

Mysticism- Evelyn Underhill Book Notes

The spiritual life is not a special career, involving abstraction from the world of things. It is a part of every man's life; and until he has realized it he is not a complete human being, has not entered into possession of all his powers.

It is therefore the function of a practical mysticism to increase, not diminish, the total efficiency, the wisdom and steadfastness, of those who try to practice it. It will help them enter, more completely than ever before, into the life of the group to which they belong. It will teach them to see the world in a truer proportion, discerning eternal beauty beyond and beneath apparent ruthlessness.

Chapter 1: What is Mysticism

Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.

Therefore it is to a practical mysticism that the practical man is here invited: to a training of his latent faculties, a bracing and brightening of his languid consciousness, an emancipation from the fetters of appearance, a turning of his attention to new levels of the world.

Chapter 2: A World of Reality

These persons prejudge nothing, criticize nothing. To some extent, their attitude to the universe is that of children: and because this is so, they participate to that extent in the Heaven of Reality. They do live a life in which the emphasis lies on sensation rather than thought: for the state which he then struggled to describe was that ideal state of pure receptivity, or perfect correspondence with the essence of things.

I would mean that we should receive from every flower, not merely a beautiful image to which the label "flower" has been affixed, but the full impact of its unimaginable beauty and wonder, the direct sensation of life having communion with life.

The artist is no more and no less than a contemplative who has learned to express himself, and who tells his love in color, speech, or sound: the mystic, upon one side of his nature, is an artist of a special and exalted kind, who tries to express something of the revelation he has received, mediates between Reality and the race.

People who do not judge or criticize things and have a childlike attitude towards the universe are able to participate in the reality of things. They live a life focused on sensation rather than thought and strive for a state of pure receptivity and connection with the true essence of things. The goal is to experience the full impact of the beauty and wonder of the world, rather than just seeing it as a label or image. Artists and mystics are similar in that they both express their connection to the reality of things and try to share that connection with others. (Rephrased and simplified)

Chapter 3: The Preparation of the Mystic

How shall I detach myself from the artificial world to which I am accustomed?

You are going to do it by an educational process; a drill, of which the first stages will be hard enough. You have already acknowledged the needs of such mental drill, such deliberate acts, in respect to the smaller matters of life. You willingly spend time and money over that narrowing and sharpening of attention which you call "business training", a "legal education", or the "acquisition of a scientific method."

The education of the mystical sense begins in self-simplification.

The essence of mystical contemplation is summed in these two experiences— union with the flux of life, and union with the Whole in which all lesser realities are resumed— and these experiences are well within your reach.

What is it that smears the windows of the senses?

Thought, convention, self-interest.

To "purify" the senses is to release them, so far as human beings may, from the tyranny of egocentric judgements; to make of them the organs of direct perception. This means that we must crush our deep-seated passions for classification and correspondences; ignore the instinctive, selfish question, "What does it mean to me?" Learn to dip ourselves in the universe at our gates, and know it, not from without by comprehension, but from within by self-mergence.

At the center there is a stillness which even you are not able to break. There, the rhythm of your duration is one with the rhythm of Universal Life. There, your essential self exists: the permanent being which persists through and behind the flow and change of your conscious states. You have been snatched to that center once or twice. Turn your consciousness inward to it deliberately.

To detach yourself from the artificial world, you need to go through a process of self-simplification. This process will require mental effort and discipline, similar to what is required for business training or legal education. The goal of this education is to learn to experience union with the natural world and the universe as a whole. To do this, you need to purify your senses, which means getting rid of selfish thoughts and judgments, and learning to perceive the world directly. This requires ignoring the question "What does it mean to me?" and instead immersing yourself in the universe. At the center of this process is a stillness that you can tap into and connect with the rhythm of universal life. This is where your true self exists, and you can reach it by turning your consciousness inward. (Rephrased and simplified)

Chapter 4: Meditation and Recollection

Recollection, the art which the practical man is now invited to learn, is in essence no more and no less than the subjection of the attention to the control of the will.

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Recollection begins in the deliberate and regular practice of meditation.

Take an idea, an object, from amongst the common stock, and hold it before your mind.

Chapter 5: Self-Adjustment

The man who makes a success of his life, in any department, is he who has chosen one from amongst these claims and interests, and devoted to it his energetic powers of heart and will; “unifying” himself about it, and from within it resisting all counter-claims. He has one objective, one center; has killed out the lesser ones, and simplified himself.

How often in each day do you deliberately revert to an attitude of disinterested adoration? Yet this is the only attitude in which true communion with the universe is possible. The very mainspring of your activity is a demand, either for a continued possession of that which you have, or for something which as yet you have not: wealth, success, honor, social position, love, friendship, comfort, amusement.

You feel that you have a right to some of these things: to a certain recognition of your powers, a certain immunity from failure or humiliation. You resent anything which opposes you in these matters. You become restless when you see other selves more skillful in the game of acquisition than yourself. You hold tight against all comers your own share of the spoils. You are rather inclined to shirk boring responsibilities and unattractive, unremunerative toil; are greedy of pleasure and excitement, devoted to the art of having a good time.

Chapter 6: Love and Will

Only the act of recollection, the constantly renewed retreat to the quiet center of the spirit, gives that assurance of a Reality, a calmer and more valid life attainable by us, which supports the stress and pain of self-simplification and permits us to hope on, even in the teeth of the world’s cruelty, indifference, degeneracy; whilst diligent character-building alone, with its perpetual untiring efforts at self-adjustment, its bracing, purging discipline, checks the human tendency to relapse into and react to the obvious, and makes possible the further development of the contemplative power.

The act of recollection, which means constantly returning to the peaceful center of your mind, can help you feel more in touch with reality and give you hope, even when the world is cruel or indifferent. Building your character through self-adjustment and discipline will help you avoid falling back into old habits and allow you to continue developing your ability to contemplate.

Chapter 7: The First Form of Contemplation

Begin therefore at once. Gather yourself up, as the exercises of recollection have taught you to do. Then— with attention no longer frittered amongst the petty accidents and interests of your personal life, but poised, tense, ready for the work you shall demand of it— stretch out by a distinct act of loving will towards one of the myriad manifestations of life that surround you: and which, in an ordinary way, you hardly notice unless you happen to need them.

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Pour yourself towards it, do not draw its image towards you. Deliberate—more, impassioned—attentiveness, an attentiveness which soon transcends all consciousness of yourself, as separate from and attending to the thing seen; this is the condition of success. As to the object of contemplation, it matters little. From Alp to insect, anything will do, provided that your attitude be right: for all things in this world towards which you are stretching out are linked together, and one truly apprehended will be the gateway to the rest.

Look with the eye of contemplation on the most dissipated tabby on the streets, and you shall discern the celestial quality of life.

You must look at these things as you would look into the eyes of a friend: ardently, selflessly, without considering his reputation, his practical uses, his anatomical peculiarities, or the vices which might emerge were he subjected to psycho analysis.

Such a simple exercise, if entered upon by a singleness of heart, will soon repay you. By this quiet yet tense act of communion, this loving gaze, you will presently discover a relationship—far more intimate than anything you imagined—between yourself and the surrounding “objects of sense”; and in those objects of sense a profound significance, a personal quality, and actual power of response, which you might in cooler moments think absurd.

The discovery of your fraternal link with all living things, this down-sinking of your arrogant personality into the great generous stream of life, marks an important stage in your apprehension of that Science of Love which contemplation is to teach.

It is a veritable condition of awareness; a direct perception, not an opinion or an idea. For those who attain it, the span of the senses is extended. These live in a world which is lit with an intenser light.

This experience will be, in the very highest sense, the experience of sensation without thought

The passage is suggesting that one should practice contemplation as a way of connecting with the world around them and to discover the deeper meaning and significance of things. To do this, one should focus their attention on an object or living thing, looking at it with a loving and selfless gaze, without judgment or preconception. Through this exercise, one may discover a deeper connection and intimacy with the object of contemplation and with all living things. The passage also suggests that this experience can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the world, and can expand one's perception and understanding of it. (ChatGPT summarizing the entire chapter notes)

Chapter 9: The Third Form of Contemplation

You are to let yourself go; to cease all conscious striving and pushing. Finding yourself in this place of darkness and quietude, this “Night of the Spirit,” you are to dwell there meekly; asking nothing, seeking nothing, but with your doors flung wide open towards God.

And as you do thus, there will come to you an ever clearer certitude that this darkness enveils the goal for which you have been seeking from the first; the final Reality with which you are

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destined to unite, the perfect satisfaction of your most ardent and most sacred desires. It is there, but you cannot by your efforts reach it.

This realization of your own complete impotence, of the resistance which the Transcendent—long sought and faithfully served— now seems to offer to your busy outgoing will and love, your ardour, your deliberation self-donation, is at once the most painful and most essential phase in the training of the human soul. It brings you into that state of passive suffering which is to complete the decentralization of your character, test the purity of your love, and perfect your education in humility.

The passage describes a spiritual practice of letting go of conscious effort and striving, and instead dwelling in a place of darkness and quietude. The idea is to open oneself up to God and let go of any desire or expectation. Through this practice, one may come to realize that the darkness enveils the ultimate goal of spiritual union and the satisfaction of one's deepest desires. However, this realization also brings a sense of one's own impotence and the resistance of the transcendent to one's efforts. This is seen as an important and painful part of the process of spiritual growth and development, as it leads to a state of passive suffering that can help to decentralize one's character, test the purity of one's love, and perfect humility. (ChatGPT summarizing of previous passage)

Here you must oppose more thoroughly than before the instincts and suggestions of your separate, clever, energetic self.

The last segments of selfhood, the very desire for spiritual satisfaction— the fundamental human tendency to drag down the Simple Fact and make it ours, instead of offering ourselves to it— must be sought out and killed.

Chapter 10: The Mystical Life

The mystics are artists; and the stuff in which they work is most often human life. They want to heal the disharmony between the actual and the real: and since, in the white-hot radiance of that faith, hope, and charity which burns in them, they discern such a reconciliation to be possible, they are able to work for it with a singleness of purpose and an invincible optimism denied to other men.