place similar mystical events at opposing ends of a spectrum as if they are empirical opposites, making the division between ecstatic and enstatic states appear wider, with little evidence to support that division. For example, as Peter Connolly points out: "Fischer himself observes, these ecstatic mystics have much in common with Buddhist and Yogic meditators. In one of his earliest articles on this subject he suggests that the descriptions of mystical rapture provided by St. Theresa are well in line with the results of EEG studies of Indian yoga practitioners."⁵⁵ As suggested, mystical life across these traditions may share similar features, but it should not be presumed that these states form a simple scale; mapping

⁵¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Doubleday, 1990; originally published London: Methuen, 1911), 632.

⁵² Robert K. C. Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1997), 5-6.

⁵³ Peter Connolly, *Understanding Religious Experience* (Sheffield, South Yorkshire; Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2019), 95.

⁵⁴ Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 5-6.

⁵⁵ Connolly, *Understanding Religious Experience*, 103.

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them as such ignores the complexities of diverse mystic life, dividing states that might be more appropriately understood as being closer to one another. Connolly successfully attempts to update this cartography of altered consciousness.⁵⁶ In his restructured map, the two poles are “normal consciousness,” and “trance.” Under the “trance” heading he arranges a collection of ecstatic trance states such as possession and rapture, and enstatic states like Spiritual Marriage and Yogic *samādhi*, placing them nearer to one another and removing the idea of a divide between. His map does not “constitute a continuum, a concept which... suggests a passing through the states closer to the center in order to get to those at the extremes. Rather this diagram attempts to show...that the experiences listed under the headings of ecstasy and enstasy are all varieties of trance experience.”⁵⁷ Connolly’s updating of Fischer’s map is an effective tool for an exploration of altered consciousness and mystical trance in its variety of expressions. The progressive path of interiorization of the mystic may result in some of these altered states, and states may blend into or lead toward each other, depending on the context or tradition. Viewing altered states of consciousness this way also allows each tradition agency over describing them without asking them to fit into a certain category and puts the states of Catholic Spiritual Marriage and Yogic *samādhi* closer together while allowing space for their differences.

This section also takes a psycho-theological view of altered consciousness, influenced by both Connolly and Deecke. Deecke notes that there is some historical precedent for interpreting trance states as sociologically-motivated expressions, but an exploration of this view will not be undertaken at present.⁵⁸ Thus, important discussion of the legitimacy of these trances will also be put aside for now, and it will be assumed that each of these descriptions constitutes a real, mystical religious experience of psychologically changing conscious awareness. The focus here is on religious experience recognized as a distinct psychological state,⁵⁹ with attention to the role that cultural conditioning plays on each mystic.

Both mystical traditions move through examples of ecstatic and enstatic states of altered consciousness. Though neither uses these technical terms in this way, they may be used to understand where a certain phenomenon falls along Connolly’s updated cartography of mystical experience.⁶⁰ The

⁵⁶ Connolly, 105.

⁵⁷ Connolly, 106.

⁵⁸ Deecke, “A Critical Assessment of Psychological Theories of Ecstasy,” 45-46.

⁵⁹ Deecke, 47-48.

⁶⁰ Connolly, *Understanding Religious Experience*, 94.

initial stages in both traditions tend to be more ecstatic, whereas the final states can be interpreted as enstatic, though a refined understanding of how scholars use these terms is required. In the yogic context, the idea of ecstasy may be understood as a state in which one's awareness is "standing outside oneself," and enstasis as a "state of being 'in' or 'within' oneself."⁶¹ In the Catholic example, ecstasy may be understood as rapturous, external joy, and enstasy, as unitive Spiritual Marriage to the divine within. Though some may disagree with this assessment, here it is meant simply as a tool to observe what each tradition says about consciousness at certain points during the process, not as a diagnosis of these states, nor an attempt to affix either state in opposition to one another on a map. It also shows that trance experience may take many evolving forms, and fluid movement through them is one possible outcome of the mystical life.

In the *Yoga Sūtra*, the ecstatic states of altered consciousness comprise the preliminary forms of *samādhi*, meditative absorption which still holds normal cognitive function (*saṃprajñāta samādhi*, or *sabija samādhi*). These use a gross, exterior object as their focus, thus fitting in the definition of yogic ecstasy as constituting a state outside oneself. Ian Whicher summarizes that this initial state, "involves ecstatic experiences of identification that are yet 'external' to authentic identity (*puruṣa*)."⁶² And, as Connolly explains "... yogic...meditations inhibit the activity of the conscious mind...and can thus be understood as forms of trance induction, through the cultivation of focal attention..."⁶³ The final three inner limbs of the eight-limbed path (*antarāṅga*), include concentration, meditation, and absorption or enlightenment (*samādhi*).⁶⁴ The combination of these final three limbs results in yet another state, the subject of the third chapter, known as *saṃyama*, a binding together,⁶⁵ which here implies higher control. This state of control allows the *yogi* to develop special powers, *siddhi*, and although an exploration of these accomplishments is outside of the scope of this paper, it should be noted that they demonstrate super-human, even supernatural events, which seem to arise as a result of the harnessed power of ecstatic, outward meditative concentration.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Connolly, 94.

⁶² Whicher, "The Final Stages of Purification in Classical Yoga," *Asian Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (July 1998): 92.

⁶³ Connolly, *Understanding Religious Experience*, 109-110.

⁶⁴ *YS* 3.1-3.3.

⁶⁵ *YS* 3.4.

⁶⁶ Smith, "The Fulcrum of Experience," 5.



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The path's ultimate destination though, is an exalted form of absorption called 'aloneness,' *kaivalya*, which though outside of the eight-limbed path, is understood as the moment of "permanent identity shift," in which the practitioner, "fully awakened into the self-effulgent nature of *puruṣa* [soul]... witnesses, observes, perceives *prakṛti* [material nature], yet ceases to be ensnared and consumed by the drama of ordinary life."⁶⁷ That final state, Whicher continues: "presupposes that the yogin has cultivated higher dispassion...the means to the enstatic consciousness realised...and can even be understood as the consummate phase of the awakening disclosed in ecstasy, the final step on the long and arduous yogic journey to authentic identity and 'aloneness.'"⁶⁸ This is relevant because it shows that an ecstatic state of altered consciousness, such as meditation on an external object or the super-powers that result from that, is not the end goal of this tradition, but is a legitimate trance moment moving towards the culmination of true yogic liberation. At the final state, the *yogi* seems to arrive at the 'clear jewel' moment from earlier in the text, wherein the mind is polished, able to reflect anything it is placed next to accurately because of the coordination of its functions in this unitive trance state.⁶⁹ Chapple's translation, which is at odds with the traditional commentaries, understands this as a description of a singular state of awareness.⁷⁰ He explains:

Patañjali states that the goal of Yoga is the diminishment of fluctuations in the mind, resulting in "abiding in the seer's own form." Various practices...are listed by which this can be achieved. It stands to reason that I:41 describes in generic fashion the distinguishing characteristics of that state, using the metaphor of the clear jewel and a phenomenological analysis of trance experience.⁷¹

This trance experience is thus one that leads to transformation, not a permanent stopping point, but a multifaceted moment of potential for the practitioner.

⁶⁷ Whicher, "The Final Stages of Purification in Classical Yoga," 95-96.

⁶⁸ Whicher, 95.

⁶⁹ *YS* 1.41.

⁷⁰ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 158.

⁷¹ Chapple, 224.

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With the Fifth and Sixth Mansions, St. Teresa describes spiritually ecstatic states of consciousness. These demonstrate a state of “exalted pleasure or happiness,” and thus must be distinguished from yogic ecstasy.⁷² The Fifth Mansion is a relatively short-lived ecstatic state called the Prayer of Union. During this, the mystic is “thoroughly awake to God though fast asleep to worldly things,” and “...during the short time that this lasts, she is almost senseless and unable to think.”⁷³ She describes the physiological effects of this ecstatic state: the body becomes immobile and there is a suppression of everyday cognitive activities which symbolize for her that the soul has temporarily abandoned the body to reside with God.⁷⁴ Importantly, this is an external route to the divine: “the Prayer of Union is really only a kind of short cut and not the direct route which is the union of the will with that of God.”⁷⁵ Though St. Teresa describes ecstatic states of visions and all-consuming joy in the these Mansions, her final destination is a subdued state of internal, permanent Spiritual Marriage, which may be interpreted as enstatic.

Another parallel in these forms of consciousness can be found in what Patañjali describes as the outcome of his eight-limbed path, the attainment of a higher form of knowledge, *viveka khyāti*, discriminative discernment. This ability to tell the difference between two things, the true soul, and the subtle forms of one’s own inner intelligence is hailed as one of the highest achievements in yogic liberation, essential for arriving at the stage of *kaivalya*. Once attained, this discerning faculty allows the practitioner to know the difference between these two most subtle things, ultimately arriving at a place of authentic knowledge, devoid of the misleading ignorance of assuming the soul is synonymous with the transient nature of the mind.⁷⁶ Similarly, in the Sixth Mansion, St. Teresa elevates the importance of the discriminative ability of a spiritual aspirant. It is a moment where one “...is concerned with the problems of recognizing the exact nature of particular experiences. St. Teresa gives very precise descriptions in order to differentiate between locutions, visions and raptures derived from God, those originating in the imagination and those coming from the devil.”⁷⁷ One needs to constantly ensure that

⁷² Connolly, *Understanding Religious Experience*, 94.

⁷³ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 97.

⁷⁴ Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 110-111.

⁷⁵ Cousins, 114.

⁷⁶ Whicher, “The Final Stages of Purification in Classical Yoga,” 87.

⁷⁷ Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 115.

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they are still on the righteous path and are interpreting these messages correctly as God begins to bestow Spiritual Marriage by granting visions and ecstatic states. The visions at this point "...may involve imaginary or intellectual visions or an experience of the flight of the soul...An uncontrollable jubilation may occur."⁷⁸ As Deecke notes, these moments have a life-altering positive impact on St. Teresa. She "...relates how important her ecstatic or visionary experiences were for the development she has undergone, and how this affected the major decisions in her life. These "joys" are to be taken literally here as actual inner experiences."⁷⁹ The moments of greater spiritual discernment are vital, either because of, or in relation to, trance in the mystical life of these two traditions.

What is evident then, is that there are a variety of temporary forms of ecstatic trance consciousness in both cases (though we may definite ecstasy slightly differently in each), and that they are not the final state of the mystical path. As the mystic moves through their ascetic life of practice and nonattachment, they experience initial states of consciousness typified by absorption on an external object in the yogic path, and instances of visions, joy, or rapture in the Christian. These processes eventually give way to deeply accurate discerning facilities, allowing them to enter the final goal of enstatic mystical consciousness of their respective traditions.

The Final Goal: A Cloud of Knowledge and The Transformative Power of Trance

Connolly elaborates on the differences in the ultimate goals of these traditions: "St Theresa...describes the final stage of her mystical path as an experience of union with God, the consummation of her Spiritual Marriage...This is certainly...quite different from the radical separation of self from matter that we find in...Classical Yoga traditions."⁸⁰ Even still, he places the two final altered states of consciousness of St. Teresa and Patañjali next to one another under the enstatic trance category on his updated cartography.⁸¹ Thus, each constitutes what could be interpreted as an inner state, while being completely different in goal. This nuanced understanding helps us balance the fine line of highlighting the similarities between these states, while acknowledging their differences.

⁷⁸ Cousins, 115.

⁷⁹ Deecke, "A Critical Assessment of Psychological Theories of Ecstasy," 50.

⁸⁰ Connolly, *Understanding Religious Experience*, 103.

⁸¹ Connolly, 105.

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In the case of Patañjali, there is some disagreement over whether the final state of *kaivalya* is a type of trance that prevents the yogi from continuing to live functionally.⁸² Rightly so, because as has been discussed, the definition given at the outset of the text indicates that a final state of Yoga is one where the mind is stilled. However, Chapple argues that we may understand these higher states, like those of St. Teresa, as offering positive changes in personality, which allow the *yogi* to continue to exist in the world.⁸³ The ultimate stage constitutes a suspension of mental processes, but as Whicher also contends, “it would be misleading to conclude that higher *samādhi* results in a definitive cessation... predisposing the yogin to exist in an incapacitated, isolated or mindless state and therefore incapable of living a balanced, useful, and productive life in the world.”⁸⁴ This is significant because it contends that the mystic’s life is enhanced by their experiences of trance, and able to transfer to a positive state of sustained true knowledge.⁸⁵ In *kaivalya*, the soul rests in its own power of consciousness because of the higher forms of dispassion practiced throughout mystical life.⁸⁶ At this juncture, the fourth chapter introduces another term to describe the ultimate isolated liberation, *dharma-megha samādhi*, a meditative absorption typified by a “cloud of *dharma samādhi*,”⁸⁷ understood as an enveloping cloud of the highest form of discriminative discernment, knowledge, by commentators.⁸⁸

For St. Teresa, the Seventh Mansion is one of a true insight into the nature of the Trinity, resulting in an eternal Spiritual Marriage, the last step in her process.⁸⁹ The transitory ecstatic states of the Fifth and Sixth Mansion provided insight, altering her personality, which ultimately allowed a full and joyous union with God. Interestingly, this final moment presents another instance when the two mystics use similar imagery. In describing the true understanding of the Trinity St. Teresa says it: “...comes upon her like a cloud of extraordinary brightness. These three Persons are distinct and by a wonderful knowledge given to the soul, she with great truth understands that all these Three Persons are

⁸² Whicher, “The Final Stages of Purification in Classical Yoga,” 91.

⁸³ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 6-7.

⁸⁴ Whicher, “The Final Stages of Purification in Classical Yoga,” 91.

⁸⁵ Whicher, 94-95.

⁸⁶ Whicher, 95.

⁸⁷ *YS* 4.29.

⁸⁸ Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous*, 25.

⁸⁹ Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 118.

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one substance, one power, one knowledge and one God alone.”⁹⁰ Here she is not entranced in an ecstatic outward rapture or vision, but present and fully aware of the truth.

The image of the cloud in both cases indicates not an obstruction of luminosity, but something of substance that forms around the brilliance of the mystic, further enveloping them with understanding. A cloud, which possesses the nature of intangibility, demonstrates the closest approximation to the ineffable experience of this ultimate spiritual truth. Though it has an unmistakable presence, it is not a dormant entity, but represents limitless possibility. Indeed, *Interior Castle* also uses the image of pouring rain to describe the moment, as if that cloud of spiritual knowledge has burst forth and fully saturated the practitioner.⁹¹ This final state sees St. Teresa also release any active desire for union and instead live fully with the certainty of her Spiritual Marriage. Life continues with great purpose, there is no fear of death, a desire to continue living and practicing in isolation.⁹² It is a stable, interior state, not prone to quick changes. The betrothal complete, God can no longer be separated from the mystic.⁹³ Similarly, Patañjali says that at the final stage of *dharma-megha samādhi*, the *yogi* has no desire for even the results of meditation.⁹⁴ This shows a complete detachment from holding on to exterior life, yet the possibility of a continuation of that life. Isolated from the error of identifying with the material world, the soul rests in itself, ensconced in a cloud of ultimate understanding.

Conclusion

St. Teresa and Patañjali have guided their spiritual aspirants along subtle paths of increasingly introspective life into the splendor of the *Interior Castle* and through the matrix of the *Yoga Sūtra*. These paths are not accidental nor spontaneous; each demonstrates an active choice containing concrete practices, results, and distinctive states. Though mysticism has been described as ineffable, each of these examples proves this definition is only partially accurate. Each has described, with astonishing detail, the progression and outcomes of mystical practice, distinguishing potential challenges, differentiating

⁹⁰ Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Interior Castle*, 207.

⁹¹ Saint Teresa of Ávila, 212.

⁹² Cousins, “The States of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 119.

⁹³ Cousins, 118.

⁹⁴ *YS* 4.29.

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closely related states, and demonstrating that the mystical life is one of active choice and participation, leading to a transformative, positive outcome. Ultimately, the two mystics demonstrate remarkably similar processes, which are still molded by their own religious and cosmological contexts. Though their language, content, and respective goals demonstrate these differences, their paths offer an essential connection: detach from the world, learn and deepen introspective practices, pass through ecstatic states of outward focus, and finally arrive to a version of enstasis within. When the fluid and inter-related relationship between varieties of trance states is put into context, their importance within the overall mystic life is evident. They demonstrate that mysticism may be defined best not by the dramatic content of the culminative experience, but by the life-long participation on the part of the mystic in and around that experience.

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