

The Sacred Self

Mysticism has been examined for centuries. To define it for the sake of conversation, mysticism is knowing the unknowable through experience. We can call that ineffable experience by many names, but to know it, we must experience it. I cannot know how a brownie tastes if I don't taste it. I cannot know my neighbor if I do not spend time with him. And I cannot know what it feels like to break a bone if it has never happened to me. I can hear about it from a friend, but they are only pointing toward something that I have yet to know deeply in my own bones. Because of its intangibility and ineffability, it is challenging to describe the capacity of the sacred. Each mystical experience is as varied and differentiated as life itself. Facilitating designs that take care of and respond to the sacred require such deep listening of the life within us. How could we possibly create a design for vitality without deeply listening to the sacredness of life as our primary guide? The mystic is the one who listens deeply to the ineffable and lives from it.

Mystical or sacred experiences happen in all kinds of ways—in nature and often in the midst of great physical and emotional pain. Like St. John of the Cross or Julian of Norwich, these Christian mystics speak about opening to pain so deeply, that it transformed into the sacred. Creating communities that honor and value the sacred, and creating a design that allows for its members to practice skills that foster a sense of the sacred in the world, is life giving and needed work. Like the 13th c. poet Rumi says, “There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” Thankfully, following the call to foster life and love on this planet shows up in many forms. As these design principles are applied in different communities around the world, we will see even more ways to cultivate connection to the ineffable vitality that animates all that is living.

One of the most straightforward, concrete ways to relate to the sacred, or vitality that we refer to in this design, is by talking about the breath. We are breathed. We need not plan it or control it. The breath involuntarily moves in and out of our bodies without any effort on our part. Whether clenched in pain, sound asleep, or dancing in celebration, the breath keeps moving. In a culture of scheduling, planning and busyness, the breath itself reminds us that there is something that is out of our control; something bigger than our calendars and plans. Breathing is the invisible bridge that connects us to the human body where we experience our lives. The breath and the air we are immersed in is invisible, constant, interconnecting, hidden and mysterious— all words that we might use to describe a transpersonal or spiritual presence. In this design, vitality is the word we use to describe this animating life source.

Our ancient ancestors made this connection between the breath and the spirit as well. David Suzuki scientist and environmentalist writes, “the word “spirit” expands from

its Latin source “spiritus” meaning “breath” or “air”, into so many other lively meanings- the soul, the animating principle, intelligence, emotional vigor, liveliness...each one in opposition to deadness or dullness. Our language knows better than we realize the vital nature of the air we breathe. It is the whirlwind and the breeze, a moving ocean of invisible forces in which we swim all the days of our lives, from our first gasp at birth to our last, slow exhalation at death.” We literally would not be alive in our bodies without the breath. The ancients acknowledged the sacredness of the breath and honored how breathing connects us to ourselves and to what surrounds us. The word for spirit or soul in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Sanskrit all refer to breath or wind. We cannot live without the breath, and with the earthly degradation that we face, it seems that we have forgotten the resource that the breath truly is. Breathing not only keeps us alive, but allows us to thrive. The breath can teach us about the ineffable qualities that it embodies; qualities that we desperately need in relationship to ourselves, each other and the planet itself. Amidst the wide-open spaces within, the breath is often the only constant we can find. The breath invites us to surrender and offers us an anchor to hold onto as we navigate the depths of ourselves.

If we are to know the sacred, we must spend time with it. Whatever the practice, getting to know the ineffable vitality that animates us is at the heart of this design. We know that it is this vitality that will give us the strength and connection we need to show up fully and intentionally in the world. Any practice can cultivate this sacred connection, it is much more about the intention. Whether you are practicing yoga, dancing, washing dishes, running, or meditating to name a few, it is your focus and intention that build this relationship. If your intention is to know the vitality within and around you, what you are doing matters less. Like with anything, commitment and practice is essential to develop a relationship with something new, or to further deepen connection to what is known.

When the ineffable is experienced in the everyday of this life it cannot only dramatically shift one’s perspective, it can be the seed of a calling. It is a subtle whisper in one’s life that can turn into a vocation. This vital life source we speak of, once experienced, is carried forward into the world by the one who experienced it. We come off of the mountaintop, so to speak, and into the valley of life where the wisdom experienced by the individual is needed by the collective. It is easy to want to stay on the mountaintop where the mystical experience happened; to set up a dwelling place and settle in. But to walk down off the mountain, allowing the experience to inform our lives without grandeur, is a skill that takes practice.

** There is a great story in Christian scripture about this (and many in other sacred texts too, like the Bhagavad Gita) you can read here.*

