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Draft: 13 August 2021

**Zen Buddhism and the Phenomenology of Mysticism**

(to appear in *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 3, no. 2 (2021): 1-21)

**Introduction**

If mystical or ecstatic events are held to be universal forms of religious experience, then they should be present in some form or another in every religious tradition. It can thus be fruitful to compare these experiences across diverse traditions in order to arrive at a common form or structure of mystical experience, as Angela Bello does in *The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations*. On the other hand, even if such a position is not held, it is still fruitful to ask how well the experiences of a religious tradition map onto religious categories of “ecstasy” and “mysticism.” I investigate the possibility of formulating a phenomenological account of mysticism “as such” across diverse religious traditions by using mysticism in Buddhism (and Zen Buddhism in particular) to demonstrate that current accounts are inadequate for describing mysticism as a universal phenomenon.

Within Buddhism, of course, there are thousands of established schools and new offshoots, and mystical experiences of some sort or another are a central part of many of them. However, I choose to focus on Zen in particular because it seems to have a close affinity with mystical experiences in other traditions such as the Abrahamic faiths and Hinduism, and most of the ways in which Zen does differ from them are not unique to Zen but rather are true of Buddhism generally. In short, Zen might be said to focus on and exemplify the mystical in Buddhism and is thus one of the best candidates for inter-religious comparison of the mystical.

In this paper, I argue that, although Zen Buddhism is distinct from other forms of mystical experience in important ways, it is possible to fit its experiences into a general phenomenological category of mystical experiences as such. My argument consists of three parts. First, I explicate and compare the phenomenological accounts of mysticism provided by Anthony Steinbock and Angela Bello. Second, I offer an account of the mystical in Zen which both coheres with and problematizes these accounts, arguing that Zen mysticism ultimately demonstrates the inadequacy of these accounts as descriptions of mysticism as a universal religious category. Lastly, I use this investigation to propose that Zen mysticism does indeed cohere in the main with the mystical experiences of other religions, but only if we devise a new formula for speaking phenomenologically about mystical experience as such which captures this phenomenon in all of its varied manifestations.

**Bello’s and Steinbock’s Phenomenologies of Mysticism**

Though Bello and Steinbock both formulate phenomenological accounts of mysticism, Bello is interested in an account of mysticism as such*,* that is, as a universal form of religious experience, whereas Steinbock is interested in an account of the mysticism common to the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). It will be useful to begin with Steinbock’s account in order to highlight the substantial differences between “Eastern” and “Western” mysticism (to borrow Rudolf Otto’s nomenclature) and the problem of formulating a phenomenological account of mysticism as such. I will then turn to Bello’s account as a foundation for examining Zen in terms of a universal structure of religious experience.

In *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, Steinbock explicates his understanding of the shared mystical core of the Abrahamic religions:

By mystical experience…I mean the self-givenness of the Holy *qua* Personal presence is lived. The self-givenness pertaining to the Holy is a vertical mode of givenness, namely epiphany. Epiphany is the personal presence of the Holy, and the mystical experience is precisely the personal givenness of the Holy as lived in an especially intimate manner.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Furthermore, he contends that “mystical experiences are in no way limited to experiences of union, and moreover, union is not even the point of the mystics’ lives; rather, it consists in service to God, the redemption of the world, and the participation in establishing loving and justice.”[[2]](#footnote-2) We can pick out four main features of Steinbock’s account of Abrahamic mysticism: (1) *personal*, involving not only a deeply subjective or inward element in the individual but also communion with a completely personal being; (2) *vertical*, since union is between a finite creature and a transcendent God, the experience comes from outside of us and “above” us; (3) *given*, in that communion with the divine is experienced as a gift which is “not correlative to our efforts”[[3]](#footnote-3); (4) *ethical* or *eschatological*, since mystical experience is inextricably tied to, and sometimes constituted by, acts of redemption, love, and justice.

Given his depiction of Abrahamic mysticism, Steinbock is skeptical about attempts to give an account of mysticism as such:

Although it would be simplistic to lump all spiritual and religious traditions together and to speak of a unified mystical tradition, these three can be regarded as a whole because of their “Abrahamic” character. In this respect, as a whole, they are essentially distinctive from, say Zen Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, or Shamanism—even though we can productively undertake comparative analyses between them and find striking similarities among them. Indeed, the latter have their own dimensions of spiritual practices and directedness that are irreducible, and there is certainly no point in blurring their differences in the enthusiastic recognition of some common structures.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Indeed, as we will see when we examine Zen’s form of mysticism in more detail, Zen differs markedly from Abrahamic mysticism (or at least how Steinbock formulates the latter) on every point, to such a degree that it becomes difficult to see how it can even make sense to use the term “mysticism” to refer to both in any meaningful sense. While one can appreciate Steinbock’s concern with preserving the integrity and distinctiveness of diverse religious traditions, his approach threatens to isolate religious traditions from each other to such an extent that it becomes impossible to talk about concepts like “ecstasy” or “mystical experience” as such. To be able to even say, as Steinbock does, that Abrahamic mysticism is essentially different from Buddhist or Taoist mysticism, we have to already have a working understanding of what we mean when we refer to “mysticism”.

While Steinbock may be willing to bite the bullet, for instance by affirming that it is meaningless to talk about mysticism as such, I believe it is possible to discuss and analyze mystical experience as an inter-religious phenomena while also being keen to ground this discussion in the particularities and historical situatedness of the different religions. As we will see, such an analysis goes beyond a mere “recognition of some common structures” which results in a vague and vacuous description of mysticism. Instead, the analysis is able to avoid Steinbock’s worry and produce a highly specific and nuanced description of mysticism which gets to the heart of what the phenomenon of mysticism as a religious experience *is*.

Such an account is precisely the aim of Bello, whose comparative analysis of mystical experience in Shamanism, Christianity, Sufism, and Hinduism begins with “the analysis of certain experiences that are traceable in historical and cultural contexts, even those that are very distant from one another, that show singular affinities.”[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Bello, the common core of mystical experience in the traditions she analyzes can first be thought about in terms of shared effects and motives:

The effects of ecstasy consist in a state of being estranged from oneself, but the end of such an estrangement seems to be a return to the self…If we examine the “motives,” one notes that they are traceable through contact with a world that is ‘other’ with respect to that which is experienced in an everyday fashion.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Second, and more fundamentally, “that which emerges from the description [of various mystical experiences] is that the human being shows himself/herself as possessing in the depth of his/her being or ‘core’…an openness to the Other.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In short, Bello argues that in mysticism the self is experienced as inherently open to a divine alterity, and ecstatic contact with this alterity brings the self out of itself in order to return to itself transfigured by its contact with the divine. We now turn to an examination of Zen Buddhism in light of Bello and Steinbock’s accounts. As we will see, interaction between Zen and Steinbock’s account reveals the deep distinctiveness of mystical experiences in different religions, while mapping Zen onto Bello’s account still allows for us to speak of mystical experienceas such, though with substantial qualification.

**Mystical Experience in Zen Buddhism**

The goal of Zen meditation and practice is *kensho* (“seeing nature/essence”) or *satori* (“comprehension” or “understanding”),[[8]](#footnote-8) enlightenment or insight into one’s true nature, which is revealed to be identical with the *dharma* or *dharmakaya*: simultaneously the Buddha-nature, the cosmic Buddha body, emptiness (*sunyata*), and an “absolute present” or “Suchness” with no distinctions (“there are ten thousand formations, one suchness”) and which pervades all of reality: it iseverything, and everything is it. Thus, in *satori*, one immediately grasps one’s “true self,” which is revealed to be no self at all, as Abe Masao explains: “the fact [is] that the realization of the dharma is nothing but the *self-awakening of the dharma itself.* Your awakening to the dharma in its complete universality.”[[9]](#footnote-9) As an ineffable, euphoric, “given” realization of one’s identity with the *dharma*, *satori* is similar in many ways to the mystical experiences of other traditions, but it also differs in important aspects.

First, it is instructive to note how substantially it differs from Steinbock’s account of Abrahamic mysticism as *personal*, *vertical*, *given,* and *ethical/eschatological.* In one sense, *satori* is indeed deeply personal or subjective, in that one’s true inner nature is grasped. On the other hand, it is completely *impersonal,* because selfhood is revealed as illusory and “personhood” as a false category, as Zen patriarch Hui-neng explains:

Let your mind be in a state such as that of the illimitable void, but do not attach it to the idea of vacuity. Let it function freely. Whether you are in activity or at rest, let your mind abide nowhere. Forget the discrimination between a sage and an ordinary man. Ignore the distinction between subject and object. Let the essence of mind and all phenomenal objects be in a state of thusness.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Indeed, the dissolution of the individual, which famous Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki calls *satori’s* “feeling of exaltation,”[[11]](#footnote-11) seems to be a central feature of Eastern mystical experience generally: in her account of Hindu mysticism, Bello argues that although both Hindu and Abrahamic mystics aim for union with the divine, for the latter mystical experience is merely “de-centered with respect to the I,”[[12]](#footnote-12) whereas for the former, “union with the Cosmic Spirit seems to eliminate personal and individual characteristics, and not only the negative ones but also positive ones.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, in both Zen and Hindu mysticism ecstatic experience does not appear to be experienced as the union of the self and the Other, but rather the essential, preexistent Oneness of all, in which individual personhood is negated.

Furthermore, there is no sense of communion with a completely personal being, since such communion is predicated on a distinction between a self and a divine Other. As the Zen patriarch Dōgen puts it when he discusses the effects of *zazen*,the practice of seated meditation which is the central practice of Zen (from which Zen gets its name):

When just one person does *zazen* even one time, he becomes, imperceptibly, one with each and all of the myriad things and permeates completely all time, so that within the limitless universe, throughout past, future, and present, he is performing the eternal and ceaseless work of guiding beings to enlightenment. It is, for each and every thing, one and the same undifferentiated practice, one and the same undifferentiated realization.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In other words, “[s]atori is not seeing God as he is, as might be contended by some Christian mystics…[but rather] see[ing] into the work of creation.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Rather than joining the mystic in union with a personal, divine Being, *satori* reveals the mystic’s pre-existing unity with the impersonal Whole, where distinctions like sacred and mundane, myself and yourself, enlightened and non-enlightened are nonexistent.

For the same reason, *satori* is not experienced as vertical. Perhaps the most influential innovation of Nagarjuna, Zen patriarch and founder of the Madhyamaka tradition in Buddhism from which Zen descends, is the idea of *sunyata.* This doctrine holds that all things are empty of inherent natures and indeed “interdependently co-arise,” so that there are no ultimately real distinctions between things. Perhaps most radically, this idea entails that there is no essential difference between the transcendent and the immanent, the horizontal and the vertical, *samsara* (the cycle of death and rebirth, which Buddhists typically seek to escape) and *nirvana*. As Nagarjunaputs it, *samsara* and *nirvana* are the same “Suchness” viewed from the perspective of illusion and enlightenment, respectively, and nirvana is “merely *samsara* seen without reification without attachment, without delusion.”[[16]](#footnote-16) All the distinctions we hold between “I” and “Thou” are merely “convenient designators,” useful falsehoods which language and thought invent for the sake of convenience. *Satori* leaves behind these false categories and distinctions and simply grasps the fundamental fact that, rather than coming from outside and above us, the “divine” just *is* us.

Thus, though both the Abrahamic religions and Zen speak of union with ultimacy in mystical experience, in the latter *satori* is the awareness that one already has this union, whereas, in the former (as Bello has articulated it), mystical experience in some sense constitutes or effects this union.[[17]](#footnote-17) Or, to borrow Hee-Sung Keel’s useful distinction, whereas Zen constitutes a “mysticism of unity,” Abrahamic mysticism is a “mysticism of union,” since the latter requires two distinct beings.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Concerning the dimension of *givenness*, there is more commonality between Zen and Abrahamic mysticism. In Zen, *satori* is indeed experienced as “given” in the same way as it is in Abrahamic mysticism in at least one important aspect: it is “not correlative to our efforts;” that is, enlightenment can be encouraged and prepared for, but its attainment is not a foregone conclusion or the automatic reward for linear progression.[[19]](#footnote-19) Although the notion that enlightenment is not directly correlated to the practitioner’s efforts features in most Buddhist schools of thought, this is especially emphasized in Zen,[[20]](#footnote-20) which traces its origins to Buddha’s famous “flower sermon,” summarized by Dōgen thus:

Once Śakyamuni Buddhi, on Vulture Peak in India, in the midst of a vast assembly of beings, held up an adumbrara flower and winked. Venerable Mahākāśyapa smiled. Then Śakyamuni Buddha said “I have the treasury of the true dharma eye, the inconceivable mind of nirvana. This I entrust to Mahākāśyapa.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

For Mahākāśyapa, sudden enlightenmentrequired no effort on his part, either in the form of education or meditative practices, but was transmitted wordlessly as he contemplated the flower in the Buddha’s hand. This germinal idea eventually reached its fullest expression in Hui-neng’s “Abrupt School” of enlightenment, which developed out of the illiterate and uneducated Hui-neng’s sudden experience of *satori* immediately upon hearing a recitation of the Buddha’s Diamond Sutra and which was foundational for all subsequent Zen thought.

The givenness of the experience is closely connected with both a sense of immediacy or unmediated-ness and ineffability, as Bello explains:

Mystical experience…is characterized by an absolute manifestation, by the absolute initiative of God, who penetrates the human being, transforming him or her, expanding his or her limits, allowing him or her to experience God’s presence directly without mediation.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Ultimacy, whether in the form of the divine or the *dharmakaya*, can only be experienced immediately, because it transcends the ability of human concepts, language, and reason to apprehend it, as we have seen.[[23]](#footnote-23) These functions of what Zen calls the “discriminating mind” are thus at best inadequate for leading us to the experience and describing the experience to others, and at worst lead directly away from it or greatly distort it. This deep-seated worry about the limitations of language is captured in Zen’s “motto” as “A special transmission outside the scriptures/ Without depending on words and letter/ Pointing directly to the human mind/ Seeing one’s nature and becoming a Buddha,” and it explains why mystics across the traditions use paradoxical, contradictory, and apophatic language to gesture towards the experience while confounding naïve attempts to intellectually grasp the ineffable.[[24]](#footnote-24) In short, in both the Abrahamic and Zen traditions, mystical experience is “given” or unmediated, coming to the practitioner unbidden and from “without.”

However, in Zen, as opposed to the Abrahamic traditions, this “givenness” is not conceived in terms of a “gift” from a divine “giver.” Suzuki’s depiction of *satori* as typified by a “sense of the beyond” and an “impersonal tone” explains how *satori* can be an experience of givenness coming from “outside” the self, yet simultaneously horizontal and impersonal in terms of where the experience comes from and the “no-self” which experiences it:

...the experience indeed is my own but I feel it to be rooted elsewhere. The individual shell in which my personality is so solidly encased explodes at the moment of Satori. Not, necessarily, that I get unified with a being greater than myself or absorbed in it, but that my individuality, which I found rigidly held together and definitely kept separate from other individual existences, becomes loosened somehow from its tightening grip and melts away into something indescribable, something which is of quite a different order from what I am accustomed to…As far as the psychology of Satori is considered, a sense of the Beyond is all we can say about it; to call this the Beyond, the Absolute, or God, or a Person is to go further than the experience itself and to plunge into a theology or metaphysics.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to say that, though *satori* is experienced as *coming from* “the Beyond,” it is not an experience *of* the Beyond, *per se*, since it is a perception precisely of the lack of dualities such as the immanent and transcendent.

Lastly, there is also a large degree of commonality in both traditions concerning the *ethical* dimension which Steinbock associates with Abrahamic mysticism. In both traditions, the mystical experience leads to a transformed way of living in the day to day, and, interestingly, the ethical life which results from these experiences is often quite similar in both traditions as well. Steinbock likely overstates the case when he argues that service, redemption, love, and justice are often experienced as more central in Abrahamic mysticism than the act of union itself. However, I think he is correct to emphasize both the ways in which union is not exhaustive of mystical experience and the tight connection between that experience and ethical action. To take one example, Meister Eckhart famously argued that there is no distinction between contemplation of the divine and loving action: when we totally empty ourselves and become as “empty as the wilderness” in contemplation, God pours himself into us and works in the world through us. As Bernard McGinn argues, “Eckhart’s mysticism taught that true contemplation of God is realized in fruitful action...the union of God and soul is not a matter of a special state or experience outside the usual daily round, but is rather a special awareness of the meaning of everyday life.”[[26]](#footnote-26) To the extent that Steinbock’s claim about Abrahamic mysticism’s decentralization of union is accurate, Zen mysticism would diverge from Abrahamic mysticism, since *satori*’s mystical perception of the oneness of the “self” and “Other” is Zen’s *raison d’être.* However, as Suzuki points out, “the opening of satori is the remaking of life itself…its effects on one’s moral and spiritual life are revolutionary, and they are so enhancing, purifying, as well as exacting.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus, in both Zen and Abrahamic mysticism, there is a tight connection between ecstatic experience and the ethical action which results from and fulfills it.

On the other hand, Zen seems to go much further than Abrahamic mysticism in its centralization not only of ethical action, but of all mundane activity, the body, and “practices.” Many Zen masters completely erase the distinction between *satori* and action, arguing that enlightenment is constituted not only by a radically new way of seeing the world, but also by a new mode of being in the world as well. For example, Dōgen argues that:

In the Buddha Dharma, practice and realization [enlightenment] are one and the same. As your present practice is practice within realization, your initial negotiation of the Way is in itself the whole of original realization. That is why from the time you are instructed in the way of practice, you are told not to anticipate realization apart from practice. It is because practice points to original realization.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In other words, for Dōgen *zazen* is not merely a means to enlightenment but is rather “practice-realization” (*shusho-itto*), the enlightened one’s way of being in the world. Indeed, Dōgen identifies *satori* not only with *zazen,* but with all mundane activities practiced from the vantage point of enlightenment, as “enlightenment is the tea and rice of daily activity.”[[29]](#footnote-29) As the renowned Dōgen scholar Masao Abe summarizes the Zen master’s position: “true compassion can be realized only by transcending nirvana to return to and work in the midst of the sufferings of the ever-changing world.”[[30]](#footnote-30) “Transcending nirvana” here refers to *satori,* which, as we have seen, is an experience of ultimate unity which leaves behind the dualistic concepts of *samsara* and *nirvana.* Thus, the mystic experiencing *satori* does not escape from the mundane world to a transcendent one, but rather “sees the sacred in the everyday and the everyday in the sacred.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Indeed, in Zen the body and mundane activities are vehicles for enlightenment just as much as *zazen* is. For example, in the Zen Master Takuan Soho’s famous letters to a samurai, he argues that, in the art of swordsmanship, the distinctions separating the sword from my hand, my mind from my hand, and myself from my opponent are dissolved and one perceives the common “Emptiness” at their core.[[32]](#footnote-32) From this emptiness emerges “the most wondrous unfoldment of doing.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Furthermore, the central role of the body and activity seems to be a prominent difference between Western and Eastern mystical experience generally, as Bello argues in her account that in Hindu mysticism: “the spiritual moment seems to prevail, but this does not manifest itself except by passing through the body” via yogic practices.[[34]](#footnote-34) Both Hinduism and Zen Buddhism grant a far greater role for the body in achieving mystical union than does Western mysticism,[[35]](#footnote-35) and Zen to an even greater degree than Hinduism. Indeed, we can extend Bello’s point: contra the usual Western distinction between asceticism, which focuses on practice or activity, and mysticism, which focuses on contemplation, Zen and Hindu mystics share a pronounced emphasis on activity as a vehicle towards—and essential ingredient in—mystical experience.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In short, when compared to Steinbock’s account of mysticism in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, mystical experience in Zen is radically different in most central aspects. Abrahamic and Zen mysticism diverge markedly with respect to the *personal* and *vertical* dimensions of ecstatic experience. While there is more common ground regarding the quality of *givenness* and the *ethical* dimension, substantial differences remain in how they play out in the two mystical traditions. Thus, if we are to be able to discuss the phenomena of mysticism as such, we will need to turn to Bello’s schema, which attempts to discover the structures common to interreligious forms of mystical experience.

The first aspect of the shared mystical experience which Bello identifies in her examination of Shamanism, Sufism, Christianity, and Hinduism—estrangement from the self and return to a transformed self—is also highly applicable to Zen’s goal of *satori*, though with an important qualification. The experience of *satori* consists in both an alienation from one’s illusory notions of selfhood and dualities and a return to one’s true “self,” the Buddha-nature which is at one with all things. Put another way, Zen does not aim for estrangement from the self *per se*, but rather for estrangement from the illusion of the self, nor does it aim for a return to the self *per se*, but a return to an understanding of one’s true nature, which includes no permanent or ultimately real “self” at all.

As we have seen, Steinbock argues that what is most central to Abrahamic mysticism, and what most strongly distinguishes it from Eastern mysticism generally and Zen in particular, is an emphasis on the inter-Personal dimension, an “*experience* of the absoluteness of the Holy” which emphasizes the vertical connection between creature and Creator.[[37]](#footnote-37) But it is far from clear that this personal dimension is as pronounced in the Abrahamic traditions as Steinbock suggests. In fact, despite the very important differences between Buddhist and theistic conceptions of the self, Christian mystics often speak about personhood at the upper reaches of mystical experience in a very similar way to Zen practitioners.

Compare, for instance, Zen’s notion of *satori* as simply the universal Buddha-nature coming to know or perceive itself (“The seer and the seen, the reflecter and the reflected, are one; practice and enlightenment are one”[[38]](#footnote-38)) with the medieval mystic Marguerite of Porete’s description of the soul’s ascension to the fifth and sixth states:

But the fifth state has subdued here in showing to the Soul her own self. Now she sees by herself, and she knows the Divine Goodness, and this knowing of the Divine Goodness makes her look again at herself…But [in the sixth state] this Soul, thus pure and illumined, sees neither God nor herself, but God sees himself of himself in her, for her, without her, who—that is, God—shows to her that there is nothing except him.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Likewise, Meister Eckhart’s account of mystical union with God seems to dissolve the ontological distinction between God and humanity. He argues that the “man who is established thus in God’s will” is: “…free and has left self behind, and must be free of whatever is to come in to him…The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me: my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing and one love.”[[40]](#footnote-40) As Robert Carter summarizes Eckhart: ecstasy is an experience of the fact that “the innermost in God is *identical* with the innermost in us…God and soul are simply one,”[[41]](#footnote-41) because they share the same Ground of the Being, the “Godhead,” from which both the divine and human person proceed. Thus, for the Zen masters and certain Christian mystics, in mystical experience one is not merely estranged from a self that is then given back as it was. Rather, the mystical experience of *unity* rather than *union*[[42]](#footnote-42) with the One reveals the illusory (or at least non-ultimate) nature of personhood, such that one realizes that the “self” from which one was estranged was never one’s true self to begin with.

Bello considers the second aspect which she identifies—a realization of an openness to the Other at the core of one’s being—as the central characteristic of a universal mystical experience. Here, we need to be precise about what is meant by the “Other.” Bello alternatively uses “Other” to refer to “a world that is ‘other’ with respect to that which is experienced in an everyday fashion”[[43]](#footnote-43) or—like Steinbock—to some sort of transcendent Being. This close identification of mystical and religious experience with an experience of alterity is recurrent in attempts by Western scholars of religion to give accounts of universal religious concepts.[[44]](#footnote-44) For instance, Rudolf Otto famously argued that religious phenomena are typified by *numinousness*, a revelation of divine power in which the divine is revealed as “wholly other” from the mundane or natural world. Mircea Eliadepicks up and modifies Otto’s distinction into one between the sacred and the profane. But like Otto, Eliade emphasizes that the sacred is “wholly different from the profane,”[[45]](#footnote-45) and the sacred and the profane represent “two modes of being in the world,” separated by an “abyss”[[46]](#footnote-46).

However, there are several problems with this idea that religious feeling or experience in general, and mystical feeling or experience in particular, is always an experience of Otherness. First, so long as attempted accounts of universal structures of religion depict the divine/sacred/numinous as “wholly other,” they will fail to capture the way that ultimacy is encountered in monistic religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and in animistic religions such as Shinto. For instance, in *satori*, one’s inner being or core is indeed revealed as inherently open to some type of “ultimacy,” but this ultimacy is simultaneously disclosed as crucially *not* Other than the mystical practitioner; what the unenlightened person took to be Other—the divine, the natural world, other people, etc.—is revealed to be none “other” than the mystic herself. If Eastern and Western religious traditions indeed fundamentally diverge over the question of alterity in religious experience, this might present a serious difficulty for formulating an account of the universal structures of mysticism.

However, the second problem with the idea that alterity is intrinsic to mysticism is that it fails to adequately describe ecstatic experience even for many Western mystics. As I have demonstrated earlier in this paper, Abrahamic mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Marguerite of Porete describe their mystical experiences in terms of a breaking down of the distinctions between the human and the divine, i.e., an erasure of alterity. For them (and especially Eckhart), mystical union reveals precisely that the differences between God and humans are less than essential, as we share the same Ground of Being. Indeed, as Jason Blum argues in his work comparing the mysticism of Hui-neng, Meister Eckhart and Ibn al-Arabi, such a lack of alterity is precisely what unites many forms of Eastern and Western mysticism:

In all three cases, the encounter with ultimacy consists of an event that ultimately reveals the fundamental nature of the mystic’s own self. For Ibn al-Arabi and Meister Eckhart, this is the realization that their own fundamental selves are extensions of God’s essence. In the case of Hui-neng, this realization takes a substantively different form: his “essence”—like that of the ultimacy he seeks to encounter—is void, a radical and nonessential emptiness. But the structural relation described is identical: an ontological resonance in which the fundamental nature of the being of the mystic reflects and participates in the fundamental nature of ultimacy.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Although mystical experience as such does indeed reveal a fundamental “ontological resonance” or “openness” at the core of our being, as Blum points out it reveals not that we are open to a divine Other, but rather to an “ultimacy” which is the *same* as us in essence.[[48]](#footnote-48)

For these reasons, it seems advisable to abandon completely the notion of alterity from any phenomenological account of mysticism as such, while retaining Bello’s and Blum’s very useful description of mysticism as characterized by a revelation of an ontological resonance or openness in the core of one’s being. Far from running aground on Steinbock’s concern that such an account elides the substantial differences between how Eastern and Western mystics experience ecstasy, formulations such as Blum’s demonstrate that such accounts can simultaneously recognize these differences in content while identifying the core structures of the common experience which underlies them.

**Conclusion: A New Proposal**

As we have seen, when one sets out to identify the distinctiveness of the mystical within a certain tradition, one runs the risk of formulating such a specific account that it becomes impossible to discuss the mystical as such on the basis of this account. Such is the case with Steinbock, for two of the core qualities which he attributes to Abrahamic mysticism—*personal* and *vertical*—are almost completely lacking in the way a Buddhist in general or Zen practitioner in particular mystically encounters ultimacy. Furthermore, despite some commonality between the traditions with regards to the qualities of *given* and *ethical/eschatological*, the two traditions differ significantly in how these qualities are experienced. On top of this, there are a number of other qualities of mystical experience, such as the dissolution of the individual and the importance of the body and activity, which Eastern mysticism in general (and Zen especially) emphasizes to a much greater degree than does Western mysticism. Thus, if we are to discuss the phenomenon of mystical experience as some type of universal aspect of religion, we must turn to a phenomenological account such as Bello’s, which seeks to identify common structures across a wide variety of religions.

The essence of mysticism which Bello identifies—an inner core which is open to the divine Other and an estrangement and return to the self—succeeds in capturing something of both the essence of Zen *satori* and what this experience shares with mysticism in other religions. At the same time, however, Bello’s account must be qualified on the issues of selfhood and the Other if it is to avoid seriously misrepresenting Zen and Buddhist mysticism. It seems best to avoid using the term “Other” in general when attempting to formulate universal accounts of religious phenomena, as monistic and animistic religions do not generally conceive of the ultimacy as a completely transcendent Other. Rather, their adherents see themselves as emanations or manifestations of the cosmic whole (Hinduism), as an aspect of one spirit (Shinto), or as identical with all there is (Buddhism).

Regarding the term “self,” while the term has strong associations with Western philosophical conceptions (and thus does injustice to the experience of “no-self” in Buddhism), the use of any other term would likely be equally problematic. The reason for this is that, since *satori* and the Oneness which it apprehends are totally beyond words, distinctions, and concepts, any term used is inadequate and requires constant qualification. We have seen this in the equivocal way Zen practitioners themselves rely on the word “self” while denying its ultimate reality: the practitioner who experiences *satori* is indeed estranged from his/her “self,” since our commonplace notion of the self is illusory (thus s/he is not estranged from a self in any fundamental sense), and s/he also returns to the “self” by realizing that his/her innermost “nature” is no self at all. Furthermore, as we have seen in the case of Meister Eckhart and Marguerite of Porete, Western mysticism itself complicates the univocal use of “self” in Bello’s formulation, as the original self from which one is estranged is revealed to be an untrue or insubstantial self to begin with. For these reasons, it seems more accurate to describe mystical experience in terms of a transformation of the mystic’s *concept* of selfhood, rather than of his or her *self*.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Thus, I suggest the following as a working definition of mystical experience: *an unmediated experience of feeling exalted* *through an encounter with givenness via an inner openness or connection with ultimacy* *which involves an estrangement from one’s original, misleading conception of self and return to a transformed conception.* This definition has the advantage of allowing us to examine mysticism as a universal species of religious experience, with common structures which may be described phenomenologically. These common structures underlie mysticism’s diverse manifestations in unique religious contexts and enable us to meaningfully speak of mysticism as such: despite the varying *content* of mystical experience, it has a highly stable *form* across traditions. Thus, far from formulating a mere “recognition of some common structures” which results in a vague and vacuous description of mysticism, we have hopefully arrived at a complex and nuanced phenomenological account which highlights the distinctiveness of mystical experience. And, rather than eroding or ignoring the particularities and historical situatedness of the different religions, such a definition is both grounded in these particularities and provides us with a firm grounding from which we can better compare and contrast the content of mystical experience across various traditions.

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and James W. Heisig. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

1. Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid,* 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid,* 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Angela Bello, *The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations,* trans. Antonio Calcagno (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid,* 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid,* 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Though Zen Buddhists use both words for enlightenment more or less interchangeably, *satori* is more commonly used and will be used throughout the rest of the paper as representative of Zen mystical experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Abe Masao, *Zen and Comparative Studies,* ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: Honolulu University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hui-neng*, The Sutra of Hui-neng, Grand Master of Zen: With Hui-neng’s Commentary on the Diamond Sutra,* trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 126. *The Gateless Gate,* a classical collection of Zen *koans* compiled by Wumen Huikai, describes *satori* in similar terms: “You will go hand in hand with the successive patriarchs, entangling your eyebrows with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears…All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united…Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur” [Katsuki Sekida (trans.), *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and The Blue Cliff Records* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 28]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Suzuki argues that this feeling is central to *satori*: “That this feeling inevitably accompanies Satori is due to the fact that it is the breaking-up of the restriction imposed on one as an individual being, and this breaking up is not a mere negative incident but quite a positive one fraught with signification because it means an infinite expansion of the individual” [D.T. Suzuki*, An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964),105]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bello, *The Divine in Husserl,* 121. As we will see when we examine the accounts Meister Eckhart and Marguerite of Porete, however, many Abrahamic mystics also describe their experience in terms of the dissolution of the individual or personal. Thus, although Bello’s characterization of Abrahamic mysticism as “decentering the I” is perhaps more accurate than Steinbock’s centralization of the personal dimension, neither account does full justice to the impersonal aspect of at least many Abrahamic mystics. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid,* 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dōgen, *Bendowa,* in *The Heart of Dōgen’s* Shobogenzo, eds. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (New York: SUNY, 2002), 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Suzuki*, An Introduction*, 96-7. Suzuki further explains that “Whereas with the God of [Abrahamic] mysticism there is the grasping of a definite object; when you have God, what is no-God is excluded. This is self-limiting. Zen wants absolute freedom, even from God” (*ibid*). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nagarjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, trans. Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It is important to note that this difference is especially pronounced because I am following Steinbock’s account of Abrahamic mysticism, and that this sharp distinction might be blurred by figures within the Abrahamic tradition (such as Meister Eckhart) for whom mystical experience seems to be a realization of a preexisting union. Below, I will examine how Eckartian mysticism problematizes Steinbock’s account. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hee-Sung Keel, *Meister Eckhart: An Asian Perspective* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2007), 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. According to Suzuki, the “abrupt seeing” of *satori* “does not take place as the result of reasoning, but when reasoning has been abandoned as futile, and psychologically when the will-power is brought to a finish…The awakening is never to be taken for an attainment or for an accomplishment as the result of such strivings…The doctrine of the Unconscious as expounded here is, psychologically translated, that of absolute passivity or absolute obedience” [D.T. Suzuki*, Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T, Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett (New York: Doubleday Books, 1996)*,* 186-197]. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. That this is the case might not be immediately clear, since Zen emphasizes “self-power” (*jiriki*) rather than “Other-power” (*tariki*), as other sects such as Pure Land Buddhism do. The former argues that the practitioner needs no outside help in realizing *satori*: one’s practice of *sazen* and *zazen* are sufficient. The latter holds that *satori* is impossible to achieve under one’s own power, and therefore one must depend on the help or “grace” of some outside power, such as the Amitabha Buddha. While Pure Land’s emphasis on the need for “divine” help to overcome human weakness and error has led a number of commentators to compare Pure Land with Christianity on the issue of faith [see especially Hajime Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics,* trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori, Valdo Viglielmo, and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987)], this should not distract us from that fact that Zen is just as similar to Christianity when it comes to mystical experience. In other words, even though it emphasizes the practitioner’s self-power in achieving enlightenment, Zen—perhaps more than any other school—also argues that practice in no way guarantees enlightenment, whose arrival is always unexpected and “unbidden.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Dōgen, *Shobogenzo,* “Menju,” in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi(San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bello, *The Divine in Husserl,* 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For an interesting complication of this claim, see Tanabe (*Philosophy as Metanoetics*), who argues that the immediate experience of “ordinary mysticism” achieved by “self-power”—whether in the form of Zen’s intuition or Christian contemplation—is only capable of grasping Ultimate Being. However, the highest level of ultimacy, the Absolute Nothingness (*Sunyata*) of Buddhism which Tanabe identifies with the Absolute Paradox of Kierkegaard, is accessible only through the mediation of “Other-power.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Since this paper focuses on a phenomenological analysis of mystical experience itself, rather than the complexities of mystics’ discourse about that experience, delving deeper into the rich comparisons between Abrahamic religions and Zen on the limitations of language to describe mystical experience goes beyond its scope. For more on this topic, see Jason N. Blum, *Zen and the Unspeakable God: Comparative Interpretations of Mystical Experience* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016); Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph, “Comparing Eckhartian and Zen Mysticism,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 35 (2015): 91-110; Archie Graham, “Truth, Paradox, and Silence: Hakuin and Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard and Japanese Thought,* ed. James Giles (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 124-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Suzuki, *An Introduction,* 103-4. Suzuki goes on to add that "perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Zen experience is that it has no personal note in it as is observable in Christian mystic experiences” (106). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York, Crossroad Publishing, 2001), 155-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism,* 85. Furthermore, according to Suzuki, Zen would thoroughly reject Steinbock’s identification of “the redemption of the world” as more central to the mystics than union with the divine, as neither we nor nature stands in need of redemption: “Zen recognizes nothing from which we are to be saved. We are form the first already ‘saved’ in all reality, and it is due to our ignorance of the fact that we talk about being saved or delivered or free…Zen, therefore, does not try to disengage us from the world…Zen is not mysticism, if the latter is to be understood in the sense of escapism. Zen is right in the midst of the ocean of becoming. It shows no desire to escape from its tossing waves. It does not antagonize Nature; it does not treat Nature as if it were an enemy to be conquered, nor does it stand away from Nature. It is indeed Nature itself” (Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism,* 254-255). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Dōgen, *Bendowa,* in *Moon in a Dewdrop,* 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Dōgen, *Shobogenzo* “Gyoji I”, in *Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen,* trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi(Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999), 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Masao Abe, *A Study of Dōgen: His Philosophy and Religion,* ed. Steven Heine(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992)*,* 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford`: Oxford University Press, 2007), 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Takuan Soho*, The Unfettered Mind: Writings of the Zen Master to the Sword Master,* trans. William Scott Wilson (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986), 37. Cf. Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery,* trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Vintage, 1953) and Dōgen’s “Tenzo Kyokun” (“Instructions for the Cook”), in which the mundane task of preparing food for other monks is seen as a way of cultivating the “way-seeking mind.” [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Soho, *The Unfettered Mind, 37.* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Bello, *The Divine in Husserl,* 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Of course, this claim about the under-utilization of the body in Western mysticism is a generalization, and numerous exceptions can be found, such as the “Whirling Dervishes” of Sufi Islam. In addition, as we have seen, mystics like Meister Eckhart often drew a close connection between contemplation and action. However, I think it is generally true that Western mystics more readily distinguish contemplation and activity, and where the two are joined, the latter is often conceived as a consequence or natural expression (rather than a vehicle for) the former. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This is especially apparent if we look beyond Bello’s focus on kriya yoga—which employs seated meditation as the primary vehicle towards enlightenment—to the many other forms of yoga (ex. tantric yoga) which grant the body and bodily activities a much more central role. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Steinbock, *Phenomenology,* 38-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Dōgen, *Shobogenzo* “Kokyo,” in *Moon in a Dewdrop,* 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls,* trans. Edmund Colledge et.al. (Notre Dame: University Press, 1999), 177-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O’C Walshe (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 298. In another sermon, he illustrates this identity of God and humans with the help of a vivid metaphor: “There never was so close a union, for the soul is far more closely united with God than are body and soul, which make up a man. This union is far closer than when a man pours a drop of water into a vat of wine, for that would make water and wine - but this is so turned into one that all creatures could never find out the difference” (*Ibid*, 510). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Robert E. Carter, “God and Nothingness,” in *Philosophy East and West* 59, no.1 (2009): 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Keel refers to Echartian mysticism as a “mysticism of unity” rather than a “mysticism of union,” since the latter requires two distinct beings (*Meister Eckhart,* 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Steinbock, *Phenomenology,* 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Of course, it is an open question whether the very term “religion” is too much of a Western concept to be applied usefully to Asian “religious” traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane,* trans. William R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1957), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Ibid,* 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Blum, *Zen and the Unspeakable God*, 153. Perhaps “view” would be preferable to “realization” here, since it is debatable whether our “own fundamental selves” are indeed “extensions of God’s essence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. On the other hand, many mystical accounts do seem to be marked by a sense of the alterity of the experience itself, that is, the mystic’s ecstasy is experienced as fundamentally different than their everyday, mundane experience. However, while this experience of alterity is doubtless salient in many mystical experiences, it does not seem to be anywhere close to universal. For instance, Eckhart and Zen practitioners are keen to point out that mystical experience is a new orientation towards and within daily, mundane activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Of course, this is not to deny that mystics affirm that their experience results (or can result) in the transformation of every aspect of the person. However, the experience itself is almost universally described in terms of a transformation of one’s self-conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)