

Walt Whitman delves into the mystic experience of cosmic divine unity: A Spiritual Awakening

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"Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes" - **Walt Whitman**

Walt Whitman an American poet, essayist and journalist was a great mystic. Born on May 31, 1819, Walt Whitman was the most innovative and influential poet of the nineteenth century. A mystic is a person who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect. Mystical experience is as old as humanity, it is not confined to any race. The term 'mysticism' comes from the Greek meaning 'to conceal'. In the Hellenistic world, 'mystical' referred to "secret" religious truths. Whereas in early Christianity the term came to refer to "hidden" allegorical interpretations of Scriptures and to hidden presences, such as that of Jesus at the Eucharist. Later the term began to denote "mystical theology" which included direct experience of the divine. Typically, mystics, see their mystical experience as part of a larger undertaking aimed at human transformation. Thus, in general, 'mysticism' would best be thought of as a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions and experiences aimed at human transformation variously defined in different traditions. Mysticism has many meanings in the study of the history of religions. Walt Whitman believes in the possibility of attaining insight into mysteries transcending ordinary human knowledge through divine presence of oneness in the nature. Whitman's approach

to mysticism was certainly not pedantic and it was not based on a scholarly understanding of concepts.

It must be remembered that mysticism is at the heart of all religious systems, including Buddhism. Mystical insights, it is claimed, can only be attained by direct divine intervention or else by inward contemplation. Mysticism whether employed by Buddhists, Christians or any one else is by its nature anti-reason. A mystic is thoroughly anti-rational and anti-scientific in temper. As a boy, Whitman was fond of Homer and Shakespeare, and he would study these authors for hours together lying on the sea-shore and listening to the sea-gulls and the sea-surfs. Another major influence was the mystic transcendental philosophy of India, especially the Bhagwat Gita and of Emerson. Emerson was a mystic and his mysticism colours Whitman's own mysticism. Emerson's oversoul filtered into Whitman's creative vision and hovered closely over the pages as he wrote. Like Emerson, Whitman conceived of the Supreme Power as "Soul" or "Spirit" that manifested itself in a pantheistic fashion through matter.

Despite being the mystic to the core, Walt Whitman cannot be called as a pure mystic. He cannot feel and completely humanize the tie between God and human. His poetry is the mixture of realism and materialism. He always sought to seek the spiritual through

the material. He never wanted to escape the realities of the worldly life. He believed that the finite objects of the world were as real as the human soul.

The first traces of his mysticism surface during the period between 1850 and 1855, when the pulls of divinity inspired Whitman to make the following observations:

"I never yet know how it felt to think I stood in the presence of my Superior...If the presence of God were made visible immediately before me, I could not abase myself."(3)

Whitman seemed to agree with Heine who professed that God is identical with the world and therefore is the real hero of world history, the latter is His perpetual thought, His perpetual act, His word, His deed, and of all humanity, one might rightly say: It is the incarnation of God. However, Whitman also made a slight departure from Heine in his approach to GOD. Having an implicit faith in the divinity of Man, Whitman made Man his hero of world history, instead of God. By this measure, the worship of God was synonymous with service to mankind, and the key to religion was not in rituals but in meaningful sympathy. Whitman's philosophy was thus the philosophy of humanism. To Whitman, God was present in the human race: to be devoted to the human race was to worship God. This was how the soul could be absorbed in God. If Man was the hero of world history, and the pathway to God, it becomes easy to understand why Whitman dedicated four precious years of his life to Civil War victims. Such work was engrossing and redeeming. Moreover, the Civil War soon diverted his attention from himself and put forward other problems. He visits to the hospitals from 1863 to 1865 affected him

profoundly. For three years the spectacle of death was daily before him. With time, his conception of death became increasingly spiritualistic. He grew tired of matter and of his body; he wanted his soul to be free at last and to dissolve in time and space:

To break the stagnant tie- thee, thee to free,
O soul. . .(p. 69 Whitman)

There are many frequent announcements made by Whitman as to the relation of body and soul. At times he cannot distinguish between the two. At others, he says the body is the soul. To him the soul is not a concept. It is reality even after death. A mystic is also convinced that the human soul is eternal. It is the body which dies; the soul lives on. Whitman lying for hours together contemplates about the apple tree, the blossoms and the sky. At such moments he would have a mystic experience, when his soul would expand and embrace the entire universe. He would have this feeling of oneness with all created things and his soul embraces with love even the smallest created object. This feeling of 'oneness of identity', with both the great and the small, this sense of divinity of all living things pervades in his poetry. In his *Song of Myself*, the poet finds complete identity between himself and others. Grass, a central symbol, in the poem suggests the divinity of common things. It is the longest poem in *Leaves of Grass* and is a joyous celebration of the human self:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume

For every atom belonging to me as good
belongs to you. (p. 173 Whitman)

There are three important themes: the idea of self, the identification of the self with other selves and the poet's relationship with

the elements of nature and the universe. To Whitman, the self is both individual and universal. Man has an individual self, whereas the world or cosmos, has a universal self or cosmic self. The poet wishes to maintain the identity of his individual self and yet he desires to merge it with the universal self, which involves the identification of the poet's self with mankind and the mystical union of the poet with God, the Absolute Self. Even the most commonplace objects, such as leaves, ants, and stones contain the infinite universe. The poet reclines idly and at ease in the midst of nature. In this way, he prepares himself for his mystical journey towards unity with the Absolute or divine. He belongs entirely to Nature, and so there is no essential difference between him and the various objects of Nature. As others are also formed of the same elements, there is essential unity in all creation. The theme of democracy, brotherhood, fraternity and equality looms large in this poem. He has a glorious vision of the future of America. He thinks democracy can only be justified on the spiritual basis through pantheism. He says:

I see something of God each hour of the
twenty-four and each moment then

In the faces of men and women I see God,
and in my own face in the glass

I find letters from dropt in the street and
everyone is sighted by God's name.

(p. 36 Whitman)

In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, an ordinary experience is dramatized in such a way that it symbolizes the mystic unity that pervades in all mankind and the universe. The theme is basic oneness of life. This poem seeks to determine the relationship of human beings to one another across time

and space. The basic metaphor in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* is flood tide that symbolizes the sea of life and time. The ferry connotes the cyclic movement in life. It suggests a process of going and returning. This poem can be compared to Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and Coleridge's *The Lime-tree Bower*. In both of these poems someone important to the poet- Wordsworth's sister, Coleridge's friend- is taken to a place that has been important to the poet. While Wordsworth is more concerned with the idea of the power of space but Coleridge like Whitman is more interested in the relevance of shared experience and its ability to transcend barriers of space and mortality. In the end, Whitman seems to give more credence to shared experience than Coleridge does. He realizes that others have also shared his range of emotional and spiritual experience. This makes him significant as an individual but also part of a larger whole. He says that as everyone possess a soul and the souls are involved in the same sights and scenes and same activities in this material world. Time and distance are meaningless, for 'oneness of all' is basic and spiritual. The poet cries out ecstatically in the third section of the poem:

It avails not, time nor place- distance avails
not

I am with you, you men and women of a
generation or ever so many generations
hence

Just as you feel when you look on the river
and sky so I felt,

(p. 168 Whitman)

There is spiritual identity between him and the other selves. *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* was first written in 1856, it resolves the antitheses of the 'one' and the 'many' and thus it develops that "unity in diversity" is

eternal law of Nature. Like *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* which appeared at the same time, *Song of the Open Road* celebrates a communion and a democracy based on place. A road is something everyone uses, whether they are rich or poor, and it forces all levels of people to associate with one another. The road, furthermore, signifies mobility. For Whitman too, the road is a space for gathering the material for poetry. As he travels along it, he sees a variety of people and places and hears a plethora of stories. In this poem, one's soul goes out in sympathy and love to the passers-by. Some kind of secret link seems to connect a man to total strangers. Thus, happiness flows out of the human soul in the open air. The poet invites all alike to come on the journey along the open road. In the beginning, Nature may appear rough and incomprehensible, but very soon the travellers would begin to understand her and in turn they would find divine things in Nature. The road is not merely the physical path on which the poet travellers but it is also symbolic of the path which leads to spirituality. The journey itself symbolizes the process by which the soul achieves its identity with the divine. The universe itself is a great road for travelling souls. As the souls progresses on its journey on the grand road of universe, all religions, philosophies, and theories which hamper the soul's progress fall away and seem meaningless. Thus, the soul expands and becomes large and free. So, the road variously stands for a long-brown path, the infinite

road of life, the metaphysical vision of the journey of the soul to its divine fulfillment. Whitman goes on to explain his unique experience on spirituality:

Only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality...Only here, and on such terms, the meditation, the devout

ecstasy, the soaring flight. Only here, communion with the mysteries....The soul emerges, and all statements, churches, sermons, melt away like vapors. Alone, and silent thought and awe, and aspiration-- and then the interior consciousness, like a hitherto unseen inscription, in magic ink, beams out its wondrous lines to the sense. Bibles may convey, and priests expound, but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one's isolated self, to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commune with unutterable.(11)

In *Leaves of Grass* the poet celebrates his own self, his individuality. To Whitman, the complete self is both physical and spiritual. The self is a portion of one Divine Soul. Whitman is both the poet of body and soul. He says that we could comprehend the soul through the medium of body. For Whitman, body is as sacred and as spiritual as the soul. Whitman's most important poetry from *Leaves of Grass*, and selections from his prose writings, offers a glimpse into the spiritual side of his most radical themes- love for country, love for others and love for self. Rich with passion, reverence and wonder, Whitman's poetry gives insight into his quest for self-discovery, which involved an ongoing mystical experience of the world. The most important period of his life as a poet was the years between 1850 and 1855. Outwardly it was undramatic and judged in terms of wordly success, it was a failure. But intellectually and spiritually, these were the most exciting and adventurous years that Whitman had experienced, for during the half-decade he wrote and printed his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and thereby created a new epoch not only in America but in world literature. Poet's major concern in *Leaves of Grass* was to explore and celebrate his own self. Secondly, he wanted to give

poetical expression to his thoughts on life's greatest mysteries- birth, death, rebirth or resurrection and reincarnation. *Leaves of Grass* is the biography of Whitman's soul. W.D.O' Conner said that it is a sort of American Bible. Richard M. Bucke distinguished simple, self and cosmic as three levels of consciousness and he placed in the last the prophet, the seer and the mystic. He maintains that Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and Walt Whitman are the persons who reached the cosmic level of consciousness. (13)

Like Emerson, he says nature is divine and an emblem of God. The universe is not dead matter, but full of life and meaning. He loves the earth, the flora and fauna of the earth, the moon and the stars, the sea. and all other elements of Nature. He believes that man is nature's child and therefore man and nature should never be disjointed. Whitman says that cosmos is God and God is the cosmos; death and decay are unreal. The cosmic consciousness is, indeed, one aspect of Whitman's mysticism. Mysticism is an experience which has a spiritual meaning which is not apparent to the senses nor to the intellect. Thus mysticism, an insight into the real nature of man, God, and the universe, is attained through one's intuition. A mystic believes in the unity of God and man, man and nature, God and the universe. For a mystic, time and space are unreal. Man communicates with his soul in a mystical experience and Whitman amply expresses his responses to the soul in *Leaves of Grass*, especially in *Song of Myself*. Whitman's poetry is an artistic expression of various aspects of his mystical experience. After an ecstatic spiritual experience that he once had, Whitman wrote:

"A man realizes the venerable myth he is a God walking the earth, he sees new

eligibilities, powers and beauties everywhere: he himself has a new eyesight and hearing. The play of the body in motion takes a previously unknown grace. Merely to Move is then a happiness, a pleasure to breathe, to see is also. All the beforehand gratifications, drink, spirits, coffee, grease, stimulants, mixtures, late hours, luxuries, deeds of the night, seem as vexatious dreams, now the awakening; many fall into their natural places, wholesome, conveying diviner joys." (12)

Whitman's fascination with the development of the human race and man's place in the scheme of existence was broadened and made more philosophical by his becoming acquainted in the early 1850's with lectures and books on astronomy. However, the internal evidence is so abundant, and at times verbal echoes so clear, that we can at least be sure of one source. This was the astronomer O.M. Mitchel, whose book *A Course of Six Lectures on Astronomy* (1848) Whitman unmistakably drew upon for facts, ideas, and figures of speech in many passages of *Song of Myself* and later poems. As a mystic, Whitman believed that there was no difference between the creator and the creation. His "self" is a universal self. He sees people of both sexes, all ages, many different walks of life; even animals are included. The poet along with the divine spirit not only loves them all; he is also a part of them. Whitman says:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend
outward to them

And such as it is to be of these more or less I
am,

And of these one and all I weave the song of
Myself.(4)

Whitman feels oneness with the objects before him. He loses himself in their actions. His own self merges into the universal self. He is here and everywhere. He is an inspired soul. That is why, *Leaves of Grass*, being the demonstration of his knowledge and feelings, is a work of inspired lyricism. And his intention to remain in common with the universe is really his communion with God since this world, too, is the outward manifestation of that ultimate reality with which he experiences oneness. In order to seek that ultimate truth, whatever it may be, Whitman, like Aristotle, directs his mind towards the worldly things. Being an American seeker after Truth, he lets his imagination go everywhere- in the remote places, in the far east, in the crowded cities,.....He wants to revoke, not only the objects before his eyes, but all the rest of the world, the 'infinity' of space and the 'amplitude' of time. Once he was asked by the readers to 'indicate the path between reality and their souls'. In the *Song of Myself*, he shows himself to be 'the poet of the Body' and also 'the poet of the Soul'.

"The pleasures of heaven are with me and
the

pains of hell are with me,

The first I graft and increase upon myself
the

letter I translate into a new tongue." (p. 181
Whitman)

He related the body to the mystical experience. Here he presents a striking contrast with Browning. Browning sees the body through the soul whereas Whitman sees the soul through the body. In *Song of Myself*, he interfuses the body and soul. Because of this interpretation, he abases neither the body nor the soul. The soul holds

the body captive and then the poet has a moment of illumination:

"And I know that the spirit of God is the
brother of my own,

And that all the men ever born are also my
brothers,

and the women my sisters and
lovers....." (p. 175 Whitman)

This intuitive knowledge springs spontaneously from the soul. It is transcendent and ineffable. This mysticism is all pervasive in the *Leaves*. Hence we find the mystic swinging from one pole to the other, till they are firmly rooted in ecstasy. In this way, the mystic seeks to merge his identity in the Absolute. The mystic is conscious of the unity of the universe. His concept of union is vigorously emphasized in *Passage to India*. This soul is charged to go beyond the barriers of space and time:

"O soul thou pleasant me, I thee,

Sailing these seas or on the hills, or waking
in the night,

Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time and
Space, and

Death, like water flowing....." (p.
254 Whitman)

Its task is to realize the unity and oneness of the Absolute. He tries to name the nameless, the transcendent. In this endeavour, he finds metaphors, and each metaphors is found to be inadequate. The poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* is an elegy based on the intensely personal experience of the poet asserting the triumph of the eternal life over death. The meaning of the poem is rather implicit and springs out from a recollection of the narrator's childhood days. Whitman imaginatively recreates the childhood experience of the lad and shows us how be

becomes the man and the man, a poet. *Out of the Cradle*

works through literary symbols. The cradle indicates the movement of the universe and sense of continuity following birth. The sea-waves whispers the mystery of death to the outsetting bard. The word 'death' is the missing clue. It is, infact, a prelude to spiritual life.

Moreover, Whitman's visions were not fleeting glimpses that came by fluke. He deals with death as a fact of life. Death in life is a fact but life in death is a truth for Whitman; he is thus a poet of matter and of spirit. Like a true mystic, he believes that no one really dies. For him, death means rebirth; it is the way by which man can establish a certain relation with God. Walt Whitman says that Nature is God. It is personal, alive with feeling. It is a reservoir of inexhaustible life, inspiration and love. His body and soul are spoken of in the spirit of the Great Sikh Masters. Though seemingly personal, his verse speaks of universal harmony and love, optimism and joy, and celebrates life through words electrified with love and spirit. Whitman's voice rings out today as clearly as ever. His poetry is so full of freedom and light that one thing is sure: it will maintain its vitality in times to come. The name of Walt Whitman stands on par with those of the great masters of American Literature. He tells readers that "this is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despite riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God..." (Karbiener, Introduction XXXV) (3)

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