

# Self-praise Hymns and Mystical Experiences

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## Abstract

The article argues that self-praise hymns (a.k.a. aretalogies or in Sanskrit *ātmastuti*) can be analyzed as an inventory of records of mystical experiences across religious traditions and over history, similar to inventories of mystical experiences gathered by way of structured questionnaires. The genre is characterized by linguistic features such as paradoxical predications, gnomic temporalities and deictic indexicalities. The paper compares case studies in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Coptic, and Tibetan whereby a deity or a 'culturally postulated supernatural agent' speaks in the first-person of its otherworldly nature. The article thus offers a novel analytic approach to the study of mystical experiences.

## Keywords

mystical experience – cognitive psychology – Nag Hammadi – Tantric religions – self-transformation

## 1 Introduction: William James, Reality, Perception, and the Mystical

In the second season of a popular internet series *The Man at the High Castle*, the wise and elderly Japanese Pacific States trade minister Nobusuke Tagomi starts moving between two parallelly existing realities. He enters a library, looking at a pile of censored books just before shifting to an alternative reality.<sup>1</sup> The book cover that captures the eye is that of William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, possibly alluding to one of James' most frequently quoted paragraphs in relation to the mystical experience:

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1 For a blog on the series episode and an image of the frame with the books, see <https://www.tor.com/2016/12/20/the-man-the-high-castle-season-two-series-review/> (accessed March 12, 2021).

It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. *No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.* How to regard them is the question, – for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. *At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.*<sup>2</sup>

The idea that altered states of consciousness relate to parallel, alternative realities is reinforced in the above-mentioned scene referencing it back to William James and his association of the interdependency of perception and reality. This interdependency, according to James, is essential for his construal of the mystical experience as intrinsic to religious experience, for “with this we make connection with religious mysticism pure and simple.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, James implicitly, at least, assumes that mystical experiences are empirically accessible via experiencing altered states of consciousness induced by psychoactive substances, as he states right at the outset: “Some years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken.”<sup>4</sup>

This formulation is, of course, highly problematic for various reasons, despite James’ contribution in taking the first step towards situating the study of religious experience – with the mystical as its core – under the scrutiny of scholarly, scientific, and academic engagement. The two major problems with James’ formulation are: a) that he ascribes truth claims to mystical experiences based on his own and his peers’ experiences, and b) that he assumes these experiences of an altered state of consciousness are connected with religious mysticism and comparable to mystical experiences in a variety of religious

2 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902* (New York/London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), 388 (my emphasis).

3 James, *The Varieties*, 393.

4 James, *The Varieties*, 387.

traditions. In other words, James' formulation is uncritically based on his own experience, on the one hand, and on a highly skewed understanding of what 'mysticism' means in diverse religious traditions, on the other hand. The combination of personal experience and cultural bias thus leads him to assume that every religious tradition has at its core a mystical experiential dimension.<sup>5</sup>

Ever since James' formulation of the mystical experience, scholars of religion, philosophers, and psychologists of religion revised, refined, debated, and reformulated the definition of mystical experiences and their significance to human cognition and to social and material realities.<sup>6</sup> Scholars of religion found the Jamesian 'common core thesis' extremely problematic, and formulated a constructivist approach to the topic, arguing that an unmediated experience of some 'Ultimate Reality' or 'Absolute Truth' is impossible. Thus, Steven Katz argues that it is highly problematic to view one's own experience as universal 'religious mysticism' and, perhaps more importantly, as identical to that of others, be they modern, rational 'experientialists', or premodern mystics like St. Theresa.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the assumption that one's own experience constitutes the experiential core common to all religions, be it Yoga for Hindus or Sufism for Muslims, reeks of cultural biases, even when relating to Christian mysticism, as Grace Jantzen argues.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, James' ahistorical and orientalist depiction of 'world religions' seems naïve a century later, and his perennialism that reached its peak in the work of Walter T. Stace met the fierce opposition of constructivists, starting with Katz, arguing that assuming an unmediated experience – exalted and profoundly shaking as it may be – is a fallacy.<sup>9</sup> James' construal of the topic was further dismissed as a biased form of romanticism and post-Kantianism until, eventually, the whole idea

5 This formulation is known as the 'common core thesis', cf. Ralph W. Hood, "The Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (online, 2016).

6 For religious studies approaches, see Nelstrop and Magill, *Christian Mysticism*, 1–20. See also Richard King "Mysticism and Spirituality," in John Hineells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London/New York: Routledge 2009). For an extensive survey of the philosophical approaches to the study of mysticism, see Jerome Gellman, "Mysticism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition). For an extensive survey of the approaches by psychologists of religion, see Taves, "Mystical and other Alternations," 669–82.

7 Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), 22–25.

8 Grace M. Jantzen, "Mysticism and Experience," *Religious Studies* 25, no. 3 (1989).

9 See Katz, "Language, Mysticism, and Epistemology," 27–30.

of exploring the experiential dimension of religion, in particular the mystical experience, was dismissed as an empty rhetorical exercise.<sup>10</sup>

But there are other scholars that while being critical of the Jamesian construal of mystical experiences further explore its implications on the comparative study of religion and, in particular, South and East Asian religions. Over the decades past Katz' fierce objection to the 'common core thesis', James' fourfold definition of the mystical experience as ineffable, noetic, passive, and transient, was problematized in relation to the formulations of the experiential dimensions in Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions.<sup>11</sup> Sallie King and Richard King, scholars of Buddhism and South and East Asian religions, responded that in ruling out the possibility of an unmediated experience, Katz and other constructivists ignore the fact that Buddhist and Hindu philosophers and practitioners aim at achieving precisely that which is unmediated.<sup>12</sup> Such an achievement, it should be stressed, is directly related to the historical rigorous, argumentative logic developed in Indic traditions to analyze the interface between perception and reality. Whether monists, dualists, or phenomenologists, all belonging in the over-arching Indic intellectual tradition seem to agree that it is reality that is mediated by perception, and that reality – whatever that may mean – is disentangled from mediation only upon clearing up the mind of any mental constructions whatsoever. Indeed, meditative practices in many Indic traditions aim precisely at that. For example, the second *sūtra* of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* succinctly formulates this idea in its second verse, explaining what yoga is: *yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ* (yoga is the cessation of the mind's activities). Only then, the *Yogasūtra* continues, is the conscious subject, the *draṣṭṛ* (seer) stabilized in its own identity (*tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe 'vasthānam*). In other words, reality is perception free of any perceptible objects to be experienced. This definition for the practice of Yoga and its end goal resonates with terms such as 'pure consciousness experience' and 'absolute unitary being', coined by psychologists of religion in their attempts to define and characterize mystical experiences.<sup>13</sup>

10 For the criticism of James as culturally biased, see Jantzen, "Mysticism and Experience." For the criticism of the term 'experience' as an analytical category, see Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience."

11 For rejecting the Jamesian criterion of transiency, see King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 157. For rejecting the criterion of passivity, see Christine Overall, "The Nature of Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 18, no. 1 (1982). For deconstructing James' criterion of ineffability, see Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Reality: Ineffability," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 3 no. 3–4 (1975).

12 King, "Two Epistemological Models"; King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 167–186.

13 Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 670.

In what follows, I focus on critical approaches to the Jamesian construal of mystical experiences from the diachronic and hermeneutic perspective of religious studies, while integrating synchronic, empirical studies on mystical experiences from the perspective of the psychology of religion and cognitive psychology.

## 2 Altered Sense of Self and Otherworldly Entities

There is a problem, though, with the so-called ‘pure consciousness event’ in addressing the diverse and rich phenomena classified as mystical experiences, as it leaves us with nothing to experience, with no object of perception, let alone a conscious subject left to communicate their experience.<sup>14</sup> The Yogasūtra does address this problem in its third chapter dealing with *siddhis*, or supernatural powers attributed to accomplished yogis, that seem like a mapping of mystical experience accounts, such as reading thoughts, moving between time dimensions, changing body size at will, etc.<sup>15</sup> The aim is, however, to attain ‘seedless hyper-consciousness’ (*nirbījasamādhi*), where only the conscious subject (*draṣṭṛ*) remains, while no perceptible object whatsoever is left at all. As Yohanan Grinshpon argues, the author of the Yogasūtra was in all likelihood documenting and studying yogic practices as a *philosopher* rather than a *practitioner*.<sup>16</sup> His research project as summarized in the text was embedded in a larger project of exploration into human perception and the nature of reality, as attested in the vibrant and sophisticated *philosophical* debates that circulated in ancient India between monist, dualist, materialists, and phenomenologists for over a millennium.<sup>17</sup>

But were all Buddhist and Hindu philosophers like Patañjali, Diñnāga, and Śaṅkara discussing the mystical experience in the Jamesian sense of the term? In many respects, construing their philosophical discourses about the nature of perception in relation to reality as an argument in favor of the ‘common core thesis’ and against the constructivist position is somewhat reductionist towards their rigorous, rational, and logical systems of argumentation. Were

14 In terms of the theory and practice of Yoga, experience (*bhoga*) is conceptualized as constituting mental activities (*cittavṛtti*) that Yoga practitioners aim to silence in order to achieve a state of ‘pure consciousness’ (*nirbījasamādhi*). For a discussion on experience in this context, see Yohanan Grinshpon, *Silence Unheard: Deathly Otherness in Patañjala-Yoga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 79–90.

15 *Ibid.*, 53–64.

16 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

17 Matilal, *Perception*, 21–44, 69–93.

they aiming at mystical or religious experiences at all? Were they aiming at any experience of absolutist or unitary being whatsoever? At least in the case of Buddhism such monist assumptions would go against the basic Buddhist principles of impermanence (*anitya*) and non-essentialism (*anātman, asvabhāva*). Moreover, and as Sharf convincingly argues, unlike James, one's personal experience was insufficient for establishing truth claims about the nature of reality or the validity of extraordinary, otherworldly experiences.<sup>18</sup>

That said, there are, even in Buddhism, reports and accounts of *siddhis* or altered states of consciousness, if you will. They may be, at best, *embedded in* philosophical discourse on the nature of reality, perception, and the relation between the two. They may, furthermore, be presented as an outcome of religious disciplines or practices, even if not the most desirable or perfected, as is the case with the *siddhis* chapter in the *Yogasūtra*, where experience – any experience – is perceived as a mental activity (*cittavṛtti*) subject to cessation (*nirodha*). Ostensibly, the discursive textures of mystical experiences significantly differ from the textures of philosophical, scholarly argumentation, even if they are included within philosophical debates for demonstrating a point or voicing experiential accounts. Presumably, textual expressions of mystical experiences can be measured – at least to some extent – against existing typologies of mystical experiences such as the Mysticism Scale and the 5-dimensional altered states of consciousness scale.<sup>19</sup> Reading synchronic accounts of altered states of consciousness diachronically into premodern religious literature is neatly demonstrated by Benny Shanon, who has juxtaposed experiential expressions in Biblical passages with both explicit and implicit references to the presence or consumption of psychoactive substances such as harmaline, which he relates to as entheogens (i.e., generating religious enthusiasm or inspiration).<sup>20</sup>

Ann Taves points in this direction as well in her synchronic study of 'alterations in the sense of self'. To her empirical analysis of results in structured interviews and online questionnaires, she adds in passing that

A multisensory approach to self-loss/ego dissolution dramatically expands the range of unusual self-experiences that can be considered alongside

18 “[T]he authority of exegetes such as Kamalaśīla, Buddhaghōṣa, and Chin-i, lay not in their access to exalted spiritual states, but in their mastery of, and rigorous adherence to, sacred scripture [...] premodern Hinduism was similarly wary of claims to authority predicated on personal experience.” Sharf, “The Rhetoric of Experience,” 272.

19 Taves, “Mystical and Other Alternations,” 674–77.

20 Benny Shanon, “Biblical Entheogens: A Speculative Hypothesis,” *Time and Mind* 1 no. 1 (2008).

experiences in which the boundaries of the self are blurred or dissolve. *Changes in body ownership* allows [sic!] us to consider experiences in which it seems to the subjects as if their body, voice, or hand are not their own. Religious traditions have valorized such experiences as possession by positive or negative spirits, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), and automatic (spirit-controlled) writing. Psychiatry has characterized them as dissociative experiences. *Changes in self-location*, particularly out-of-body experiences, are associated with sleep paralysis and so-called near-death experiences. Various practice traditions cultivate out-of-body experiences as a means of journeying into other realms (e.g., astral travel; journeys to heaven) and containing spirits (e.g., shamanistic healing).<sup>21</sup>

The above quote is noteworthy as it relates Taves' analytical classification of mystical experiences to diverse religious traditions of experiences and practices.

Religious traditions and practices such as those associated with changes in body ownership and changes in self-location, as suggested by Taves, can be approached by scholars of religion, using *diachronic* analytic frameworks, such as textual studies, art history, archaeology, performance studies, social history etc. Presumably, inventories of experiential phenomena comparable to mystical experiences – such as the Yogasūtra's *siddhis* chapter – exist in religious literature and can be identified as such by textual analysis even in the absence of explicit references to practices associated with 'alterations in the sense of self'. Such analytical frameworks do, however, require systematic analysis free – as much as possible – from cultural and religious biases, like those postulating experiences of 'pure consciousness' or 'unitary being' as of higher and more desirable quality than extraordinary sensorial experiences. In other words, developing a critically comparative framework for mystical experiences in the history of religion (rather than in the psychology of religion) requires examining textual and linguistic data for comparable patterns and features, aiming at modular or structural classification rather than qualifying criteria such as 'positive' or 'negative', 'introvert' or 'extravert', which necessarily involve judgmental evaluations and biases.

The analysis of first-hand accounts synchronically or diachronically should address, though, another noteworthy constructivist argument against the 'common core thesis'. A constructivist would argue that what may be construed as mystical experience in a specific religious context can only be studied as culturally conditioned and mediated by the language of that religion, only

21 Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 681.

*seemingly* comparable to another religious context. Steven Katz's argument is that no experience is ever unmediated (by language and culture), hence, assuming that mystical experiences are all the same is a fallacy. In favor of the 'common core thesis', though, Sallie King addresses Katz's argument with a neat allegory of coffee-drinking experience, arguing (and quite convincingly so) that: "The act of drinking coffee in its totality can by no means be said to be an unmediated experience. Nonetheless, before one drinks coffee one really has no idea what it tastes like; after one cup, one knows exactly. How far does the conditioning power of the coffee traditions extend? In the end, though drinking coffee is a mediated experience, that mediation is a relatively insignificant element of the experience itself."<sup>22</sup>

In other words, even if some coffee-drinking traditions mediate the actual experience of drinking coffee in various ways, the fact that there is an empirical object "out there" that induces coffee-drinking experiences cannot be denied. She then adds a reservation: "Granted, coffee is an empirical object with relatively constant physical and sensorial traits, while the content of a mystical experience is none of these."

Against King's caveat stands the fact that entheogens *are* empirical objects just like coffee. Moreover, cognitive and psychological studies of mystical experiences (in the Jamesian sense of the term) such as those by Taves and Shanon, effectively identify the referent of mystical experiences (or altered states of consciousness) that prompted William James to engage with the topic in the first place. Dismissing the validity of critical approaches to mystical experiences circumvents the challenges involved in empirical and comparative study of religions and their transmitted textual and performative traditions.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, a bold and straightforward engagement with the topic would a) acknowledge the fact that mystical experiences indeed have referents that can be mapped and researched synchronically, diachronically, or both ways, b) relate research on entheogens to the textual and historical study of mystical experiences, and c) clearly distinguish between intellectual, philosophical, and metaphysical discourses, on the one hand, and the experiential dimension of religion on the other hand. For so doing, we need a simple, working

22 King, "Two Epistemological Models," 264–65.

23 The dismissive approach is eloquently and sharply expressed in Sharf (2000, 286): "The category of experience is, in essence, a mere place-holder that entails a substantive if indeterminate terminus for the relentless deferral of meaning. And this is precisely what makes the term experience so amenable to ideological appropriation [...] To put it another way, all attempts to signify 'inner experience' are destined to remain 'well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere'"



definition of mystical experiences to serve religious studies scholars rather than cognitive scientists.

Let me suggest a preliminary working definition for a mystical experience as a direct encounter with or a turning into an otherworldly entity. The notion of direct encounter in association with mystical experiences is a common trope in the scholarship on the topic,<sup>24</sup> to which I add the notion of ‘turning into’ to account for Taves’ notion of ‘alterations in the sense of self’ as well as for phenomena such as possession, apotheosis, theurgy, and trance. Importantly, though, I would like to avoid categories such as ‘divine’ and ‘absolute’ for avoiding judgmental attributes in specifying an ‘otherworldly entity’ as the object of alteration. In this, I build to a certain extent on the concept of ‘culturally postulated supernatural (CPS) agents’ coined by Thomas E. Lawson and Robert N. McCauley in their attempt to differentiate between religious and secular rituals.<sup>25</sup> They aim at specifying a category of religious entities inclusive of non-monotheistic and non-classical religious rituals. Religious ritualistic actions, they argue, “inevitably connected sooner or later with actions in which CPS agents play a role.”<sup>26</sup> In a similar manner, I differentiate between ‘spiritual but not religious’ (SBNR) accounts of mystical experiences (such as James’ and his contemporaries) and religious expressions that can be identified as such.<sup>27</sup> The former, in my opinion, are less than useful in addressing the significance of mystical experiences in the context of religious traditions, as they may not necessarily identify the mystical encounter with an otherworldly entity, be it a demon or a god. The latter, presumably, will always involve an encounter with an ‘otherworldly entity’, comparable to a certain extent with Lawson and McCauley’s ‘culturally postulated supernatural agents’. The comparability ends with the caveat that where a CPS agent is religiously perceived as part of or as acting in the world as perceived by our waking, normal state of consciousness, an ‘otherworldly entity’ is suggestive of a radical change in the perceived reality.

Thus, tentatively defining mystical experiences as those *formulated* as an encounter with or turning into an otherworldly entity is a useful tool; it

24 Cf. Sharf, “The Rhetoric of Experience,” 269.

25 E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, “The Cognitive Representation of Religious Ritual Form: A Theory of Participants’ Competence with Religious Ritual Systems,” in *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Ilka Pyysiäinen and Veikko Anttonen (London: Continuum, 2002), 155.

26 Lawson and McCauley, *Bringing Ritual to Mind*, 159.

27 For James’ role in heralding the *zeitgeist* of ‘spiritual but not religious’, see Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 129–35.

enables us to focus on textual expressions of encounters with or turning into an otherworldly entity as denotative of mystical experiences. We can further typify and classify them for comparative analyses, like say, visionary literature as, for example, the otherworldly creatures described by Ezekiel,<sup>28</sup> or the otherworldly palaces (*kūṭāgāra*) of Buddha Maitreya described in the Gaṇḍavyūha.<sup>29</sup> For the present discussion, however, I wish to further narrow down the scope of such mystical expressions and specifically relate to those in which ‘alterations in the sense of self’, to use Taves’ term, is suggested by referring a first-person pronoun to an otherworldly entity. In other words, the discussion from now onwards will focus on textual expressions where the speaker identifies as an otherworldly entity and, moreover, refers to oneself as such.

### 3 Self-Praise Hymns as Expressions of Mystical Experiences

Otherworldly entities speaking of themselves as such are, presumably, present in religious literature across cultures and since at least the late second century BCE. The generic term for such expressions, aretalogy (Ἀρεταλογία, ‘virtue-speech’), is a bit limited in its scope, as it is most prominently associated with the divine speech of Isis.<sup>30</sup> A slightly more useful term, I believe, is the Sanskrit term *ātmastuti* composed of the reflexive pronoun (*ātman*) and the noun *stuti*, ‘praise’, which more significantly relates to self-proclamations and aretalogies where the ‘self’ is a deity.<sup>31</sup> Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton discuss *ātmastutis* in a chapter on poetry and poetics in the Ṛgveda and refer the reader to Ṛgveda x, 125. This is a short self-praise hymn, with the first-person pronoun predicated by ‘boasting’ phrases of might and all-pervasiveness.<sup>32</sup>

28 Ezekiel 1.

29 Phyllis Granoff, “Maitreya’s Jewelled World: Some Remarks on Gems and Visions in Buddhist Texts,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (1998), 353ff.

30 Andrew T. Glicksman, *Wisdom of Solomon 10: A Jewish Hellenistic Reinterpretation of Early Israelite History Through Sapiential Lenses* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 89–90; cf. Hal Taussig, Jared Calaway, Maia Kotrosits, Celene Lillie, and Justin Lasser, *The Thunder: Perfect Mind: A New Translation and Introduction* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 57–60.

31 Notably, the term *ātmastuti* neatly translates into the terms ‘self-proclamation’ or ‘ego-proclamation’, used by modern scholars in relation to aretalogies. See Paul-Hubert Poirier, “Thunder: ΝΗC VI,2,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*, ed Marvin Meyer (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 367. See also, George W. MacRae, “The Ego-Proclamation in Gnostic Sources,” in *Studies in New Testament and Gnosticism*, ed George W. MacRae, Good News Studies 26 (Wilmington: M. Glazier, 1987).

32 Brereton and Jamison, *The Rigveda: A Guide*, 153, 163.

Some verses of this hymn demonstrate several comparable and prominent features of self-praise hymns. Thus, for example, the first verse introduces the otherworldly speaker as present (lit. roaming *carāmi*) within all the Vedic gods at once (*viśvadevaiḥ*), whereas the eighth verse predicates the speaker as an all-pervasive wind (*vāta*):

I roam with the Rudras, Vasus, Adityas, I am indeed with all deities.  
[...]  
I blow like the wind, while reaching all the worlds.<sup>33</sup>

Such formulations, as demonstrated below, are commonly used across religious traditions for predicating otherworldly speakers or, in other words, for expressing mystical experiences of turning into an otherworldly entity (or ‘alterations in the sense of self’). Another feature typical of self-praise hymns is oxymoronic or paradoxical self-predication, transgressing indexical categories of self and other, of space and time. See for example verse Ṛgveda x, 125:3, where the speaker transgresses the indices of the third person (*tām*) with the first person (*mā*), and verse 125:7, where she transgresses spatial categories of top (head, *mūrdhan*) and bottom (within, *antaḥ*). In verse 125:7, kinship categories are transgressed, where the speaker gives birth (*aham suve*) to her father (*pitaram*).<sup>34</sup>

Her is me that gods had distributed everywhere,  
As I am of abundant places, causing [them] to abundantly enter [me].  
[...]  
I beget [my] father on his head; my womb is within the water, the ocean.<sup>35</sup>

33 *aham rudrebhīr vasubhīś carāmy aham ādityair uta viśvadevaiḥ* /1a/ [...] *aham eva vāta iva pra vāmy ārabhamānā bhuvanāni viśvā* /8a/ Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations are mine. For a different (and recent) translation, see Joel Brereton and Stephanie Jamison (tr.), *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1601–604. For an older translation, see Ralph T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda translated with a Popular Commentary Vol 2* (Benares: E.J. Lazarus and Co., 1889), 571–72. For the Vedic text, see <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsa/n/rv10125.htm> (accessed September 2, 2021).

34 Cf. Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 108, 109:  $\Delta\text{NOK } \tau\epsilon\tau\mu\alpha\delta\gamma \ \bar{\eta}\tau\epsilon \ \rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\omega\tau$  “I am the mother of my father.”

35 *tām mā devā vyadadhuḥ purutrā bhūristhātrām bhūry āveśayantīm* /3b/ [...] *aham suve pitaram aśya mūrdhan mama yonir apsv antaḥ samudre* /7a/.

The term *ātman*, 'self', constituting the first element in the compound *ātmastuti*, 'self-praise', is a core metaphysical concept in Hindu monism and, as such, its significance in relation to religious expressions of 'alterations in the sense of self' cannot be understated. It is a few good centuries after the Vedic period and around the same time that Buddhism emerged in North India that the term *ātman* surfaces in Upaniṣadic prose (800–600 BCE). This period is considered the earliest phase in the evolution of Hindu monism, philosophy, and metaphysics.<sup>36</sup> The term *ātman* signifies an epistemological and metaphysical shift from ritual-centered to ascetic-oriented ideologies; *ātman* is a grammatical category, the reflexive pronoun, that at this period expands the range of its semiotic properties to include a noun deprived of any indexical denotations (*neti neti*, not this, not that), while implicitly including them all at the same time.

Leaving aside doctrinal issues, it is important to note how this notion of selfhood becomes associated with an otherworldly selfhood or mystical experience. It is also noteworthy that self-referential statements appear within narrative prose sections, as the mystical speaker may surface somewhat sporadically in genres that are not necessarily poetic or hymnic (*stuti*). An example for an embedded mystical speech is the first phrase of a creation myth narrated in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4:

This [world] was just self (*ātman*) in the beginning, shaped like a person (*puruṣa*). He examined all over and saw none other than himself. In the beginning, he uttered "I am he,"<sup>37</sup> and thus the noun 'I' came into being.<sup>38</sup>

This self-perception (*anuvīkṣya*) is notably formulated by an uttered expression (*vyāharat*) of selfhood. Both occur in association with the creation of the world when nothing else rather than selfhood exists. As such, this small

36 Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xlv–lvi.

37 Note that the third person pronoun *saḥ* can be understood as included in the quotation phrase marked by *iti*, as I did, or as the subject of the finite verb *vyāhart*, as Olivelle understands it (see footnote below). Later on, monist theology repeats this phrase, *so 'ham* (I am he), as a mantra attesting the divine entity (he) constituting the self (I). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soham\\_\(Sanskrit\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soham_(Sanskrit)) (accessed September 2, 2021).

38 *ātmaivedam agra āsit puruṣavidhaḥ | so 'nuvīkṣya nānyad ātmano 'paśyat | so 'ham asmīty agre vyāharat tato 'ham nāmābhavat|* For the text, see V.P. Limaye and R.D. Vadekar, *Eighteen Principal Upaniṣads* (Poona: Vaidika Samsodhana Mandala, 1958). Cf. Olivelle's translation (Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, 13): In the beginning this world was just a single body (*ātman*) shaped like a man. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. The first thing he said was, 'Here I am!' and from that the name 'I' came into being.

segment constitutes an expression of an 'alteration in the sense of self' embedded in a larger narrative of a creation myth explaining, in mythological terms, the emergence of consciousness as a precursor of the emergence of the world of plurality and of matter, as the text proceeds to explain division and creation of the material, this-worldly reality.

The above miniscule formulation of selfhood as primordial wholeness is elaborated in tantric traditions as an achievement in turning into the deity, predominantly Śiva, as becomes evident upon examining the impressive inventory of such expressions termed by Lyne Bansat-Boudon 'Anthology of Spiritual Experience'.<sup>39</sup> In her study of an eleventh-century Tantric text, the Paramārthasāra, attributed to the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta, Bansat-Boudon introduces verses 47–50 as follows:

self-proclamation of the 'I' as ultimate principle, on the model of the Vedic 'self-praise' (*ātmastuti*). The realization of the absolute 'I' (*aham*), equally that of the yogin and that of the Lord, is characteristic of the 'way of Śaṃbhu' (*śāmbhavopāya*), defined, as well, as the 'direct way' (*sākṣādūpāya*). In consequence, the first-person pronoun expresses the 'undeniable' (*anapahvanīya* [...]) faculty of experience (or consciousness) present in all beings. This 'I', the mode of affirmation of the 'Great Lord that is the Self of each person' (*svātmamaheśvara*), reduces all the other modes of valid knowing (including revealed texts, Āgamas), to a position of externality and relativity.<sup>40</sup>

The verses discussed demonstrate features commonly found in aretalogies or self-praise hymns like phrases expressing all-pervasiveness, as in: "It is *I* who appear in each and every thing, just as the nature of light appears in all existent things (49b),"<sup>41</sup> and like oxymoronic phrases as: "Though devoid of corporeal sense-organs, it is *I* who am the one who sees, the one who hears, the one who smells (50a)."<sup>42</sup>

As is evident by the above examples, self-praise hymns can be embedded in different types of discursive literature, not necessarily poetic or ritual-oriented such as Ṛgveda x.125. It is possible, therefore, to employ the term 'self-praise hymns' in comparing and contrasting expressions of mystical experiences

39 Bansat-Boudon and Tripati, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, 460–61.

40 *Ibid.*, 25–26.

41 *sarvasminn aham eva sphurāmi bhāveṣu bhāsvārūpam iva* (translated by Bansat-Boudon and Tripati, *Ibid.*, 211. For the text, see *Ibid.*, 380).

42 *draṣṭā śrotā ghrātā dehendriya-varjito 'py akartāpi* (translated by Bansat-Boudon and Tripati, *Ibid.*, 211. For the text, see *Ibid.*, 380).

across cultures and religious traditions regardless of their textual environment. To be sure, I am not arguing that turning into an otherworldly entity constitutes a singular experience of sorts, nor a necessarily desirable experiential achievement. As Benny Shanon demonstrates in his detailed mapping of the Ayahuasca experience, and as Ann Taves specifies in her list of 'self-related items in the inventory of non-ordinary experiences', mystical experiences are diverse and varied, as well as their expression, construal, and reception in community and society.<sup>43</sup> To return to Sallie King's coffee allegory, the diversity and variation in all that is mediated by cultural mediation and personal inclination can be also attributed to experiences induced by drinking coffee, or to any perception of any object, 'particular', in the world.<sup>44</sup> Yet, it would be awkward to argue that such 'ordinary' experiences significantly differ from 'mystical' experiences in being utterly devoid of any preconditioned, unmediated sensation, as implied by Katz in arguing for cultural and linguistic mediation of mystical experiences.<sup>45</sup>

Based on the working definition suggested above for mystical experiences, I propose to briefly test the hypothesis that a) the speech attributed to an otherworldly entity is a *linguistic expression* of a mystical experience, and b) *the linguistic structures* underlying these expressions constitute patterns and features that are comparable across religious traditions. Note, however, that in all likelihood and as stated above, we are dealing here with diverse experiential phenomena that can, at best, be categorized as a uniquely identified dimension of religious experience.<sup>46</sup>

To test this hypothesis, the following sections examine some linguistic entities and event structures characterizing a small selection of self-praise hymns as examples of otherworldly entities' speech. In the following sections the mystical speakers and their reflexive predications are compared across religious traditions for the strategies used to transgress categories of selfhood. Self-praise hymns will then be examined in relation to their environment – textual as opposed to performative – for examining the strategies employed for

43 Benny Shanon, *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2002); Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 684.

44 King, "Two Epistemological Models," 265; Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Reality," 275.

45 Katz, "Language, Mysticism, and Epistemology."

46 See, in this respect, Benny Shanon's (*Antipodes of the Mind*, 34–35) definition of "a natural cognitive domain." Cf. Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 686n4 in relation to the *sui generis* nature of mystical experiences.

expressing all-pervasiveness in space and time, arguably indicative of mystical experiences (in the Jamesian sense of the term).

#### 4 Transgression of Categories

Hypothetically speaking, an otherworldly entity in self-praise hymns presents itself as originating from anywhere beyond, below, or above the world as normally perceived by our senses, namely, the normal, waking state of consciousness. There may be human audience present, explicitly or implicitly, and the human addressee too may be depicted in an altered reality or state of being. A famous example for this is the speech of the Jewish God in Exodus 3, where the otherworldly entity speaks from within a bush burning without being consumed and identifies itself as ‘I am that which (ʾašer) I am’ (Ex. 3: 14 אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה).<sup>47</sup> The use of the first-person pronoun in such circumstances involves a transgression of categories otherwise associated with the usage of the first-person pronoun in ordinary speech. This phrase, ‘I am that which I am’, in response to the human asking the name of the deity, has provoked numerous interpretations by its curious transgression of categories, which need not be repeated here.<sup>48</sup> It is, however, noteworthy that the Hebrew first-person pronoun is a prefix embedded in the verbal form, *ʾehyeh*, rather than an independent pronoun. As such, it is inseparable from the event structure, which is indexed as an all-pervasive temporality of being, namely, the imperfect/future form of the verb ‘be’. Naturally, different strategies of categorical transgression are employed in accordance with the language medium. The first-person pronominal transgression of categories, though, is a notable feature of the ‘mystical I’ and, arguably, a common feature of self-praise hymns.

A particularly interesting case of a mystical speaker is in one of the most curious texts preserved in the Nag Hammadi Coptic corpus bearing the title

47 See Ex. 3: 2: וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלֶבֶת אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה נִיֵּץ אֵינֶנּוּ אֶכָּל/ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֵת הַמַּרְאֶה אֲתָה הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה/ וַיֵּרָא וַיְהִי כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת אֵלָיו וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲגַנִּי “The Lord’s messenger was revealed before him in the midst of the flames from within the bush. He realized that, indeed, as the bush is engulfed in flames, it remains unconsumed. Moses then thought to himself, let me get closer and examine this magnificent sight; how come the bush does not burn? When the Lord saw him approaching for a closer look, God called him from within the bush and said, ‘Moses! Moses!’ and he said, ‘I am here.’”

48 Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14): God’s ‘Narrative Identity’ Among Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise,” *Poetics Today* 31, no. 2 (2010); See also Saner Andrea D., “Too Much to Grasp”: *Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God* (Penn State University Press, 2015), 1–3.

*The Thunder: The Perfect Mind* (ΤΕΒΡΟΝΤΕ: ΝΟΥΣ ἸΠΤΕΛΕΙΟΣ).<sup>49</sup> As Hal Taussig *et al.* convincingly argue, this title is likely to be a later addition to a text that may have first existed orally and independently of other texts in the corpus before being transcribed and added to a collection of other texts.<sup>50</sup> It is, in any case, the only remaining papyrus copy of the text, and therefore, it is less than certain that the otherworldly entity is as abstract as the title suggests. The speaker in the so-called ‘Thunder’ may or may not be a deity; it is certainly ‘otherworldly’, as it opens with a strong statement emphasizing its origin in ‘power’ (δῶμη): “I, it is from the power that they sent me” (ἸΝΤΑΥΤΑΟΥΘΕΙ ΔΝΟΚ ΕΒΟΛ ΖἸ ὄμη). Notably, the event structure associated with the speaker here is an emphatic perfect, a verbal form (II perfect) that was used in spells with the first person, especially in mortuary texts.<sup>51</sup>

A peculiar feature of the speaker in this text is its shifting gender categories, as discussed in detail by Taussig *et al.*, highlighting the implications of the gender-shifting divine speaker on the overall understanding of the text. In many respects, their study redeems the text from the Greco-centric and Christian-centric approaches in previous studies.<sup>52</sup> They state that “[p]revious scholarship has scratched its head at what to make of *Thunder* in the ancient world. Thunder is indeed quite unusual for the ancient Mediterranean. There are few, if any, parallels. At first, the vocabulary can seem deracinated from the kind of social contexts exhibited in most literature of that time. Initial impressions that Thunder is about an otherworldly, divine realm are quite understandable, since the piece’s ‘I’ speaks as a god(dess).”<sup>53</sup>

49 I am indebted to the Egyptologist, the late Sarah I. Groll, who was my Coptic teacher (1999–2002) for introducing me to this text and encouraging me to conduct a comparative study of the *Thunder* and Sanskrit self-praise hymns (Ophira Gamliel, *The Language of Revealed Mysteries* (Unpublished M.A., Thesis, Jerusalem, 2001) [in Hebrew]). A preliminary comparison of the *Thunder* with Sanskrit literature was attempted already by George MacRae, the first Coptic scholar to have translated the text into English (George W. MacRae “The Thunder: Perfect Mind,” in *Nag Hammadi Codices v, 2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinesis 8501, 1 and 4*, ed Douglas M. Parrott (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 231–255). He noted a few passages from the Bhagavad-Gīta, where God Kṛṣṇa refers to himself in a similar, ‘mystical’ manner. I leave out the comparison with the Bhagavad-Gīta for the present study.

50 Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 83ff, 103n7–9.

51 For the use of the II perfect in coffin texts, see Harold M. Hays, “The Mutability of Tradition: The Old Kingdom Heritage and Middle Kingdom Significance of Coffin Texts Spell 343\*,” *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux* 40 (2006–2007), 57n11.

52 Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 93–97.

53 *Ibid.*, 95.



Taussig *et al.* also note that their “analysis has quite quickly found reason to place *Thunder* in the middle of important ancient Mediterranean social negotiations.” This, however, may not be unique or peculiar but rather demonstrate another feature of mystical speakers as upon examining otherworldly entities in self-praise hymns, the dimension of ‘social negotiations’ is often evident. If indeed self-praise hymns carry linguistic expressions of encountering or turning into otherworldly entities, this should not come as a surprise. Claims to have transformed into or directly encountered an otherworldly entity are likely to involve tenuous social negotiations. Take for example the words of the twelfth-century poetess Mahādeviyakka of the South Indian Śaivite movement known as Vīraśaivism:<sup>54</sup>

I have Māya for mother-in-law;  
The world for father-in-law;  
Three brothers-in-law like tigers;

And the husband’s thoughts  
are full of laughing women:  
no god, this man.

And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.

But I will  
give this wench the slip  
and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my lord.

My mind is my maid:  
by her kindness, I join  
my Lord,  
my utterly beautiful Lord  
from the mountain-peaks  
my lord as white as jasmine

and I will make Him  
my good husband.<sup>55</sup>

54 A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 19–54.

55 Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 49–50.

According to A.K. Ramanujan,

A net of marriage rules and given relations binds her [Mahādeviyakka]. These are what you make and enter into, not what you are born with. This elaborate build-up of social bonds is shattered by the cuckolding climax of the poem, with the Lord as the adulterous lover. Here a vulgar Kannada word is used to speak of ‘cuckolding’, the ‘fornication’. The whole poem, written in a colloquial, vigorous speaking style, moves toward the word *hādara* or fornication, enacting by linguistic shock the shock of her explosive desire to shatter the entire framework of so-called legitimacies. Elsewhere also Mahādeviyakka rejects outright all notions of modesty as a virtue. She is supposed to have thrown off her clothes at one point, in defiance of the indecent pruderies of the society around her.

This stresses the view that love of God is not only an unconditional giving up of all, but it is necessarily anti-‘structure’, and anti-social ‘unruly’ relationship – unmaking, undoing, the man-made. It is an act of violation against ordinary expected loyalties, a breakdown of the predictable and the secure. Some such notion is at the heart of this complex of metaphorical action. The Lord is the illicit Lover; He will break up the world of Karma and normal relationships, the husband’s family that must necessarily be violated and trespassed against, if one should have anything to do with God.<sup>56</sup>

The transgression of categories associated with the speaker in the *Thunder* as well as in the Vīraśaivite poem by Mahādeviyakka is strikingly comparable, as both transgress kinship categories in what can be construed as negotiating social tensions. For the sake of comparison, see the following lines from the *Thunder*:

I am the whore and the holy woman  
 I am the wife and the virgin  
 I am the mother and the daughter  
 I am the limbs of my mother  
 I am a sterile woman and she who has many children  
 I am she whose wedding is extravagant and I didn’t have a husband  
 I am the midwife and she who hasn’t given birth  
 I am the comfort of my labor pain  
 I am the bride and the bridegroom  
 And it is my husband who gave birth to me  
 I am my father’s mother,

56 *Ibid.*, 50–51.

my husband's sister, and he is my child  
 I am the slavewoman of him who served me  
 I am she, the lord of my child.<sup>57</sup>

Whether the mystical speaker in the *Thunder* is a deity or a human-turned-divine is difficult if not outright impossible to tell. However, the linguistic entity constituting the mystical speaker in the *Thunder* is a remarkable example for transgression of categories. As Coptic enables gender marking for the first person in some of its verbal forms and pronominal categories, besides marking nouns for gender, the result is an often-bewildering transgression of gender categories. One particularly curious example for this is the phrase “I am he whose image (m.) is multiple in Egypt, and she whose image (f.) is none among the Barbarians” (16:6  $\alpha\lambda\omicron\kappa\ \pi\epsilon\tau\eta\alpha\upsilon\gamma\epsilon\ \pi\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\iota\eta\epsilon\ \chi\bar{\eta}\ \kappa\eta\mu\epsilon/\ \lambda\gamma\epsilon\ \tau\epsilon\tau\epsilon\ \mu\bar{\eta}\tau\epsilon\ \omicron\epsilon\iota\eta\epsilon\ \chi\bar{\eta}\ \bar{\eta}\beta\alpha\rho\beta\alpha\rho\omicron\varsigma$ ), where the possessive pronouns are used in transgressing the gender categories of the noun ‘image’.<sup>58</sup> Taussig *et al.* comment that “[t]he strong feminine voice (perhaps in itself a kind of contradiction of expectations in the ancient world, if not sometimes the modern world as well), the switching between feminine and masculine pronouns, and the unconventional clusters of masculine/feminine images work together to undo, challenge, and flex meanings and identities related to women and men.”<sup>59</sup>

That the transgression of categories in relation to the mystical self is dangerous and even lethal for the mystical speaker, is poignantly exemplified by the story of the Sufi saint al-Hallāj, who was, according to the tradition, trialed and convicted in Baghdad for transgressing the categories of the human self with the divine in uttering the phrase ‘I am the Truth’ (أنا الحق).<sup>60</sup>

As already mentioned above in the previous section, some self-praise hymns are embedded within narrative or discursive textual environment, and somewhat encapsulated in brief statements or phrases. In the following section, I look into the textual versus the performative environments of self-praise hymns, while further examining the linguistic entities and event structures typical of the genre as expressed uniquely in each language. To recall, the first-person pronoun encountering or turning into an otherworldly entity tends to be associated with transgressed pronominal and nominal categories (e.g., gender, kinship) and with all-pervasiveness (e.g., gnomic temporalities, oxymoronic predication). These features are discernible in all the self-praise

57 Translated by Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 107, 109.

58 *Ibid.*, 120n87, 121n90.

59 *Ibid.*, 10.

60 Louis Massignon and Herbert Mason, *The Passion of Al-Hallaj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam, Volume 1: The Life of Al-Hallaj* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 23.

hymns that I have examined as well as in embedded self-praise phrases. Their textual and performative environments, at least ostensibly so, show interestingly comparable patterns as well.

## 5 Textual and Performative Environments

Broadly speaking, self-praise hymns are found in two types of environments – textual as opposed to performative. Where self-praise hymns are stand-alone compositions like the *Thunder*, the Ṛgveda x.125, or Mahādeviyakka's poem, they can be analyzed for performative functions, such as recitations or rituals.<sup>61</sup> As already discussed in brief, self-praise hymns are more often than not embedded in larger texts, from narratives, like the creation myth in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4 and the revelation in Exodus 3, to philosophical discourses like the self-praise verses in the Tantric treatise Paramārthasāra 47–50. It is quite possible that the embedded type of self-praise hymns and phrases emerges out of a process of incorporation from performative environments, even though it is difficult to determine this without in-depth research on several case studies and the religious traditions they represent. Ostensibly, stand-alone self-praise hymns are often appended to larger corpora of performative texts, such as the Ṛgveda, whereas embedded self-praise hymns emerge in specific types of textual environments. I can, at this stage, point at two major types of textual environments for embedded self-praise hymns – philosophical discourses and mythical narratives. This section focuses on two examples for embedded self-praise hymns, one in Tibetan and one in Sanskrit, with the former embedded in philosophical discourse of the Dzogchen school, and the latter embedded in a destruction/creation narrative, the Hindu flood myth.

The Tibetan text is included in an eleventh-century collection of Dzogchen teachings constituting the mind series.<sup>62</sup> Besides embedded self-praise segments, it is also framed as such, with each of its eighty-four chapters attributed

61 For the *Thunder*, see Taussig *et al.*, *The Thunder*, 84–91; for the ritual context of the Ṛgveda in general, see Brereton and Jamison, *The Rigveda: A Guide*, 43–61; for the *vacana* poems see William McCormack, “Appendix 11: On Lingayat Culture,” in *Speaking of Śiva*, tr and ed A.K. Ramanujan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 182.

62 For the source, see Dingo Khyentse Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud 'bum (gting skyes)*. 36 vols (bdr.MW21518, Thimbu, 1975), i.9–174. For studies of the text, see Eva Dargyay, “A Rñin-ma Text: The Kun Byed yRgal Po'i Mdo,” in *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization* ed Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein (New Delhi: Manohar); David Germano, “Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*),” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17 no. 2 (1994), 207–209, 235–43, 263–66; Dylan Esler, “The Origins and Early History of rDzogs chen,” *The Tibet Journal* 30 no. 3 (2005), 46–47.

to an otherworldly speaker, the All-Creating Bodhi Mind, personified as Buddha Samantabhadra who teaches his Bodhisattva disciple, Vajrasattva.<sup>63</sup> The text is titled *The All-Creating King: The Bodhicitta in which All Dharmas Are the Great Perfection* (*chos thams cad rdzogs pa chen po byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal po*).<sup>64</sup> Buddhist traditions engaged in rationalizing a state of consciousness that may be construed as a 'pure consciousness event' or an 'unmediated state of consciousness' are found in many philosophical treatises in South and East Asian Buddhist texts,<sup>65</sup> but it is less common to find this very state of mind speaking up in praise of itself.<sup>66</sup> Examples abound throughout this text, however, and I focus here on chapter fourteen as it is relatively short and depicitive of performative language strategies underlying its composition.<sup>67</sup>

The fourteenth chapter starts with a recurring prose section framing the self-praise hymn embedded in the larger discourse: "Then, the Bodhicitta, the All-Creating King, told this supreme instruction, his own secret, 'Hey, Mahāsattva!'"<sup>68</sup> This is followed by phrases of nine syllables each, suggestive of the performative function underlying the textual transmission. The feature of all-pervasiveness is evident throughout this text and right at the outset in the speaker's name, *kun byed rgyal po*, All-Creating King, and in the first metrical verse of the chapter: "I, 'All-Creating', am the secret in everything."<sup>69</sup> The next verses are constructed of couplets structured as four prohibitive sentences, with each preceded by a complex noun phrase marked by the dative (*la*) as the

63 Bodhi Mind is *bodhicitta* in Sanskrit (lit. the mind of realization) and *byang chub kyi sems* in Tibetan (lit. the mind of purely perfected, or enlightenment).

64 Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.9.

65 King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 177–82; Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Mysticism and Reality: Ineffability." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 3 no. 3–4 (1975), 235–36; Yaroslav Komarovski, *Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 44–80.

66 Cathy Cantwell (personal communication, May 2021) drew my attention to self-praise speech in Dzogchen aspiration prayers with Samantabhadra as the speaker. See, for example, Rigdzin Gödem, "Prayer of Kuntuzangpo (Kunzang Mōnlam)," tr Adam Pearcey, *Lotsawa House*, 2019 (accessed August 17, 2021).

67 I am indebted to Cathy Cantwell for guiding me in reading this chapter as well as looking into other sections of this text. I have previously translated into Hebrew sections of this text under the guidance of Yael Bentor (Gamliel, *Language of Revealed Mysteries*). The whole text has been translated into English by Christopher Wilkinson (2019), but his choices for words and syntactic structures seem to be quite loose, and less than useful for the present, comparative discussion.

68 *de nas byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal pos/ nyid kyi gsang ba dam pa'i gdams dag 'di gsums so// kye sems dpa' chen po//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.62. Note that these phrases are in prose, perhaps an indication incorporating a stand-alone performative text into the larger discursive textual environment.

69 *kun byed nga ni kun du gsang ba 'o//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.62. The term *gsang ba*, 'secret', indicates intimacy rather than esotericism according to Cathy Cantwell (personal communication).

target of the prohibition. The verb phrase too is a complex formation, *mi bstan gsang par bya*, 'don't reveal' (lit. do as secret without revealing).

To the teacher who is three bodies that emerged from me –  
 [Don't] reveal the three aspects of my own self nature.  
 To the Buddhas of the three times who dwell within me –  
 Don't reveal [the three aspects of] my own self nature.  
 To the entourages who gathered within me –  
 Don't reveal [the three aspects of] my own self nature.  
 To the sentient beings of the three worlds created by me –  
 Don't reveal [the three aspects of] my own self nature.<sup>70</sup>

These four prohibitions are mirrored by an irrealis conditional formation (*ma gsang bstan byas na*, 'had [you] revealed') that branches into a sequence of irrealis conditional sentences, constituting a parallel realm of (im)possible worlds.<sup>71</sup>

*Had [you] revealed* my own self nature  
 To the teacher that is the three bodies, [which is] my own self nature,  
 The teacher [who is] the three bodies *would not have arisen* from me.  
*Had* the teacher [who is] the three bodies *not arisen* from me,  
 The three teachings, the three vehicles, and the three entourages *would not have gathered*.  
*Had* the three teachings, three vehicles, and three entourages<sup>72</sup> *not gathered* –  
 There *would not have* been Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, namely, the  
 Three Jewels,  
 Nor the unsurpassable mind of realization [which is] the all-knowing.<sup>73</sup>

70 *nga las byung ba'i sku gsum ston pa la/ nga yi rang bzhin rnam gsum mi bstan gsang// nga la gnas pa'i dus gsum sangs rgyas la/ nga yi rang bzhin mi bstan gsang bar bya// nga la 'dus pa'i 'khor tshogs thams cad la/ nga yi rang bzhin mi bstan gsang bar bya// nga yis byas pa'i kham s gsum sems can la/ nga yi rang bzhin mi bstan gsang bar bya//* Rimpoche, *rNyung ma rgyud*, i.63.

71 The irrealis conditional sentences are comprised of past forms in the if-clause (ending in *na*) and negated future/present forms (*mi 'gyur*) in the main clause.

72 The *gtings sgyes* text has *phun* (precious) here, which seems to be a scribal error; the Darge text repeats '*chor* (entourages) as would be expected.

73 *nga yi rang bzhin sku gsum ston pa la/ nga yi rang bzhin ma gsang bstan byas na/ sku gsum ston pa nga las 'byung mi 'gyur// sku gsum ston pa nga las ma byung na/ bstan gsum theg gsum 'khor gsum 'tshogs mi 'gyur// bstan gsum theg gsum phun ('khor) sum ma 'tshogs na/ sangs rgyas chos dang dge 'dun dkon mchog gsum/ bla med byang chub kun gyis rig pa med//* Rimpoche, *rNyung ma rgyud*, i.63.

The transgression of categories typical of self-praise hymns is expressed in transgressed temporalities, where the past and future collapse into non-existence present, negating all possible modalities of existence. The effect is a reversed creation of an (im)possible world of teaching non-teaching:

*Had my own self nature been compassionately explained  
To the sentient beings of the three worlds created by me,  
There would be no object for the teachings of the three teachers.*<sup>74</sup>

The oxymoronic temporalities and (un)fulfilled negations culminate in recursive and all-encompassing selfhood emerging out of and back into the other-worldly speaker:

Therefore, I, the All-Creating,  
Having externalized my own self nature,  
I reveal my own self nature to myself.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, while Buddhist philosophy and metaphysics negate the notion of self, the experiential dimension of otherworldly, altered selfhood finds its expression in this tradition as well, possibly more so in the Dzogchen tradition than in other schools, and possibly more so in relation to Buddha Samantabhadra than to other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.<sup>76</sup> This expression of a mystical self even in a non-theistic religion based on the precept of non-self (*anātman/anatta*) bears implications on questions around the ‘common core thesis’ and the applicability of the psychological/cognitive category of ‘alterations in the sense of self’ discussed above.

The narrative environment of self-praise hymns tends to reflect an alteration in the sense of the physical, objective reality. It is often one of crisis or

74 *nga yis byas pa'i khams gsum sems can la/ nga yi rang bzhin thugs rje bstan gyur na/ ston pa gsum gyi bstan pa gnas med 'gyur//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.63.

75 *de nas kun byed rgyal po nga yis ni/ nga yi rang bzhin nga yis phyung nas ni/ nga la nga yi rang bzhin nga yis bstan//* Rimpoche, *rNying ma rgyud*, i.63.

76 Dylan Esler (personal communication, June 2021) drew my attention to his work on Dzogchen manuscripts and texts, where several examples for expressions associating a first-person speaker with all-pervasiveness and transgression of categories. See Dylan Esler, *The Lamp for the Eye of Contemplation, The bSam-gtan mig-sgron by gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes: Hermeneutical Study with English Translation and Critical Edition of a Tibetan Buddhist Text on Contemplation* (PhD thesis, Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 2018), 190, 266, 268. A self-praise hymn uttered by Guru Padma-sambhava can be found in the tenth chapter of the *Zang Yes Ling Ma* (see Gamliel, *Language of Revealed Mysteries*).

radical transformation accounting for 'alterations' not only in the 'sense of self' but in the whole world. An example for a self-praise hymn embedded in such a narrative is the Mahābhārata III.187. This self-praise hymn is tied to a narrative of crisis and change; the whole world is flooded, everything disappears, and only the immortal sage Mārkaṇḍeya is left, floating lonely and dejected in an endless ocean, when he suddenly sees a Banyan tree. A little child is seated on the tree in the midst of the apocalyptic flood. The child swallows the sage, and Mārkaṇḍeya sees the whole world within the belly of the child. He is then vomited out and, realizing that the child is otherworldly, he asks for the child's identity. The self-praise hymn is uttered in response to the question, in a dialogue form similar to the one uttered by the All-Creating King addressing his disciple, Vajrasattva.<sup>77</sup>

Some verses of the Mahābhārata III.187 are especially noteworthy for demonstrating the recurring features discussed so far in relation to transgression of categories and expressions of all-pervasiveness in both spatial and temporal terms. The child first identifies as Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa, and then proceeds to boast his all-pervasive, 'unitary being' characteristics, inclusive of all the deities, and indeed, constituting the whole universe:

I am the eternal origin, unchanging, called Nārāyaṇa,  
the creator of all creatures and their destroyer.  
I am Viṣṇu, I am Brahma, I am also Śakra, the king of gods.  
I am King Kubera, and I am Yama, the king of the dead.<sup>78</sup>  
Fire is my mouth, the earth is my legs, the sun and the moon are my eyes.  
The sky and the horizons are my body, the wind dwells in my heart.<sup>79</sup>

In a similar manner to the Coptic *Thunder* and the Tibetan *All-Creating King*, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa too encompasses the widest possible range of the conceptual categories constituting the Hindu worldview, from cosmogeny, to myth, to society, to religion and so on. Notably, all the finite verb forms are inflected in the present, gnomic, tense: *dhārayāmi*, 'I carry', *pibāmi*, 'I drink', *visrjāmi*, 'I emit', etc., as if to portray the all-pervasiveness of the speaker over time as well as over space.

77 The Mahābhārata as a whole is structured as a dialogue within a dialogue.

78 *ahaṃ nārāyaṇo nāma prabhavaḥ śāsvato 'vyayaḥ/ vidhātā sarvabhūtānāṃ saṃhartā ca dvijottama//4// ahaṃ viṣṇur ahaṃ brahmā śakraś cāhaṃ surādhipaḥ/ ahaṃ vaiśravaṇo rājā yamaḥ pretādhipas tathā//5//.*

79 *agnir āsyaṃ kṣitih pādaḥ candrādityau ca locane/ sadiśaṃ ca nabho kāyo vāyur manasi me sthitah//7//.*



Turning into the primordial snake, I carry (*dhārayāmi*) the earth,  
 Surrounded by the four seas, adorned by Mt. Meru and Mt. Mandara.  
 Ages ago in the form of a wild boar  
 I have heroically salvaged (*uddhṛtā*) the earth that was submerged under  
 water.  
 I become the mare-faced fire; I drink up (*pibāmi*) the waters  
 And I always emit (*visṛjāmi*) them out.  
 Brahmins (priests) are my mouth, warriors are my arms,  
*Vaiśyas* (farmers) are my thighs, *sūdras* (laborers) are my feet.  
 All are ordered according to [social] hierarchy.  
 The [four scriptures], the Ṛg, the Sāma, the Yajur and the Atharva Vedas  
 Emerge out (*prādurbhavanti*) of me and enter (*praviśanti*) back into me.  
 Ascetics engaged in subduing, aspiring for redemption (*mokṣa*) while dis-  
 ciplining themselves  
 Free of desire, anger, and hatred, free of attachment, and done with faults,  
 Selfish and steady in purity, acquainted with their higher Self –  
 These wise people get close to me (*upāsate*), as they continuously con-  
 template me.<sup>80</sup>

Another feature these self-praise hymns have in common is their tendency to swiftly shift into a sermon-like register with imperative and modal forms, often of verbs of perception, as the recurring imperative form *viddhi*, 'know', in the following verses:

These stars that are seen in the sky,  
*Know* that they are my forms.  
 All the gem-producing oceans in all directions –  
*Know* that they are my garment, my bed, and my dwelling place.  
*Know* that desire and anger, fear and ignorance  
 Are all my own forms.<sup>81</sup>

80 *catuḥ-samudra-paryantāṃ meru-mandara-bhūṣaṇām/ śeṣo bhūtvāham evaitāṃ dhāra-  
 yāmi vasuṃdharām//10// vārāhaṃ rūpam āsthāya mayeyaṃ jagatī purā/ majjamānā  
 jale vipra vīryeṇāsīt samuddhṛtā//11// agniś ca vaḍavā vaktro bhūtvāhaṃ dvijasattama/  
 pibāmy apah samāviddhās tās caiva visṛjāmy aham//12//brahma vaktraṃ bhujau kṣatram  
 ūrū me saṃśrītā viśaḥ/ pādaū sūdrā bhajante me vikrameṇa krameṇa ca//13// ṛgvedaḥ  
 sāma vedaś ca yajurvedo 'py atharvaṇaḥ/ mattaḥ prādurbhavanty ete mām eva praviśanti  
 ca//14// yatayaḥ śānti paramā yatātmāno mumukṣavaḥ/ kāma-krodha-dveṣa-muktā  
 niḥsaṅgā vītakalmaśāḥ//15//sattva sthā nirahaṃkāra nityam adhyātmakovidāḥ/ mām eva  
 satataṃ viprās cintayanta upāsate//16//.*

81 *tārā rūpāṇi dṛśyante yāny etāni nabhastale/ mama rūpāny athaitāni viddhi tvaṃ dvija  
 sattama//18// ratnākaraḥ samudrās ca sarva eva caturdīśam/ vasaṇaṃ śayanaṃ caiva*

This knowledge imperative requires the transgression of categories differentiating the material world and the human experience from the body (*rūpa*, 'form') of the deity. Similar to the All-Creating King, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa too has the whole religious universe emerging out of himself; *phyung* in Tibetan and *visṛjāmi* in Sanskrit, both verbs suggest a notion of externalization and emission of the phenomenal world out of core, essential selfhood (*ātman* in Sanskrit, *rang bzhin* in Tibetan).

I am the self of all, treading the three paths, granting bliss to all.  
 I am above all while existing everywhere, the eternal mind with wide  
 strides.<sup>82</sup>  
 I alone drive the wheel of Time, I am the Absolute, the formless,  
 The subduer of all creatures, reviver of all the worlds.  
 Thus, my entire self is deposited by me in all living creatures,  
 But there is no one who knows me.<sup>83</sup>

As already mentioned in passing, it is quite possible that many of the instances of embedded self-praise hymns rely on the appropriation of performative, stand-alone texts into their textual environments. The discussion is incomplete without demonstrating the performative environment of such stand-alone self-praise hymns, where they have a life of their own in a living tradition. While it is possible to imagine performative contexts for ancient texts that are no longer performed, a better place to start is in demonstrating performative environments of self-praise hymns such as the popular self-praise hymn attributed to the ninth-century monist philosopher Śaṅkara. This hymn is known as *Ātma Śaṅkam* or *Nirvāṇa Śaṅkam*, namely, the *Six Verses of the Self* or of *Yogic Realization*.<sup>84</sup> It equates the speaker, the 'I' (*aham*), with Śiva in a line

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*nilayaṃ caiva vidddhi me//19// kāmaṃ krodhāṃ ca harṣaṃ ca bhayaṃ mohaṃ tathaiva ca/  
 mamaiva vidddhi rūpāṇi sarvāṇy etāni sattama//20//.*

- 82 This verse involves a paronomasia in the terms *ananta*, *hṛṣīkeśa* and *urukrama*, each can either function as an attribute (eternal, mental, and strong respectively) or to Viṣṇu-related entities (the thousand-hooded serpent of the deity, his Kṛṣṇa incarnation, and his dwarf incarnation).
- 83 *ahaṃ trivartmā sarvātmā sarvalokasukhāvahaḥ/ abhibhūḥ sarvago 'nanto hṛṣīkeśa  
 urukramaḥ//33// kālacakraṃ nayāmy eko brahmann aham arūpi vai/ śamaṇaṃ sarva  
 bhūtānāṃ sarva lokakṛtodyamam//34// evaṃ praṇihitaḥ samyaṇi mayātmā munisattama/  
 sarvabhūteṣu vipreṇdra na ca māṃ vetti kaścana//35//.*
- 84 The alternative titles suggest that the hymn is associated with both monist (*advaita*) and dualist (*sāṅkhya*) traditions, by way of referencing the former by the *advaita* key term *ātman* and the latter by the term *nirvāṇa*, mentioned in the *Yogasūtra* (and synonymous with *nirodha*). This doctrinal integration is typical of Tantric Śaivite traditions. The

repeated at the end of each verse, preceded by three lines listing out negated categories of different sorts in an apophatic language, thus demonstrating the transgression of categories typical of self-praise hymns. In the fourth and fifth verses, the negation, even transgression, of socioreligious categories such as merit, sacrifice, caste, and parents is especially evident, demonstrating the social negotiations and tensions that characterize expressions of altered selfhood, even when the altered self is venerated as a deity or a deity-turned-yogi practitioner.

No merit, no guilt, no pleasure, no pain,  
 no council, no sacred places, no Veda, no sacrifice,  
 I am not the experiencing, nor the experience, or the experiencer.  
 I am Śiva, I am Śiva, identical with Bliss, the Brahman (*cit*).  
 I have no fear of death; I have no caste divisions,  
 I have no father; I have no mother, not even birth,  
 no relative, no friend, no guru or disciple,  
 I am Śiva, I am Śiva, identical with Bliss, the Brahman (*cit*).<sup>85</sup>

Especially striking is the negation of experience: I am not the experiencing, nor the experience or the experiencer (*ahaṃ bhogaṃ naiva bhogyam na bhoktā*), transgressing the categories of selfhood and being and transcending experience altogether.

This self-praise hymn is, in fact, so popular, that it is performed by contemporary, modern musicians in South India such as Smita<sup>86</sup> and the duo Lipsika and Remya,<sup>87</sup> besides more orthodox, devotional performances, such as the one performed in February 2020 at an Isha Yoga Centre in South India for the occasion of the annual festival honoring Śiva (*śivarātri*), with a yogi known as Sadguru seated on a raised platform and venerated as the deity-turned-yogi.<sup>88</sup>

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oscillation between Hindu monist and Buddhist phenomenalist approaches is evident also in the Mahābhārata and in the Dzogchen textual traditions. Regrettably, a thorough investigation of the issue is beyond the scope of the present contribution.

85 *na puṇyaṃ na pāpaṃ na saukhyaṃ na duḥkhaṃ /na manro na tīrthaṃ na vedā na yajña /ahaṃ bhogaṃ naiva bhogyam na bhoktā /cidānandarūpaḥ śivo 'ham śivo 'ham// na me mṛtyuśaṅkā na me jātibhedaḥ/pitā naiva me naiva mātā na janmaḥ /na bandhur na mitraṃ gurur naiva śiṣyaḥ/ cidānandarūpaḥ śivo 'ham śivo 'ham//*. The text is adapted from "Atma Shatkam," Wikipedia (accessed August 18, 2021).

86 with English subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QW2nQzDPXng> (accessed March 7, 2021).

87 Produced by Ameya Records: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq9WPkuLdbc> (accessed March 7, 2021).

88 See here: <https://youtu.be/8wab6ZjHWY0> (accessed March 7, 2021).

## 6 Conclusion

The study of mystical experiences in the Jamesian sense of the term focuses on altered states of consciousness that a cognitive psychologist like Benny Shanon would approach as a natural cognitive domain to explore within the broader 'geography of the mind'.<sup>89</sup> A psychologist of religion like Ann Taves would approach mystical experiences as a *sui generis* phenomenon within the broader typology of experiences involving 'alterations in the sense of self'.<sup>90</sup> Both psychological perspectives are based, on the one hand, on verbal accounts by 'mystically experienced' informants (such as William James, Aldous Huxley, or interviewees). On the other hand, they draw upon empirical studies of the material effects of entheogens on the mind and of neuroscientific evidence. These cognitive and psychological approaches to the study of mystical experiences are synchronic. Contrarily, scholars of religions approach mystical experiences from a diachronic perspective relying on comparative textual, cultural, and historical analysis. Nevertheless, both approaches reveal certain phenomenological consistencies underlying and manifesting in mystical experiences across cultures and religious traditions. In synchronic analyses, verbal accounts can be classified into types (the Mysticism Scale and the 5-dimensional altered states of consciousness scale), as shown by Taves, that can be corroborated by material, empirical neuroscientific evidence of 'alterations in the sense of self'. In the present discussion, I aimed at a diachronic analysis to identify consistent patterns analogous to Taves' categorical type of 'alterations in the sense of self' by focusing on self-praise hymns.

The focus on self-praise hymns as a generic formulation of mystical experiences was guided by the notion that "mystical experience is generally construed as a direct encounter with the divine or the absolute."<sup>91</sup> For the sake of inclusivity and in consideration of religious doctrinal, ideological, and practical diversity, I suggested to replace the terms 'divine' and 'absolute' with the term 'otherworldly entities', inspired by Lawson and McCauley's concept of CPS agents in relation to religious rituals. Further, I also suggested to add to the notion of an otherworldly encounter the notion of turning into an otherworldly entity, as many of the self-praise hymns seem to convey. Thus, the suggested working definition of mystical experience facilitates the analysis of self-praise hymns

89 Shanon, *Antipodes of the Mind*, 34–35; see also Benny Shanon, *The Representational and the Presentational: An Essay on Cognition and the Study of Mind* (Luton, Bedfordshire: Andrews UK Ltd, 1993 [2008]), 500–505.

90 Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 686.

91 Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience," 269; cf. Nelstrop *et al.*, *Christian Mysticism*, 8–9.

as expressions or formulations of mystical experiences, whether as brief first-person utterances by otherworldly entities embedded in discursive or narrative textual environments or as full-fledged hymns designed for performative purposes. In one case, I have examined also the self-referential poem by a mystic in her *encounter with* an otherworldly entity (Mahādeviyakka addressing Śiva), which is, most probably, as intensely and profoundly transformative as *turning into* an otherworldly entity (a god or a deity) or even (imagining) *being* one to be begin with.

A comparative analysis across languages and religious traditions reveals two recurring features of self-praise hymns, namely, transgression of categories and all-pervasiveness. These patterns seem to underlie different strategies in the formation of entities and structuring of events as affordable by the specific language of each hymn. Thus, an imperfective/future form in Biblical Hebrew transgresses the nominal category of names and divine identity, while demonstrating, simultaneously, the feature of all-pervasiveness. Similarly, the Tibetan self-praise hymn transgresses the categories of pronominal indexicality by attributing the first-person pronoun to an abstract notion of the mind of realization (*bodhicitta*), which is further identified as an All-Creating King. This unexpected selfhood is predicated by a series of negated irrealis conditional clauses demonstrating the pattern of all-pervasiveness, collapsing existence and non-existence, past and future into the event structure dominating the fourteenth chapter. Similarly, an Old Egyptian emphatic construction is used in the Coptic self-praise hymn to index the transcendent source of the speaker, while transgressing gender and kinship categories in association to the speaker's selfhood.

Such strategies in ancient texts resonate with at least some of the 'experience' questions related to alterations in the sense of self that Ann Taves has been exploring.<sup>92</sup> For example, event structures demonstrating all-pervasiveness resonate with Taves' categories of 'Connectedness: I have had an experience in which my sense of time was altered and it was impossible to tell where my body ended and the rest of the world began' and 'Absorbed: I have had an experience in which I was completely absorbed in what I was doing and unaware of the passage of time'. Self-praise hymns thus attest to a long history of formulating alterations in selfhood. It seems to me, therefore, that mystical experiences or altered states of consciousness, if you will, do after all occupy a prominent place in quite a few religious traditions regardless of the 'personal discovery' by William James of his own experience with an altered state of consciousness.

It is, after all, approximately four millennia earlier than James that a strikingly similar account of an altered state of consciousness induced by

<sup>92</sup> Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations," 684.

entheogens was recorded in the R̥gveda. One remarkable difference is that the first-person pronoun switches from the singular to the plural back and forth.<sup>93</sup> This example, thus, is suggestive of the mystical landscape as a common, rather than private, personal state of consciousness.<sup>94</sup> I conclude with two lines of the hymn to demonstrate the features discussed above of categorical transgression and all-pervasiveness, while explicitly connecting the sensation to the consumption of an entheogen, *soma* (who is also the god Soma, an object of worship). The categories of mortals and immortals, 'I' and 'we', are transgressed in just these two lines. The pattern of all-pervasiveness is evident in shifts from the past forms related to 'normal' time denoting the event of consumption (*abhakṣi, apāma*) to an immediate, immanent present in addressing the brew with rhetorical questions (*kiṃ nūnam ... kim u ...*).

Wisely, I drank the sweet, powerful, attentive, utmost pathfinder,  
which all gods and mortals inquire of for its sweetness.  
[...]  
We drank Soma, we became immortal, we reached light, we found gods.  
Can adversity affect us now, or even the harm of a mortal, Oh Immortal!<sup>95</sup>

To paraphrase William James' famous words, self-praise hymns forbid a premature closing of accounts with experience.

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- 93 Could this be a case of 'connectedness with others' ("I have had an experience in which I became one with everyone at a large group event and lost my sense of individuality," see Taves, "Mystical and other Alterations")?  
94 This experiential 'we' interchanging with the 'I' stands in sharp contrast to Sharf's construal of the Jamesian mystical experience as private (see Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience," 267, 283, 285).  
95 RV VIII.48.1, 3: *svādor abhakṣi vayasah sumedhāḥ svādhyo varivovittarasya | viśve yaṃ devā uta martyāso madhu bruvanto abhi saṃcaranti //1// [...] apāma somam amṛtā abhūmāghanma jyotir avidāma devān | kiṃ nūnam asmān kṛṇavad arātīḥ kinu dhūrṭir amṛta martyasya //3//*. For other translations, see Griffith, *The Hymns*, 198–99; see also Brereton and Jamison, *The R̥gveda*, 1128–30. For the Vedic source, see <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvasan/rvo8048.htm> (accessed September 4, 2021).

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