EXPLORING MYSTICISM. By Frits Staal. Penguin Books: New York, 1975, 224 pp (a slightly different edition has been published in paperback by the University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975).

The study of mysticism has never been more popular, nor exposed to greater risks of distortion, than at the present time. There has long been a need for a systematic critique of results achieved and methods employed in this field of study, which has often avoided precise definitions and has rarely been characterised by clarity and consistency of method. This is a task that Frits Staal, professor of philosophy and South Asian languages at the University of California (Berkeley) has now undertaken. Known for his work in Indian philosophy and linguistics (including a comparative study of *Advaita and Neo-Platonism*, University of Madras, 1961, and remarkable researches into contemporary Vedic recitation), Professor Staal has here embarked on a project for which he is particularly well qualified.

Two-thirds of his book are devoted to questions of method and evaluate the work of others. In the remainder, he addresses himself to the more exacting labour of establishing the bases for a rational investigation of mysticism. The book opens with an assault on the usual assumption that oriental thought, and above all, religious thought, is "irrational." Taking as his criterion of rationality the simple postulate that self-contradictions are false, Staal proceeds to demonstrate that irrationality is a built-in component of occidental Christian tradition. Turning to early Indian Buddhism, he finds little in its philosophical expression that would qualify as "irrational," according to the criterion of self-contradiction. Considering the problem of the Madhyamaka tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*), Professor Staal finds rationality even in that perplexing formulation ("Everything is such as it is, not such as it is, both such as it is and not such as it is, and neither such as it is nor such as it is not. That is the Buddha's teaching."—Nagārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 18.8). He also entertains Richard Robinson's suggestion that the true function of the tetralemma may have been as a pedagogical or therapeutic device, and hence an anticipation of the Zen kōan. It may be, too, that the *catuṣkoṭi* was simply an illustration of the inapplicability of ordinary language to absolute reality (pp. 43–54). At all events, Staal finds that the attribution of irrationality to Buddhism by Western scholars can best be understood as a reflection of their own, Christian-nurtured belief that all religion is essentially irrational.

The second and longest part of Staal's book (pp. 65–122) is a review of work done to date, rather bellicosely entitled, "How not to study mysticism." Here the author presents a selection of representative approaches: dogmatic, philological, historical, phenomenological, physiological, and psychological. These are sharp critical essays; they do a necessary job of clearing away much wooly thinking, and unmask some outright falsifications that have too long been allowed to pass unchallenged. Staal is particularly effective in showing up the hollow pretensions of certain fashionable trends in the humanistic and social sciences; their worst abuses, he maintains, derive from a false conception of the methods of the natural sciences, a misprision which humanistic and social scientists then attempt to impose upon their own very different material. In dealing with the often too facile assumptions of his predecessors, Staal constantly tries to indicate the real boundaries of our knowledge, particularly with regard to the technical vocabulary of Indian mysticism. His inclusion of Edward Conze's work among the monitory examples of "how not to study mysticism" seems to me curious, however, given Conze's repeated insistence on just the same experiential prerequisites that Staal calls for later, in the third and final section of the book.

It is this final section that we should reasonably expect to propel us far beyond what has hitherto been accomplished in the rational study of mysticism. What does Professor Staal offer us, as a systematic approach to the problem? First, "Effort, doubt, and criticism" (pp. 125–35). He maintains that direct experience of mystical states is necessary if we are to study them. Yet experience is by no means to preclude a measure of accompanying critical detachment, the effort to observe the motions of our own minds. Professor Staal's ideal student of mysticism is a "rational mystic," who willingly submits to a practical discipline and opens himself to experience, in order to achieve results that will later be subjected to systematic analysis. The investigator of mysticism will need to accept the order of practice of an established tradition, and so, a teacher—though he need not accept uncritically his teacher's explanations of processes or, it may be, theology. The crucial point here seems to be knowing when to withdraw and submit provisional results to detailed analysis; earlier experimenters have sometimes simply continued to advance—gone in, or gone under—and this is particularly true of those who have attempted to attain mystical states by means of drugs.

Professor Staal considers the question of drug-induced ecstasy alongside other, purely mental systems, and makes use of both traditional accounts and modern laboratory studies. He comes to the cautious conclusion that drugs may be efficacious in bringing about mental states which can also be produced by other means—means which generally find a larger measure of ethical approval in established religious systems. Yet many organised religions view mystical states with suspicion, if not overt disapproval. It is on the relation of mysticism to religion, and the possible historical role of chemical substances in the development of religious and mystical systems, that Professor Staal makes many of his most interesting suggestions.

How are the paradoxical tenets of systems like the Madhyamaka related to the organisation and practice of religion? This is a question that historians of Buddhism have perhaps not often enough considered. There is a notorious gap, in Western scholarship, between the study of Buddhist philosophy and the understanding of how—and if—it related to actual Buddhist practice. As an example of historical modifications arising out of the ultimate unassimilability of absolutist doctrines, Professor Staal takes Ch'an / Zen. Originating with Indian formulations that drastically minimized the role of personal effort in spiritual awakening, Zen in time developed into a system comprising rigorous training and stringent tests of attainment. "Zen is therefore noted for the stress on spontaneity which is present in its theory and expressed in its art, and for painful and military disciplines which characterise its practice" (p. 169).

Staal offers other suggestions on matters of historical development, and considers the origins of ritualism and the background of philosophy. Starting from historical instances of synthesis, such as "the combination of works and insight" (*jñānakarmasamuccaya*) advocated by certain medieval Vedantist, Advaita, and Mīmāṃsā authors, Staal advances once again to the controversial ground of drug-induced mystical states and their synthesis with ritual activity. Here he draws upon the researches of R. G. Wasson, who has identified the Vedic soma with a hallucinogenic mushroom, fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*). In pre-Vedic times, soma was apparently used by Indo-European priestly officiants in the course of their rites. When the Indo-Europeans left their homeland, where the original hallucinogenic soma was readily available, and arrived in India, where less efficacious substitutes had to be found, "there developed the Vedic ritual, in all likelihood the most elaborate ritual man has devised" (p. 172). The purpose of the elaborate ritual, Staal suggests, was to reach a certain state of mind that had earlier been attained by ingestion of the original, hallucinogenic soma. Thus the development of ritualism might be related to a progressive deprivation of earlier direct stimuli as a means of achieving supranormal states of mind. When in time the efficacy of ritualism came to be questioned, it was in turn supplanted by a process of interiorisation and idealisation. The interiorisation of ritual action and an enhanced rationalisation of its effects brings us to the threshhold of Indian philosophical thought.

Staal's carefully worked-out hypotheses (which are not adequately represented by this compressed summary) will of course have to be weighed by competent authorities. But there is no denying their great interest, nor the remarkable agility with which Professor Staal is able to demonstrate their potential importance for the study of mysticism itself. His concluding chapter proposes that for purposes of rational investigation, mysticism may have to be removed entirely from the realm of religion. Though mystics have regularly had recourse to existing religious superstructures in naming or explaining the contents of their experiences, there may be no proof that mystical states of mind are in any way intrinsically "religious." With mysticism in general, as with the individual mystic, the attribution of the experience to a divine agency would be only a secondary stage (like the similar, once universal, attribution of dreams). "It seems likely that the belief in gods is a special outcome of mystical experiences, interpreted as divine, and is in turn a device that facilitates the attainment of such experiences" (p. 179). As we have now abandoned the religious view in regard to dreams, perhaps a rational interpretation of mysticism will have to follow suit. It is certain that this would in time affect our notions of religion itself—given the number of religions and sects that are based upon the interpretation of an original mystical experience.

Professor Staal seems to exemplify a new and distinctively international kind of scholarship; born in Holland, and having taught at universities in Holland, England, India, and America, he is proficient in several highly developed scholarly disciplines. His writing cuts neatly across the traditional national and disciplinary boundaries that still too often isolate scholars from one another. Particularly worthy of mention is his constant recourse to the works of Japanese Indologists. The frequency of his references to the writings of Professors Nagao, Hattori, and Kajiyama reveals Professor Staal's recognition of Kyoto as one of the world's leading centres of Indology. There is no doubt that his book will be generally welcomed as a thought-provoking guide to a difficult subject.

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