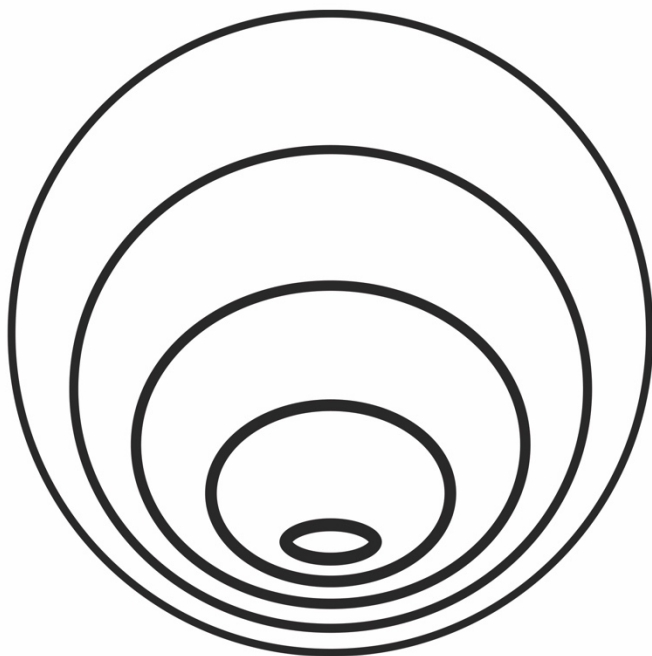


Original Sin Is A Lie

Bob Peck

How Spirituality Defies Dogma
and Reveals Our True Self



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Original Sin Is A Lie: How Spirituality Defies Dogma and Reveals Our True Self

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Part Three:

Awareness is the Foundation

**Original sin is a lie,
because every human being has an
automatic, unconscious thought
system of self-interest;
but when we get still in our mind,
our heart opens—like a flower in
bloom.**

CHAPTER 8

Demystifying Mysticism

From the Outer to the Inner

*“If you realize that all things change,
there is nothing you will try to hold on to.”*

—Laozi

This world is constantly attempting to provoke a response to its seemingly endless stimuli.

React to this!

Judge that!

Enjoy this!

Hate that!

And as soon as you finish engaging with one phenomena, a new one comes into view.

It’s exhausting, isn’t it?

All of the manifestations of mysticism that I’ve come across are based on the idea that the external world does not bring lasting peace—and that a redirection towards the internal brings about an unspeakably powerful, inner transformation of self.¹

We may find external peace for a day, or a month or even a few years but some aspect on which that happiness is dependent will inevitably come crashing down. When we put our sense of well-being on the external world, we are Sisyphus, struggling to push

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that ancient boulder up the hill. Life will come rolling back down as we sigh in exasperation, throwing our hands up defeated again and again.

“He who looks outside dreams, he who looks inside awakens.”

—Carl Jung

Classic Americana has two achingly accurate representations of the transitory joys of the external: Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. Elvis had gargantuan fame and riches and yet he died depressed and unhealthy, overtaken by the ravages of drug abuse. Marilyn was, and is still (more than half a century after her death), the icon of female beauty. She was also riddled by anxiety, depression and excessive prescription drug use that ended her young life, shortly after her third divorce.²

There’s really no shortage of famous, unfulfilled deaths in our society.

They couldn’t find happiness despite having absolutely everything the world has to offer. According to our society which is fixated on material acquisition, sexuality, and social status, they should’ve had happiness. Why didn’t they?

Then you have George Harrison. One of The Beatles, George was open about never feeling fully satisfied by everything they had acquired.

Imagine being a Beatle in the 1960s. The global popularity of unparalleled pop stardom alongside the admiration of their authentically evolving creativity. They had money, women, and their influence on music is staggering and nearly immeasurable. But as George articulates, none of those things made them truly happy. So if not there, then where?

He eventually found his peace after meeting Ravi Shankar, an Indian sitar player and philosopher in his own right. The Beatles met every famous person on this planet and George said no one ever truly impressed him, until he met Ravi. Sure movie stars and successful people were impressive in a way, but they were all trying to be someone else in front of the Beatles. Whereas Ravi’s

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calm, loving authenticity touched Harrison deeply as someone who had a fuller grasp of the peace of the inner world.³ Harrison's songs like "The Inner Light", "All Things Must Pass", and "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" show us how he was able to see through all of the traps awaiting us 'out there', living a long peaceful life thanks to this understanding.

Universally the mystics claim, by way of their own experiential learning that there is a unifying connectivity between all beings.⁴ There is a Transcendent Oneness that radiates between every living thing and our ability to connect with that Unity is the only way out, or rather way in.

You aren't going to find lasting happiness here.

'Here' meaning the world, the external world of form.

But according to the mystics, you will find it Here, internally, within your heart in your connection to your Truest Self, beyond the influences of time and space.

"You will undertake a journey, because you are not at home in this world.

And you will search for your home, whether you know where it is or not.

If you believe it is outside yourself, the search will be futile, for you will be seeking where it is not."

—A Course in Miracles, T-12.IV.5:1–3

The word "mystic" derives from the Greek root *mu*, meaning "silent" or "mute"... indicative of an understanding so profound that only silence can provide its due respect.⁵

There is a mystical "version" of every world religion, while the orthodox institutions are typically on the opposite end of that spectrum. The Christians had the Gnostics, the Muslims have the Sufis, the Jews have Kabbalah, the Buddhists Zen, and Hinduism has the Vedanta. There are thousands of degrees in both directions for every system, but even most religious scholars will draw these parallels.

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“Theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language.”

—Meister Eckhart

Mysticism, the non-institutional internal path, is the string connecting the pearls of each major faith.

A respected religious studies scholar, Dr. Stephen Prothero, wrote a book with a spicy title, *God Is Not One*, which covers the doctrinal distinctions between the world religions. The book’s thesis is that it’s intellectually lazy to say “oh well they’re all the same”, and that is an important point to make. On the institutional, exoteric side of each faith, they are very different—grossly oversimplifying for the sake of brevity: Judaism is based on following rules or commandments, Christianity is focused on the sacrifice of Christ, Islam means submission to God, Buddhism is concerned with ceasing desire and consequently ceasing suffering, and Hinduism is mainly a devotional attempt to break the cycle of birth and death.

But on the mystical, esoteric side of each faith, the distinctly institutional lines of division start to blur.

It’s also important to emphasize that the mystic values the experiential understanding of Spirit. They are sometimes called “the ecstasies,” based on the state of spiritual ecstasy generated by their realizations.⁶ While institutional practitioners rely on the testimony of clergy, the sanctity of scripture, and the psychology of ritual, the mystic only needs their own intimately personal experience of Divinity / Awareness / Unity / Presence.

“Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools.

...Hence whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram—impersonal and unattainable — the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive.”

—Evelyn Underhill

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The mystical experience is a defining component of this internal exploration, and its importance stems from its function. While there can be similar ecstatic emotions to drug-induced states of consciousness (which is a whole 'nother chapter), the distinction is that the mystical experience has a considerably higher purpose, which is that it acts as the connection between two seemingly-oppositional conceptions of divinity: the Transcendent and the Immanent.

The divine is both beyond this plane of existence, and simultaneously all-pervasive throughout. The Absolute is the unending substratum beneath all things, as well as the Experiencer of the world of form—and the mystical experience is the bridge between these two (ultimately unified) conceptions of the Infinite.

Swami Abhayananda covers this dynamic thoroughly in the *History of Mysticism*, writing:

“Yet while we do not possess the written testimonies of the mystic sages of the dim past... when we examine the mythologies of these earliest civilizations, especially those myths which describe the origin of the cosmos, we find a curious similarity in the religious symbols used by widely separated cultures. In almost every instance, we may discover the legend of an original Father-God, whose first Thought or Word, symbolized in the form of a Mother-Goddess, is said to have given birth to all creation.”

Despite their theological sophistication and spiritual practicality, the mystical sects were formerly less out in the open than they are today. There was less literacy and more danger from the orthodoxy. Today, there's no shortage of extensive, academic explanations of each of them. There are bookshelves full of their ideologies, entire university careers devoted to their study. But a brief summary of the main mystical sects will suffice here.

Gnosticism

In the time between Jesus's death and the formation of what

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came to be modern day Christianity, there were several competing sects of Judaism: some of which were beginning to reflect the profound and newly radical teachings of Jesus, while other Jewish communities were holding fast to the ancient traditions of the Torah and the Jewish people. While early Christianity was primarily focused on the one major difference between traditional Judaism—that Jesus Christ was “the Messiah”—Gnosticism took their beliefs a step further.

As we touched on earlier, the name “gnostic” comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge”, although the translation is closer to an intuitive understanding than to knowledge of the analytical mind. While the sect that would become Christianity was focused on scripture and faith, the Gnostics were bent on revelatory experiences, experiencing an intimately personal connection with the divine.

Like Christ, the Gnostics were reforming the way that the Jewish people came to understand God.

In some Gnostic sects, this world was considered illusory, and this personal connection was the answer for how to break through the veil between this world and heaven. The idea of the false creator god of the Old Testament was not exclusive to Marcion, and “Yaldaboath” or “the Demiurge” is only one player in a larger cosmic drama that is representative of the soul’s journey into this plane of existence. *Sophia*, Greek for “wisdom”, is a feminine figure who represents the human soul, but also the Divine Feminine who is in a variety of ways responsible for the creation of the sickly Demiurge, the creator of this world. There is a fall of Sophia due to her miscreation, but she guides humanity through the Holy Spirit, and works with the True Father, the Creator of All, to send forth the Christ—who reminds the lost earthly souls of their inherent divinity in order to “escape the bonds of the world ruler and return to their heavenly home and the blessed rule of the true Father.”⁷

The Gnostics were by no means perfect. Some sects held spiritually-superior beliefs about themselves, like many other religious sects throughout history. While there were smaller groups of Gnostics who had the beautiful practice of drawing lots to see

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who would lead the day's service—because every human is capable of being a divine instrument—other Gnostic groups would look down upon the more traditionally religious because they were not in the process of spiritual awakening & material transcendence. (Sound familiar?)

Ultimately the Gnostics were considered heretics by orthodox bishops, Irenaeus being an exceptionally notorious persecutor. And while Marcion gave us the earliest “canon” in the second century, it wasn't until 367 CE that Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria was the first to name the exact twenty-seven books of the New Testament in today's version.⁸ When Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, many prominent Gnostic leaders and writers were executed as heretics.

And again, fortunately for our contemporary civilization, two of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the 20th century were those rural Egyptian shepherds stumbling across ancient leather-bound scrolls near the Dead Sea—in 1945 at Nag Hammadi and in 1946 at Qumran.⁹ Many of the texts belonged to the Gnostics as they were mentioned by name in correspondence between early church fathers. Several of these Gospels we did not have complete copies of before the 20th century, including my beloved *Gospel of Thomas*. Accordingly, they have come to greatly influence how we understand the formation of Christianity as well as these alternative spiritual systems by early followers of Jesus.

*“Split a piece of wood,
and I am there.
Lift up the stone,
and you will find me there.”*

—Jesus, Saying 77, Gospel of Thomas

Sufism

Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is even more diverse than the Gnostic tradition as it is not necessarily its own sect, but rather the mystical,

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internalized nature of each branch of Islam, with a deep focus on universal courtesy, awareness, and inner awakening.¹⁰ There are Sufis in both the primary Sunni and Shia schools, as well as Sufi Orders that were disconnected from any element of traditional orthodoxy.

Rumi and Hafez being two of the most prominent Sufis throughout the centuries, Sufism tends to be comprised of the poets, musicians, singers, and dancers of Islam. The “Whirling Dervishes” are one such Sufi order that spins around and around in artful dances, mimicking the intoxication of the spiritual experience.

The word “Sufi” comes from the Arabic word *tasawwuf* meaning to “dress in wool” referring to the woolen garments of early Islamic ascetics. But the definition of their belief is the path of the heart. It is admonishing one’s own worldly desires in place of Love for the Beloved. To the Sufi, God, or *Allah* in Arabic is considered in a sense to be an intimate partner, the One and Only recipient of one’s devotion. By purifying the heart of greed, lust, and wrath we become unhindered to access the truth in our inner self, which translates to an outpouring of love to the Creator and all of creation.

*“Love is
The funeral pyre
Where I have laid my living body.
All the false notions of myself
That once caused fear, pain,
Have turned to ash
As I neared God.
What has risen
From the tangled web of thought and sinew
Now shines with jubilation
Through the eyes of angels*

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*And screams from the guts of Infinite existence
Itself.
Love is the funeral pyre
Where the heart must lay
Its body.”*

—Hafez

In Sufism, the detachment from the world is so powerful that there comes a moment of annihilation (*fana*) in the love of the Divine. This is similarly referred to by Carl Jung as the “ego death” in modern psychology, and in many ways parallel Bhakti yoga of Hinduism.

The Sufis would give exceptionally more alms, they would fast for nine months instead of one, they would pray more than five times a day—they weren’t pious for society’s sake, they were pious out of the purest love for God.

When you love someone you want to make them happy, and these expanded practices were the surest way to do so.

*“We did not take Sufism from talk and words,
but from hunger and renunciation of the world and
cutting off the things to which we were accustomed and
which we found agreeable.”*

—Junayd

One subtle yet very important theological distinction within mysticism that I would like to point out in regards to Sufism, is the difference between “annihilation” in the Divine, *fana*, and the “descent” of the Divine into a human body, *hulul*. There have been many Muslim dynasties with shifting sectarian divisions, decrees and renunciants, too many to contextualize here, but there was a very famous Sufi who was hanged for this very debate.

Mansur al-Hallaj was a Socrates-like figure in the 8th century CE who got in a lot of trouble for saying “*Anal al haq*”, meaning “I am the Truth.”

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He was sent to the gallows for hulul, as his proclamation was considered blasphemous. The ruling imams' logic was that our bodies are bound by time and space—Almighty God cannot possibly descend into mortality in the way that we frail humans do. Whereas Hallaj's followers considered his declaration fana, emptying the soul in order to take on divine attributes. Hallaj was not making a "crude claim to divinity, but rather expressing the negation of his own separate existence."¹¹

"I have seen my Lord with the eye of my heart, and I said:

'Who are You?'

He said:

'You.'"

—Mansur al-Hallaj

Al-Hallaj famously sang and danced to the gallows in chains. He was so intoxicated by spirit that he was beyond any fear of death. He sang, "Kill me, my faithful friends, for in my being killed is my life."¹² His legacy endures to this day as one of hundreds of famous Muslim Sufi mystics who found peace and joy despite the external happenings of the body.

Kabbalah

Completing the Judeo-Abrahamic representation of mysticism is the *Kabbalah* of Judaism. Like Hinduism, Judaism is ancient. For nearly three millennia (~2,000 BCE to ~1280 BCE), the term "Kabbalah" in Hebrew simply meant "to receive" or "that which has been received through tradition."

It wasn't until the 13th century CE that Jewish esoteric mystics in Spain and Italy claimed to understand "hidden" or "secret teachings" of the ancient scriptures that represented a more psychodynamic view of the human mind, of metaphysical layers to this world, and of the cosmogony—the birth of the universe. These interpretations, the mystics claim, had been passed down from the earliest prophets (Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, King Solomon) of the

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Jewish faith, secretly transmitted for generations from teacher to student.¹³

“In love is found the secret of Divine Unity.

It is love that unites the higher and the lower stages of existence, that raises the lower to the level of the higher—where all become fused into one.”

—*The Zohar*

The foundational text of Kabbalah is *The Zohar*, (meaning the Book of Radiance) which is a narrative of mystics traveling the Galilee that plays as a metaphysical commentary of the Torah—the five Books of Moses, the central documents of the Jewish faith. There are other Kabbalistic texts, but *The Zohar* is the masterpiece. A voluminous work spanning many concepts but most relevant for this humble summary is the definition of God as, ultimately, undefinable. The Divine Essence is beyond human comprehension, beyond space & time, for which the Kabbalists use the term “*Ein Sof*”, meaning “Nameless Unending Infinity”. While the *Ein Sof* is unknowable by human beings, there are ten stages (“*sefirot*”) that act as vessels of Divine Energy through which we can come to know God. Each stage has its own characteristics that progress as the human being nears closer to the Knowable God in proximity.¹⁴ They are highly symbolic, acting as a blueprint of the metaphysical experience within this realm. The famous 20th century Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem writes that the Kabbalistic symbolism is:

“...An expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us. A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its expression in the symbol.”

¹⁵

The Zohar categorizes the levels of textual interpretation as follows: direct interpretations (in Hebrew, *Peshat*), allegoric (*Remez*), imaginative or Rabbinic meanings (*Derash*), and the inner, metaphysical meanings of Kabbalah (*Sod*). As discussed in the *Thomas* section, a common theme among mystics across cultures is

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that there is oftentimes 'hidden wisdom' or 'secret teachings' withheld from the masses. Now my initial reaction to hiding anything is hesitation because that implies some kind of hierarchy between human beings, as ultimately I hold the firm understanding that We Are All One. Ironically, hierarchical elitism is something that made me (and so many others) thoroughly question organized religion and start to look elsewhere. However the more I work with these kinds of transcendental ideas I can see that they are indeed not for everyone, and that someone not living within these perspectives could easily misinterpret them. (I might be guilty of doing that myself!) So in that sense I understand some of the intention behind concealment.

The Zohar was allegedly written (or transcribed) by Shimon bar Yochai in hiding during the Roman-ruled 2nd century CE, later revealed to the public at large in the 13th century CE Spain by a Jewish writer named Moses de León. There is still a lively debate among Jewish rabbis and scholars over the original author being de León or Shimon bar Yochai. Regardless of its author, *The Zohar's* commentary and insights have been appreciated by wider Jewish audiences for centuries, and in recent decades the Kabbalah has become more closely associated with New Age movements and a variety of universalist aspirants.

Taoism

Taoism is one of China's most cherished cultural legacies. It goes back to at least the 4th century BCE. You can feel its influence in a multitude of places, from Eastern Zen Buddhism to Western literature, cinema and culture. Chances are some of your favorite science fiction or fantasy stories have Taoist themes in them. In Brazil there are Taoist temples full of followers. Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Singapore also have long histories with Taoism. Even famous childrens' book authors in Europe have tried to channel Taoist philosophy in their stories.

The *Tao Te Ching* is the foundational text for Taoism. Its credited author is the mythic sage Laozi. Some scholars believe it

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was written by a collection of authors over time.

The Tao (translated as “*the Way*”) is an idea as large as God. It is the source and substance of everything, including us. Yet the tradition of Taoism says that the Tao is too deeply rooted in reality to even describe with words. This means the Tao we talk about is not the real Tao. Taoists understand that language can’t express all of existence. Instead, they believe other forms of expression like music, dance, art and even non-action can better capture the true state of existence, or the true Tao.

“Existence is beyond the power of words to define.”

—Laozi, Tao Te Ching

When you first read Taoist ideas and quotes, you might notice that they seem confusing or contradictory. They intentionally try to turn common knowledge on its head. They often compare opposing concepts like life and death, stillness and movement, emptiness and fullness. Instead of seeing these as opposites, a Taoist would see them as interconnected.

“Stop leaving and you will arrive.

Stop searching and you will see.

Stop running away and you will be found.”

—Laozi, Tao Te Ching

Do you feel the confusion yet? Laozi pushes against your understanding of basic logic. Taoists say not to rush through this mental exploration. Sit on these thoughts patiently and the confusion will give way to a deeper wisdom.

Zen

I almost left this paragraph blank.

But that’s too pretentious because the point is to give some necessary background, not be showy flashy guy. Or maybe I was worried about people thinking about formatting errors. I’ll just start.

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Buddhism is already a fascinating system. Even in its most general sense, the Buddha's search for truth is so penetrating and so profound that you might think there wouldn't be a reformation required. But ultimately Buddhism is still a religion, too. One that has been institutionalized over the centuries like all the others, and because of this we have the emergence of Zen, a lotus sprouting up from the mud.

"Zen does not confuse spirituality with thinking about God while one is peeling potatoes."

Zen spirituality is just to peel the potatoes."

—Alan Watts

Admittedly Zen does not meet every definition of "mysticism", the mismatch being that mystic philosophy tends to rest on a theistic belief in an internal divinity—whereas Buddhism is generally categorized as an agnostic spiritual system—however, an integral component of Zen is experiential spiritual practice, which is why many academics have thought of it as a 'mystical branch' or 'esoteric Buddhism'.

A sub-school of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, the Zen origin story actually dates all the way back to the "Flower Sermon", the subtlest of subtle moments in the Buddha's teaching career. While seated in front of his monks, he simply held up a white flower. No one seemed to make sense of it, except one monk, Mahākāśyapa, smiled quietly. His smile was clear to the Buddha as the true understanding of the teaching—causing Buddha to designate Mahākāśyapa as his primary successor.¹⁶

Centuries later, Buddhism made its way to China in the 5th century CE, brought by Bodhidharma, a semi-legendary Western Buddhist monk, credited for Zen's pioneering transmission. Zen developed further thanks to a flavoring from Taoism, the ancient Chinese religion of Laozi and the later writings of Zhuangzi. Bodhidharma is as good as it gets:

"People of this world are deluded.

They're always longing for something-always, in a word, seeking.

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But the wise wake up.

They choose reason over custom.

*They fix their minds on the sublime and let their bodies
change with the seasons.*

All phenomena are empty.

They contain nothing worth desiring.”

—Bodhidharma

Zen koans are an example of how useless form is to Zen Buddhists. Koans are riddles designed to help us break out of our conceptual thinking, like “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The answer is... up to the perceiver... which is why the late great religious philosopher Huston Smith calls Zen “a step through Alice’s looking glass”¹⁷ where confusing contradictions and playful paradoxes work to describe the nature of the mind.

But the real beauty of Zen Buddhism is its absolutist focus on presence and awareness. Dogen was a Buddhist priest who branched off from the Tendai School, founding the Soto school of Zen—further illustrating the tendency of religious systems to decay and need rejuvenation—and Dogen greatly emphasized the practice of *zazen*.

As a certified mindfulness meditation teacher, I’ve heard many new to meditation hesitate. They’ll say something to the effect of ‘I can’t stop my thoughts’... to which I reply, that’s okay! That certainly doesn’t invalidate you as a candidate to enjoy and reap the benefits of meditation. There are many non-Buddhist modern styles of meditation—guided meditation, noticing thoughts, affirmations & mantras—all of which have value, and can be much more accessible to new practitioners. But the *zazen* of Zen Buddhism *is* that very thought-stopping type of meditation that causes so much secular resistance. It’s so unique that some Buddhists consider *zazen* to be categorized differently than meditation altogether—when the head moves into the heart, or into a more holistic body-mind framework.¹⁸

In the Zen view, because enlightenment is already present,

non-striving is the key.

Everything else is in the way.

“The main practice of Zen is zazen, meaning sitting meditation,

where the goal is essentially to concentrate on the breath and suspend all thought.

If you are unable to find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?”

—Dogen

I am not compelled to speak at length about Zen because there’s something funny and contradictory in speaking about Zen, whereas Zen is feeling the rhythm that my fingers find the keys as I type out these words filling these pages. Being right here and nowhere else.

There have been great many Zen masters from Bodhidharma to Dogen to contemporary teachers like D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, Shunryu Suzuki, and my beloved Thích Nhất Hạnh, all of which have helped many minds find the “no mind”.

Advaita Vedanta

I’ve covered Hinduism at a decent length already but it’s important to include Advaita in a summary of the world mystics.

As discussed, Hinduism as a whole tends to exemplify spiritually “mystical” traits across a much wider breadth than the religions of the West. Considering mysticism as a direct, personal connection to the Divine within one’s own heart, this description holds true for all Hindus: from the Vaishnavas (worship of Krishna) to the Shaivites (worship of Shiva).

However, Advaita in particular, is where mystic philosophy really crashes through the surface and breaks into the atmosphere. After over ten years of study, I still find myself picking up my jaw:

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"I am dead already. Physical death will make no difference in my case.

I am timeless being.

I am free of desire or fear, because I do not remember the past or imagine the future.

Where there are no names and shapes, how can there be desire and fear? With desirelessness comes timelessness.

I am safe, because what is not, cannot touch what is. You feel unsafe, because you imagine danger.

Of course, your body as such is complex and vulnerable and needs protection.

But not you.

Once you realize your own unassailable being, you will be at peace." ¹⁹

—Nisargadatta Maharaj

Without sounding too redundant here, Advaita is the earliest system of "non-dual" thought. Non-duality, meaning "not two", is the idea that the atman (individual soul) and Brahman (formless Divinity) are one and the same. According to Advaitists, they are separate terms in concept only, ultimately there is no distinction. Whereas there is a distinction between your body-mind and Your Timeless Being, Your Spark of Infinity. The body comes and goes, "but not you", says Nisargadatta, one of the most profound Advaita teachers.

Advaita was mostly developed by Adi Shankara in the 8th century. He is rightfully considered one of the most sophisticated teachers in this system, and within world mysticism. In addition to the medieval founder, we've had several Advaita masters in the 20th century, namely Sri Ramana Maharshi and Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, who have utterly destroyed the veil of the temporal self—and who are worth deep contemplation, as we'll cover soon.

New Age

After the breakthrough scientific discoveries of the Age of Enlightenment, religion was reeling from a global shift towards rationalism and a more sophisticated, scientific worldview. While many religious sects regressed into overly orthodox interpretations, from the Amish to the Wahhabis, many of the mystical sects and related schools were similarly rejuvenated. With major developments in chemistry, physics, astronomy, mathematics, and biology, the religious humans basically went either hardcore fundamentalist or heart-core spiritual.

There are many antecedents for the modern “New Age movement”²⁰ all contributing to a growing patchwork of spiritual beliefs from as early as the 1830s to the late 20th century:

- American Transcendentalist authors who rose to prominence in the 1830s (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, and the great poet Walt Whitman, among others), themselves influenced by Kant and the German idealists, emphasized the inherent purity of the individual, personal freedom, and the guidance of intuitive direction
- Helena (Madame) Blavatsky co-founded the Theosophical Society in 1875 (with Henry Olcott), which originated out of contact and study under an alleged secret brotherhood of Eastern mystics and their scriptures; her followers included Annie Besant, Charles W. Leadbeater and Jiddu Krishnamurti, who ultimately left the organization and rejected the Theosophists’ messianic expectation around his youth, famously defending his departure by maintaining that “*Truth is a Pathless Land*”²¹
- Phineas Quimby’s “New Thought” and Mary Baker Eddy’s “Christian Science” both focused on the power of the mind and its role in spiritual healing; alongside the writings of Joseph Murphy, Neville Goddard, Ernest Holmes, William Walker Atkinson and Napoleon Hill

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- The work of Carl Gustav Jung, a psychoanalyst and colleague of Sigmund Freud, who founded analytical psychology and made contributions to many fields of knowledge, including mysticism and comparative mythology
- Edgar Cayce, a Christian mystic who gave over 14,000 channeled readings in a trance state in the early 1900s—his psychic readings provided answers on healing, reincarnation, and a multitude of predictions, helping to make terms like “auras”, “soul mates” and “holistic healing” household terms²²; as well as a new genre of channeled texts from a variety of sources over the next century, with some of the most popular works being *A Course in Miracles* by Helen Schucman and the Abraham material by Jerry & Esther Hicks
- 20th century physicists, notably Einstein, Planck, and Heisenberg, many of whom were interested in questioning scientific materialism, with Einstein’s relativity theory and the larger field of quantum physics pointing to the potential of consciousness as fundamental to the universe, as opposed to matter
- Unitarianism, an emerging Christian denomination in the early 19th century considering Jesus a human being, and rejecting the doctrines of original sin and Biblical infallibility
- Early religious academics helping to document and in some ways legitimize the esoteric: from Max Muller translating Eastern sources, to Rudolf Otto’s syncretistic commentaries, to William James pioneering a psychology-based understanding of mystic states, and Evelyn Underhill’s theological exploration of mysticism
- George Gurdjieff, an Armenian and Greek mystic philosopher who emphasized the unification of mind-emotion-body in a series of teachings he called “The Work”²³

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- The arrival of Hindu swamis and Buddhist teachers to America—Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda (the founder of Self-Realization Fellowship), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (the founder of Transcendental Meditation), Osho, and Swami Prabhavananda to name a few; while Shunryu Suzuki set up the San Francisco Zen Center and began to lecture Westerners in the 1950s on Buddhist teachings and practices²⁴
- The Beat authors (Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and others), a collective of writers embracing non-conformity and spontaneous creativity, and the later 1960s “Counterculture Movement” of American hippies embracing the use of psychedelics (due to the work of Dr. Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Aldous Huxley, and others), as well as sexual liberation, and questioning the societal norms of previous generations

Beyond these overlapping oceans of the last two centuries, “New Age spirituality” also tends to have an appreciation for ‘archaic’ beliefs such as shamanism, Vedic tantra, various forms of astrology, channeled literature and other pagan practices. From the ancient Greek Stoics (highly secular) to the medieval Celtic Druids (highly metaphysical), the West has truly begun to embrace more earth-centric, non-Abrahamic spirituality. New Age generally refers to an amalgamation of most interfaith understandings of spirit in what might be previously dissimilar capacities.

In conclusion, mysticism is simply a focus on connecting to the internal when everyone and everything else is focusing on the external.

Every religion has a spectrum with exoteric orthodoxy on one end and esoteric mysticism on the other. Throughout history, those who have controlled the power behind religious institutions have persecuted these mystics, either by excommunication or death.

Fortunately we live in the 21st century. Not only has this condemnation lessened significantly, but the public at large has gained access to formerly withheld esoteric scripture, ritual, and practice, along with a larger cultural movement embracing

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alternative perspectives on traditional religion and spirituality.

This is all to say that, it is a hell of a thin read to associate all spiritual thinking as being ancient, irrelevant “fairy tale” mythologies.

That dismissive attitude neglects so many multitudes of sincere seekers. They diverged from institutional norms. They transcended the everyday drudgery of this world by way of authentic mystical experiences that reflect the beauty and peace within us all.

