Body awareness as a gateway to eternity: a note on the mysticism of Spinoza and its affinity to Buddhist meditation

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Does Spinoza's Philosophy Require a 'Mystical Experience' in Order to Be Understood?

Now and again the question is raised whether the philosophy of Spinoza is a kind of mysticism or not. In Holland, for instance, this question was formerly debated between members of 'The Hague School', who argued for a mystical interpretation, and members of 'The Rijnsburg School', who argued against it, since they were more in favour of a rationalistic point of view.

Recently this old discussion has been revived by Professor Hubbeling at the University of Groningen. In an article on 'Logic and Experience in Spinoza's Mysticism', he takes sides with the rationalists. He argues that although Spinoza's philosophy has a mystical structure, in the sense that it defends certain doctrines which are often adhered to by typical mystics, this can be explained without assuming that Spinoza himself was a mystic or had any mystical experiences. It can be explained on the basis of logic and rational thinking alone, especially those logical rules which may be established on the basis of axioms 1 and 4 in Part 1 of the Ethics.

By way of implication, I suppose that Professor Hubbeling would also hold that in order to reach an adequate understanding of the doctrines of Spinoza, it is sufficient to read his definitions, axioms, postulates, and so forth carefully, and to follow his reasoning as he deduces his propositions. This is sufficient in the sense that it does not require any particular 'mystical experience' in order to grasp the meaning of what Spinoza has to say.

As an example of such a doctrine which has a mystical structure without presupposing any mystical experience, either on the part of Spinoza or his readers, Professor Hubbeling mentions: 'seeing the world and the human self in one great all including vision, i.e. seeing things sub specie aeternitatis (from the viewpoint of eternity).'

On this score, however, I believe that Professor Hubbeling's interpretation is not entirely correct. In my opinion, he exaggerates the importance of the second kind of cognition, or reason, at the expense of the third, which is
intuition. In fact, Professor Hubbeling seems to admit this to some extent himself when he remarks that he is ‘inclined to say that Spinoza’s mysticism is, generally speaking, founded on the second way of knowledge and not on the third way.’

I am aware that this is a controversial field of investigation, and that it is bristling with difficulties of interpretation. It has lately taken Professor Gueroult at Paris some 600 pages of well-packed discussion to clarify Part 2 of the Ethics, where Spinoza’s theory of knowledge is developed. I shall draw on his investigations in the following, and attempt to bring out some of their implications for the questions at hand.

Contrary to Professor Hubbeling, I will argue that the mystical structure of Spinoza’s philosophy can not be adequately cognized without presupposing a certain kind of mystical experience, and I see no reason to doubt that Spinoza himself had this kind of experience in rich measure. Moreover, I hold that this experience is first of all related to a certain kind of body awareness, quite similar to that which is cultivated in Buddhist meditation, and that it may very well be considered a kind of mystical experience.

**WAS SPINOZA A MYSTIC?**

As far as Spinoza himself is concerned, I think we may safely characterize him as a mystic in the sense that he had penetrated deeply into the field of mystical experience; at least a certain kind of mystical experience. I shall postpone for the moment how this kind of experience should be defined. Suffice it to say here that Spinoza appears to refer to such a *unio mystica* in his auto-biographical sketch at the beginning of the Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding. Here he describes his initial enlightenment as ‘a cognition of the union which the mind has with the whole of nature’ (§ 13).

Moreover, this experience, which Spinoza went through at some early point in his career, was crucial for the reorientation of his way of living. It gave him an internal motivation and power to liberate himself from the enslaving passions of everyday life, so as to give priority to eternal ends before temporal (§ 10), and to reintegrate the latter within the framework of those values and norms which follow from the former (§§ 4, 11). From Spinoza’s own account, we may gather that this was a kind of meditative experience (§ 7). These moments of illumination were ‘at first rare, and of very short duration, yet afterwards, as the true good became more discernible, they became more frequent and more lasting’ (§ 11).

According to Spinoza’s mature conceptions in the Ethics, this union of the mind with the whole of nature must have reference to nature in so far as it is conceived under the attribute of thinking. In so far as nature is conceived under the attribute of extension, there must be a parallel union of the body
with the whole of nature. This follows from Spinoza's theory of a structural
and functional isomorphy between the attributes, and from his conception of
the mind as the idea of the body. Now, the body can be conceived in two
ways, either from the viewpoint of abstract duration and time, or from the
viewpoint of eternity. Accordingly, the mind, which is the idea of the body,
will be differently conceived in each case. I take it that when Spinoza writes
about the union of the mind (or the body) with the whole of nature, this must
be understood as equivalent with conceiving the mind (or body) from the
viewpoint of eternity.

TO CONCEIVE THE ESSENCE OF THE BODY FROM THE VIEWPOINT
OF ETERNITY

This is a main point in Spinoza's mysticism. In the Ethics the cognition of
things from the viewpoint of eternity is identified with the third kind of
cognition, as can be seen from 5P31Dem.6 However, in 5P29Dem, which is
referred to in 5P31Dem, Spinoza states that a person cannot cognize any-
thing from the viewpoint of eternity, except in so far as he conceives the
essence of his own body in this way. Since this passage is crucial for the
mystical interpretation adduced here, I shall quote Spinoza's own words:

therefore this power of conceiving things from the viewpoint of eternity
does not pertain to the mind except in so far as it conceives the essence
of the body from the viewpoint of eternity (5P29Dem).

My argument for holding that this statement supports a mystical inter-
pretation is briefly as follows: in order to conceive anything else from the view-
point of eternity, a person must be able to conceive the essence of his own
body in this way. Now, the essence of the body, as well as of the mind, is
here supposed to be a singular essence, while the three kinds of cognition are
all general. From this it would seem to follow that the singular essence
cannot be an object of cognition. Therefore, if it is perceived at all, it must be
perceived in another manner. And this is what Spinoza affirms, I believe,
when he states that we may feel and experience that we are eternal. In that
case, the cognizing subject, who actually is this eternal and singular essence,
feels and experiences that he is existentially engaged in the act of cognition
while attending to its general contents. This must be a highly personal
experience, and if it be granted that it is a mystical experience, we may
conclude that such a mystical experience is a precondition for an adequate
understanding of the philosophy of Spinoza by the third kind of cognition.

I shall first attempt to substantiate this argument, and then draw out some
further implications as to its existential contents. To conceive the essence of
the body from the viewpoint of eternity is to be aware of its effort to persevere
in its being in a concrete and continuous duration. The power of the body,
by which it conserves its existence, is the very power of God, or his active essence, in so far as it is the immanent cause of the singular essence and existence of the body. To be aware of this is to be aware that one's own life participates in the life of God, which, once again, points to the conception of a *unio mystica*. This kind of body awareness involves not only concrete duration, but also the viewpoint of eternity. And this insight generates wisdom, which is the main condition for freedom. At this point Spinoza's theory, and especially the practice which it entails, has a close affinity to certain kinds of Buddhist meditation, which I shall also show.

**THE ESSENCE OF THE BODY (AND THE MIND) IS A SINGULAR ESSENCE**

The first premise in my argument for a mystical interpretation of 5P29Dem is that Spinoza is here referring to the singular essence of the body, and hence to the singular essence of the mind, which is its idea. This can be established, I believe, from Spinoza's own reference in 5P29Dem to 5P23. If we read 5P23 together with its demonstration, which refers to 5P22, we see that Spinoza is writing about 'the essence of this or that human body' of which there is necessarily given in God an idea from the viewpoint of eternity. In his essay, Professor Hubbeling agrees that 5P22 should be interpreted in this way. He too believes that Spinoza is writing about an *essentia particularis* in this context.  

**IT IS ALSO AN ETERNAL ESSENCE**

This singular essence is not only conceived from the viewpoint of eternity; according to 5P23Sch it is eternal by itself: 'This idea which expresses the essence of the body from the viewpoint of eternity is . . . a certain mode of thinking which pertains to the essence of the mind, and is necessarily eternal.' That is to say, the singular essence of the body is an eternal essence, and the idea of this essence constitutes the singular essence of the mind, which is also eternal.

**THE THREE KINDS OF COGNITION ARE ALL GENERAL**

The second premise of my argument is that each of the three kinds of cognition are general in character. That is to say, they employ general categories in their attempt to understand things, even when these things are singular entities.

I base this interpretation on 2P40Sch2, where Spinoza introduces the three kinds of cognition as three ways of forming 'universal notions' (*notiones*
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universales), as he calls them. It should be noticed, however, that his use of the term ‘universal notion’ in 2P40Sch2 differs from his use of it in 2P40Sch1. In the second scholium it is used neutrally with regard to the distinction between the three kinds of cognition, and thus equivalently with what I call a general category, which may be either a general concept or proposition, or a general image. In the first scholium, on the other hand, it is used for notions belonging to the first kind of cognition only. Moreover, the general categories belonging to the second kind of cognition are called common notions (or common and specific notions), while those belonging to the third kind of cognition are called ‘the essence of things’. Following Professor Gueroult, I interpret this expression as ‘the general essence of singular things’.8

THEREFORE THE SINGULAR ESSENCE OF THE BODY IS NOT AN OBJECT OF COGNITION

If this interpretation is correct, it follows that when Spinoza in 5P29 Dem writes about the mind's conceiving the essence of the body from the viewpoint of eternity, he does not mean that the mind cognizes the singular essence of the body, for this cannot be cognized by the general categories of any of the three kinds of cognition, not even the third.

In this connection we should not forget that according to Spinoza's ontology, only singular essences are real, while general essences as well as other general concepts, propositions, images, and so forth, are not real except in so far as they are modes of cognition.9 They are either entities of reason or entities of imagination. If this be so, then one should think that Spinoza’s system of philosophy as a whole must have the status of an entity of reason, since all its definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations, and so forth, purport to express either general essences or general truths. In that case, the reality which this system seeks to account for must be something beyond the general categories of the system itself, and belong to that which is singular, and not to be grasped by the categories of thinking. On this interpretation, Spinoza’s philosophy is congenial to mysticism indeed.

NEVERTHELESS, THIS SINGULAR ESSENCE CAN BE FELT AND EXPERIENCED IN A HIGHLY PERSONAL MANNER

Shall we conclude, then, that the mind can in no way perceive the singular essence of the body? Not at all. For, as Spinoza goes on to say in 5P23Sch:

Nevertheless, we feel and experience (sentimus, experimurque) that we are eternal. . . . We feel that our mind, in so far as it involves the essence of the body from the viewpoint of eternity, is eternal, and that its existence cannot be defined by time or explained by duration.

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In other words, although a person may not be able to cognize his singular essence by any of the three kinds of cognition, he may, nevertheless, feel and experience it in a direct manner. It follows that this must be an extremely personal experience, since it has nothing general about it; it is a peculiar involvement of the person, who actually is this singular essence, in his acts of cognition while he attends to the general contents of the cognition. It is this personal experience which is required, according to SP29Dem, in order to understand anything from the viewpoint of eternity, or by the third kind of cognition. And we may add that this experience is a special way of being conscious of oneself, of God, and of things, as Spinoza says in SP31Sch, 39Sch, and 42Sch.

AN EXISTENTIAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SECOND AND THIRD KINDS OF COGNITION

The difference between the second and third kinds of cognition, therefore, is not that the second cognizes a general entity and the third a singular; both cognize a general entity. Nor is the difference to be found in this, that the second kind of cognition is deductive, while the third is not. Both are deductive, although in two different ways. The difference is first of all an ontological, or existential, difference. The third kind of cognition requires an existential participation on the part of the cognizing subject himself. If this personal experience is lacking, his cognition will only be of the second kind, at best, or of the first, at worst.

The second kind of cognition proceeds by an external and formal deduction, whereby the general properties of singular things are established by subsuming them under properties which are common to all things under a certain attribute, or common and specific to certain classes of things. The third kind of cognition, on the other hand, proceeds by an internal and genetic deduction, proceeding 'from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate cognition of the essence of things' (2P40Sch2). This cognition is adequate because it proceeds genetically and understands the essence of things through their first cause, or God, who in a certain sense is the adequate cause of each thing, since he is the immanent cause of all causes.

However, as Professor Gueroult argues, there need not be any difference in the cognitive content between the common and specific notion of a thing and the idea of its general formal essence. The difference arises from the way this content is cognized. The crucial condition which must be met, if a person is going to transform his cognition of a property into a cognition of an essence, is that he be able to cognize it from the viewpoint of eternity. From 1D8 and SP30Dem we see that this is the same as cognizing the thing.
through the existence of God; for eternity is the existence of God in so far as it is implied by his essence. But this, according to 5P29Dem, requires first of all that the cognizing person be able to cognize the essence of his own body from the viewpoint of eternity.

This interpretation fits remarkably well with Spinoza’s way of contrasting the second and third kinds of cognition in 5P36Sch, although in this scholium he mentions only the essence (and existence) of the mind. But the same observations may be transferred to the essence (and existence) of the body.

According to Professor Gueroult’s reading of this passage, the first line in its second half should be divided in two.¹² When Spinoza writes: ‘Again, since the essence of our mind consists in cognition alone, the beginning and foundation of which is God’ (1P15, 2P47Sch), he is writing about the general essence of the mind, as genetically defined through God as its immanent cause, and hence as an object of the third kind of cognition. However, when he goes on to write that: ‘It is clear to us in what manner and for what reason our mind follows with regard to essence and existence from the divine nature and continually depends on God’, he is writing about the singular essence of the cognizing person. The singular essence of the cognizing person is existentially engaged in the very act of cognition, whereby he cognizes the general essence of the mind (or body), as stated in the first half of the sentence.

It is by this existential involvement that we ‘feel and experience that we are eternal’ (5P23Sch), and this feeling adds a clarity (5P36Sch) and certainty (2P43Sch, 49Sch) to our cognition, which makes the third kind of cognition ‘much more powerful’ than the second kind, as Spinoza remarks later on in 5P36Sch. He continues:

For although I have shown generally in the First Part [of the Ethics] that all things (and consequently also the human mind) depend on God with regard to essence and existence, yet that demonstration, although legitimate and beyond the reach of doubt, does not, nevertheless, affect the mind as much as when the same is concluded from the essence itself of some singular thing which we say depends on God.

This singular involvement, moreover, is a main condition for Spinoza’s ethics of liberation; for it is only through the power which it releases that a person can effectively counteract the strength of the passions and thereby gain freedom.

TWO WAYS OF CONCEIVING THINGS AS ACTUALLY EXISTING

I would like to add here some further considerations in support of this view. These considerations may serve, at the same time, as a concretion of what it means to conceive the essence of the body (or mind) from the viewpoint of
eternity. There are especially two passages which may be helpful in this connection, the one following immediately after 5P29Dem, namely 5P29Sch, and the one referred to in this scholium, namely 2P45Sch.

Things are conceived by us as actual in two ways, either in so far as we conceive them to exist with relation to a certain time and place, or in so far as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But those things which are conceived in this second manner as true or real, we conceive from the viewpoint of eternity, and their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God, as we have shown in 2P45, to the Scholium of which the reader is also referred (5P29Sch).

This passage may be interpreted either as drawing a distinction between two ways of conceiving this as actual, or between two ways of conceiving this as existing. I quite agree with Professor Gueroult that the latter interpretation has the stronger textual support, for instance when it is read in the light of 2P8Cor, 45Sch, 5P23Sch, and 30&Dem. Let me also quote from 2P45Sch:

By existence I do not mean here duration, that is, existence in so far as it is conceived abstractly and as a certain form of quantity. I speak of the very nature of existence, which is attributed to singular things because they follow from the eternal necessity of the nature of God, infinite in number and in infinite ways (1P16). I speak, I say, of the very existence of singular things in so far as they are in God. For although each one is determined by another singular thing to exist in a certain manner, yet the force by which each of them perseveres in its existence follows from the eternal necessity of the nature of God (see (1P24Cor) (2P45Sch).

When 5P29Sch is read together with 2P45Sch, we can say that things are conceived by us as actual or as existing in two ways. If we adopt an ‘existentialist’ terminology, we may call the first one ‘authentic existence’ and the second ‘inauthentic existence’. The first one gives us ‘the very nature of existence’, and by this alone do we see things ‘as true or real’.

**THE ACTUAL ESSENCE OF THE BODY (AND MIND), WHICH IS ITS REAL EXISTENCE, IS THE VERY FORCE, OR CONATIION, BY WHICH IT CONSERVES ITS BEING**

Applying this terminology to 5P29Dem, we may say that when the mind conceives the essence of the body from the viewpoint of eternity, it conceives this essence as actually existing. It is close to hand to identify this with the ‘actual essence’ of which Spinoza writes in 3P7. I shall return to this presently.
The essence and existence of the body is then conceived to be contained in
God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature; and the idea of
the body will then involve the eternal and infinite essence of God, as Spinoza
says in 5P29Sch.

Let us follow his reference to 2P45Sch at this point. When the essence of
the body is viewed as authentically existing in this way, it is viewed as the
very existence of the singular thing, in so far as it is in God and follows from
the eternal necessity of the nature of God. And, most important of all, it is
seen that the force by which the body (and mind) perseveres in its existence
follows from the eternal necessity of the nature of God.

From this we may conclude that when the singular and eternal essence of
the body is seen by the mind as actually existing in this authentic way, it is
conceived as an actual essence. In 2P45Sch, this is called ‘force’, which is
nothing else than the conation of the body (or mind) to persevere in its being.
This part of Spinoza’s theory is developed in 3P6&Dem and 7&Dem.14

THE MYSTICAL UNION OF GOD’S POWER AND MAN’S

When we follow Spinoza’s own references in 3P6 and 7, together with those
in 2P45Sch, we may gather that the conation or power of each singular thing,
that is, its actual essence, is nothing else than the actual power of God
(cf. 1P34, 4P4Dem), or his active essence (cf. 2P3Sch), not in so far as it is
infinite, but in so far as it can be explained by the actual essence of man
(4P4Dem). Since God is absolutely infinite (1D6), it follows that he must be
indivisible (1D12, 13&Schr). Therefore his essence and existence are one and
the same (1P20), as are also his essence and power (1P34). Furthermore, since
God is the immanent cause of all things (1P18), it follows from his indivisibility
that he must be present in all his effects, and equally present in parts
and wholes (2P45, 46&Dem). As a consequence, the power of God must be
present in the conation of each singular mode, and be so in its totality. This
is what the person feels, experiences, and is conscious of when he conceives
the essence of his body (or mind) from the viewpoint of eternity.

When the term ‘active essence’ is used about the power of God, it is traditionally
taken as equivalent with the term ‘the life of God’.15 When a person
is aware how his singular essence, or actual essence, follows from the active
essence of God, he may be said to be conscious of participating in the very
life of God, and to be united with God in a mystical union. And this is a most
intimate personal experience.

However, at the same time we must take care to point out that this union
does not amount to an identification of the essence and existence of man with
the essence and existence of God, as some critics of Spinoza will have it
(cf. 2D2, 10Schr). The two remain distinct, or rather, incommensurable;
since God, or natura naturans, is the immanent cause of all modes, or natura

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naturata (1P29Sch), and incommensurable with his effects with regard to both essence and existence (1P17Sch). For this reason Spinoza’s philosophy should not be considered as pantheistic, as much as panentheistic.

CONCRETE DURATION FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF ETERNITY

There is another implication of 2P45Sch to which I will also draw attention. This is concerned with the relation between the viewpoint of eternity and duration. As Professor Gueroult has made clear, the viewpoint of eternity does not entail an abolition of duration, but only of duration in so far as it is abstractly conceived by the imagination. Then it is conceived as something measurable in relation to a temporal framework. To the extent that a person goes into the cognition of himself or other things from the viewpoint of eternity, his imaginations concerning abstract duration in time will cease to be experienced as an external reality. He will be reflectively aware that his ordinary conceptions concerning external things, for instance of things past or things future, or of things existing at other places, are nothing more than inadequate projections of his own imagination (cf. 2P17Sch, 49Sch, 5P2). This reflective self-awareness involves a new kind of consciousness (cf. 5P31Sch, 39Sch), which has ‘no when nor before nor after’ (cf. 1P33Sch2).

All the same, this cognition has duration. But this duration is nothing else than the experience of the conation of the body (and mind). The only difference is that now the duration of the body is experienced in a concrete way, as flowing from the life force of the person himself, which is the very life of God. This conception of concrete duration is very close to the ‘living duration’ (durée vécue) of Henri Bergson, although Spinoza’s apprehension of its eternal ground is much more profound than his.

One of the properties of this duration is its continuity. This is brought out in Spinoza’s remark in 5P36Sch, quoted above, where he says that the person who cognizes something by the third kind of cognition sees how it ‘continually depends on God’. The continuity of modal duration follows with necessity from the indissolubility of God’s essence or power, which is its immanent cause.

It is true that Spinoza does not use the term ‘concrete duration’ in 2P45Sch. In that context it seems rather that he uses the term ‘duration’ as if it were equivalent with ‘abstract duration’, or ‘duration which can be determined in time’, as he also calls it in 5P29Dem. However, his definition of duration in Thoughts on Metaphysics clearly shows that he would agree to the terminology used above. In Part 1, Chapter 4, § 2 of that work Spinoza writes that Duration is an attribute under which we conceive the existence of created things according as they endure in their own actuality. From this it clearly follows that duration is not to be distinguished from the totality of a thing’s existence except in thought.
TRANSCENDENTAL BODY AWARENESS

It should also be noted that when a person is aware of the essence or conation of his body from the viewpoint of eternity, he has a kind of transcendental awareness which is quite different from, or incommensurable with, an empirical cognition of the body. It is concerned with the body which he *is*, and not the body which he *has*. The empirical cognition belongs to the first kind of cognition. When the body is perceived in that way, it is seen from the viewpoint of an external observer. This observer may be another person or oneself. In either case the body is perceived in an external way together with other external things in the common order of nature; and related to those mental constructs which help us to define the positions of things in time and space. The body is seen as part of the ‘life space’ of a person, as the phenomenologists would call it. But this entire life space is constituted through the imagination, which remains an abstract and inadequate cognition, as can be seen from Spinoza’s summary of this part of his theory in 2P29Cor. This pertains both to the ordinary cognition of everyday life, and to the cognitions within the framework of the various empirical and formal sciences, such as the natural and social sciences and in the humanities.

On the other hand we have the body of which a person is aware in the third kind of cognition. This is felt and experienced from the participant’s point of view. Now, since whatever is cognized in the empirical way, within the framework of time and space, belongs to that which is constituted by the imagination, it follows that the constituting body itself cannot belong to time and space. In this sense it is not an empirical body, but a transcendental body; that is to say, it is a necessary condition for generating the constituted body which is conceived by the imagination.

The transcendental body has its being in concrete duration, but not in time and space. However, this can be understood either in a weak sense, in so far as it is understood by the second kind of cognition, or in a strong sense, in so far as it is understood by the third kind of cognition. When it is understood by the second kind of cognition, it is merely understood ‘from a certain viewpoint of eternity’ (*sub quodam aeternitatis specie*) (2P44Cor&Dem). In this perspective the body may be said to be timeless and spaceless. But when it is understood by the third kind of cognition, it is seen from the viewpoint of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*) in the full sense, which is also to see it from the viewpoint of infinity. It is here alone that it is seen to follow from the power of God.18

A GATEWAY TO ETERNITY

When a person is reflectively aware of his body and its affections and affects in this way, he no longer mistakes the products of his imagination for external things (SP2), but screens off the tendency to hypostasize the products of the
imagination. In this way error and false consciousness are counteracted by adequate cognition; and as a consequence, the passions are counteracted by the active affects. According to 5P4Sch, this is the chief remedy against ignorance and the passions, and therefore, we may add, the foremost strategy of liberation in Spinoza’s ethics of freedom.

Through this awareness ‘the mind can cause all the affections of the body or the images of things to be related to the idea of God’, as Spinoza states in 5P14. In 5P15 and 16 he goes on to say that the more a person understands himself and his affects in this way, the more he loves God. From the references in 5P39Dem, we see that this implies that such a person will have a body which is fit for many things, and therefore a mind of which the greatest part is eternal. In other words, this kind of body awareness is a gateway to eternity, so to say.

AN AFFINITY TO BUDDHIST INSIGHT MEDITATION

It is really curious that when Spinoza comments on this in 5P16Dem, he says that ‘this love [of God] is connected (junctus) with all the affections of the body (5P14), by all of which it is cherished (5P15), and therefore (5P11) above everything else ought to occupy the mind.’ The Latin term junctus, or Jungere, is etymologically related to the Sanskrit term yoga, which derives from the root yuj, ‘to bind together’, ‘hold fast’, ‘yoke’, French jout, Norwegian åk, etc. In the Indian cultural area, the term yoga serves, in general, to designate any ascetic technique and any method of meditation. In its ‘mystical’ acceptation, the emphasis is on man’s effort to break away from the dispersion and automatism that characterize profane consciousness, and to gain a state of integration which may be characterized as a union with God. It is by ‘identifying’ himself with Divinity that the yogi attains this integration and internal freedom, which consists in a return from a fragmentary to a total way of being.

I do not mean to suggest that Spinoza used the term Jungere here in order to allude to yoga in its Brähmanic or non-Brähmanic forms. I doubt that Spinoza had any direct knowledge about these Indian techniques at all. And yet, it is very interesting that he uses exactly this term in exactly this connection. At least it is interesting from the point of view of a ‘perennial philosophy’.

The kind of yoga that I would attribute to Spinoza appears to have an especial affinity to certain forms of Buddhist meditation. I use the term ‘meditation’ in a wide sense here which includes also ‘contemplation’. According to a classification of different kinds of meditation or mental culture (bhāvanā) which is current within the southern branch of Buddhism, there are two main types of meditation; mental concentration (sammāthabhāvanā) and insight meditation (vipassanābhāvanā).
Mental concentration in this connection consists in an increasing introversion, achieved by progressively diminishing the impact of external stimuli. This type of meditation is not so typically Buddhist, but is held in common with Hindu yogic practices. It appears that Spinoza would not have evaluated this kind of meditation so highly, at least not if his statement in 4P185Sch may be taken as an indication of his attitude: 'Indeed, so far as the mind is concerned, our intellect would be less perfect if the mind were alone and understood nothing but itself.' It may be correct to say, perhaps, that in so far as Spinoza was a mystic, he was not of the extremely introvertive type. This attitude on the part of Spinoza is shared by several schools of Buddhism in the Far East, especially among the Ch’an, or Zen, Buddhists.

Insight meditation, on the other hand, is a more specifically Buddhist form of meditation. It is based on the principle of Right Mindfulness (Sammā sati), as explained in the Satipatthāna Sutta, and consists in an awareness of the body, including its postures and breathing; of the feelings, the mental processes and of mental objects. This fourfold way of mindfulness or awareness (sati) is first of all a kind of bare attention, which appears to be very close in character to the feeling, experience and consciousness which Spinoza presupposes in connection with the third kind of cognition. According to the Buddhists, this mindfulness leads to insight (vipassanā) concerning bodily and mental processes, much along the lines which Spinoza clarifies in 5P2-45Sch, when he writes about having a clear and distinct conception of the affections and affects of the body (and mind). Moreover, according to the Buddhists, the fruition of this insight is nothing less than wisdom (poṇa).

For the Buddhists, as much as for Spinoza, there is a necessary connection between ignorance and bondage under the passions, and between wisdom and freedom (cp. 3P1, 3). The ignorant person will falsely hypostasize the entities of his imagination, thus believing in the substantiality of egos and things. By this his suffering (dukkha) is caused. The sage will be aware of the true status of these things, seeing the non-substantiality of egos (anatta, cf. 2P10) and of things (anicca). They are nothing but dharmas, as the Buddhists would say, or modes, as Spinoza would say. They are modes of cognition, constituted through the imagination of the person, arising from the modifications or affections of his body. Through the body awareness described above, the natural attitude of everyday life, which unduly ontologizes these things, is bracketed.

In the northern branch of Buddhism the different kinds of meditation are classified in a similar manner. In Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, for instance, the ‘mind yoga’ (or Mahamudra) forms a close parallel to the insight meditation referred to above, as does also the so-called 'cultivation of the innate mind' in Chinese Ch’ an Buddhism and Japanese Zen Buddhism.

It is a strong point in these Eastern traditions that they emphasize the practice of meditation. On this score Western philosophers and others have
much to learn. Nevertheless, one finds also among Western mystics a variety of meditative techniques, and if I am not mistaken, Spinoza’s way to freedom, through an awareness of the body from the viewpoint of eternity, is remarkably similar to the way of the Buddha.

IS THIS A MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE?

I conclude, then, that Spinoza’s philosophy can not be adequately understood by the third kind of cognition, unless the cognizer becomes existentially involved in his act of cognition in a way that amounts to a very personal experience.

However, it may still be asked whether it is well founded to call this a mystical experience? Whether it is, depends, among other things, on how we define the term ‘mystical experience’. Considering the literature in this field, there seems to be a fairly high consensus that one should include both cognitive and affective elements in the concept of a mystical experience. Among the cognitive characteristics there is the cognition of God, or of something which is recognized to be the absolute reality; and the emphasis must be on the immediate and intimate awareness of one’s own relation with this divine presence. Among the affective characteristics there is first of all the pure attitude of love, both towards God and towards one’s fellow-beings in nature. There are also other affects included, such as pure joy or blessedness, and tranquillity.

It seems to me that in so far as the third kind of cognition involves a personal experience, it satisfies these requirements of a mystical experience. On the cognitive side this is an intimate cognition of God (4P28), or rather, of singular modes through God (5P24, 27Dem); involving a highly personal feeling and experience (5P23Sch) of the essence of one’s own body from the viewpoint of eternity (5P29Dem). That is to say, the person who is engaged in this kind of cognition must clearly experience how his own essence and existence follows from the essence and existence of God, and how it continually depends on it (5P36Sch).

On the affective side, moreover, this third kind of cognition generates active joy, which is also called blessedness or felicity (5P32Dem, 33Sch, 36Sch); active love, which is also called repose in oneself (5P27, 32Dem, 36Sch, 42Sch) and intellectual love of God (5P32Cor, 33, 35, 36&Cor). Besides, these affects generate active desire, or fortitude, which has reference to the well-being of others as much as of oneself (3P59Sch, 4P73Sch, 5P41).

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE; A PRECONDITION FOR SPINOZA’S ETHICS OF LIBERATION

This cognition and the affects which it generates constitute the source of the basic values and norms of Spinoza’s ethics, just as they do in the ethics of
Body awareness as a gateway to eternity

wisdom and love which may be found among most mystics in the world. Without the experiential basis of the third kind of cognition, I am afraid that it could not be a motivating source for this kind of ethics at all. Reason alone is not enough (4P17Sch). So I cannot see that anything is gained by purging the element of mystical experience from the philosophy of Spinoza, and reducing it to the rational element alone.

On the contrary, it seems to me that when we approach the philosophy of Spinoza, there is always a certain danger of becoming overly involved in its technical apparatus of definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations and so forth. Our approach may easily become more intellectualistic or academic than was intended by Spinoza himself. However, if we desire to avoid this, it may be helpful to ask what is the living experience which served Spinoza as a source of his philosophy? If we suppose that there is a mystical experience at the bottom of it, we may perhaps also ask if Spinoza’s reflections may be of any help to us in order to penetrate somewhat deeper into this experience, and to see its implications somewhat clearer, both in theory and in the practice of our own lives.

NOTES

2 Ibid., p. 126.
3 Ibid., p. 139.
5 For supplementary evidence concerning Spinoza’s early experiences of mystical union, see his Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being, tr. A. Wolf (1910), New York, 1963, pp. 78–80, 100, 115, 116, 147, 149, and especially pp. 123, 133, 135.
6 To be read as follows: Ethics, Part 5, Proposition 31, Demonstration. Other abbreviations which I also use are: Corr – Corollary, D – Definition and Sch – Scholium.
7 Hubbeling, op. cit., pp. 133, 137–8.
9 Ibid., p. 463.
11 Ibid., p. 343, and also pp. 377, 390, 453–6.
12 Ibid., p. 549, and also pp. 120, 454ff.
14 Ibid., pp. 422, 447.
15 Cf. Gueroult, op. cit., i, p. 381, concerning the traditional equivalence between the term ‘active essence’ (essentia activa) and the term ‘life of God’ (Vita Dei). See also Gueroult’s remarks on the mysticism of Spinoza in i, p. 9; ii, pp. 464, 534.
16 Cf. Ibid., ii, p. 613.
17 Cf. Ibid., i, p. 504.

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