

“When I’m in My Zone” - A Mystical Event?

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Abstract

Not limited to athletes, the experience of being “in the zone” is a feeling of heightened awareness, of flow, maximized performance, merging, and of paradox. It is similar to a mystical experience in its characteristics, but is a non-religious moment. The zone is characterized by several of James’ mystical characteristics-ineffability, transiency, timelessness, and unity.

Keywords: *Infinite; Transcendant; Immanent; “The Zone”; Transiency; Paradox; Thomas Merton; Carl Rogers; Stephen Curry*

Mysticism has certain “secret” connotations and could seem the domain of the spiritually élite. However, in today’s society many people experience some extension of themselves into time and space that can be called an experience of being “in the zone”. Athletes, performers, even psychologists, like Carl Rogers expressed their joy in some indescribable moments “in the flow”.

The method is broadly phenomenological as is evidenced in the use of narratives. After comparing the “zone” experience with mystical characteristics of James and others, it is possible to see mystical elements in the narratives.

The author has drawn the conclusion that being “in the zone” does share certain characteristics with mystical experiences.

The study shows that mysticism is not beyond ordinary people’s experience.

When basketball great, Steph Curry, delivered victory to the Golden State Warriors in the last three seconds of their game against the Dallas Mavericks 125 - 122, he described the moment: “I was able to get to my spot and knock it down”. Curry, who finished with 32 points on 11 - 19 shooting the ball said: “It’s just a flow of possession. You have confidence to take the shot, make it and finish the game” [1]. Curry was in the zone [2].

A runner describes the experience of a marathon: “It was magic...Furiously I ran; time lost all semblance of meaning. Distance, time, motion were all one. There were myself, the cement, a vague feeling of legs, and the coming dusk” [3,4]. The runner would never be able to communicate the nature of the experience to anyone else, for the experience of unity and simultaneity of distance, time and motion was ineffable [5].

Psychologist Carl Rogers, 1902-1987, was known for a non-directive client-centered approach to counselling” [6]. In his own therapeutic practice, Rogers experienced something akin to being in the zone. He recalled it in 1986, “When I am at my best...when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing” [7].

The basketball star, the marathon runner, and the psychologist each experienced aspects of being in the zone and used expressions to convey that reality: “flow of possession,” “magic,” and “in touch”. This paper explores the experience of being in the zone and asks: If aspects of the zone experience resemble or are actual characteristics of a mystical event, is it possible to conclude that being in the zone is type of mystical experience?

We begin with a description of the zone and its characteristics, to determine if a similarity exists between certain characteristics of mystical experience from the examples given.

The Zone: Characteristics

The Zone is a place where the body and mind, perceptions and emotions come together. The Urban Dictionary defines The Zone: “a place where your [sic] beyond ‘on a roll’ and your performance is at max skill and your potential becomes more than what it is and anything around you becomes phased out seemingly a place where you can’t be stopped or touched” [8]. Phoenix writes, “The Zone is mostly accessed by athletes, fighters...adrenaline junkies, people who play video games, musicians, ministers, teachers, etc”.

The Zone is a state of merging: “the driver merges with the car; the tennis player joins her mind with the ball and court; the swimmer becomes one with the water” [9]. It is a solitary experience like surfing that creates a personal sense of challenge: “... just you and the ocean, you against the waves or with the waves....It’s a basic, primitive thing. It’s just you and the ocean” [4], an experience of the primordial, the elemental.

Hang gliders, parachutists, bungee jumpers empowered by the feeling of exhilaration are emboldened to engage in experiences which define and defy the finite quality of life: “Free fall is free being, man diving is man alive,...the exhilaration of sinking to the world of nothingness, or at least to stillness, and thereby creating the self as ALL” [4].

Drawn primarily from sports, these examples demonstrate characteristics that James and other authors have used to describe mystical experience. In the case of a runner, extreme physical exertion creates heightened awareness, a state of consciousness that recedes with time [10]. This phenomenon exemplifies James’s characteristic of transiency or impermanence. A central and distinctive part of mysticism is a unitive experience-with God or the universe such that “a unitive consciousness would involve no differentiation between object and subject” [11]. In an athletic experience, a runner feels exhilarated though somehow, seems to feel she/he is not running at all. This experience, contradictory to the nature of reality [12], is paradoxical.

The Nature of Mystical Experience

Mystical experiences share the following in common: a sense of objectivity or reality, the feeling of blessedness, peace, awareness of the holy, sacred, or divine; a sense of merging, paradoxicality, and ineffability [10]. Experiences in the Zone such as heightened awareness, transiency, merging, paradox, unity, and ineffability are also characteristic of mystical experiences [5].

The complexity of mysticism as a “direct experience of reality” [13] cuts across Cartesian dualism and calls for an integral approach to the study of consciousness [14]. The research of d’Aquili and Newburg, 1999 [15] posits the link between the structure of the brain and capacity for mystical experience, notwithstanding Sage’s materialist critique [16]. Taking the classification of mysticism as developed by Söderblom (1892), that is, “infinity mysticism” and “personality mysticism” we broaden our understanding of transcendent and immanent [11] elements in the mystical experience and their possible interface with aspects in the narratives of the “zone” experience, through the use of poetry. In a text from Dr. Carl Rogers (1986) quoted in part earlier in this article, we come closer to identifying the interface between the zone and a mystical event, and draw final conclusions.

Mysticism, the Zone and the Brain

Mystical experience overlaps with various forms of extraordinary psychical experiences, including philosophical experience (being sunk or lost in some abstract idea), creative experience (of inspiration invention, discovery...), aesthetic experience (beauty in art or nature), and elemental experience (the experience of the raw power and substance of things [17]).

Mysticism is a complex, but unified set of perceptions in which the interplay of bodily sensation, consciousness, and knowledge contributes to the “direct experience of ultimate reality” [13]. Human beings experience all reality through the medium of the body, which is the locus of both non-religious and religious experiences. With that in mind, we consider mysticism, the zone and the brain exploring the claims of two scientists that there is a link between the structure of the brain and the potential capacity for mystical experience.

Heffern reports that d’Aquili and Newberg in their 1999 study, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience*, posit that the brain’s structure not only compels the urge, but has the capacity to make spiritual experiences real (2001:14). Through their research the psychiatrist d’Aquili and the physician Newberg conclude that the process of deafferentation, i.e. when the brain structure is cut off from sensory input called afferents, is responsible for the experience of a unitary state.

Drawing on their knowledge of ancient religion and techniques employed by shamans and teachers of prayer and spirituality, the two scientists hypothesize that practices such as chanting and meditation, for example, act as catalysts for the process of de-afferentation and as such, are responsible for the experience of unitary states. Such participation in ritual causes a diminishment in the activity of what is called the orientation association area (OAA). Basing their conclusions on research conducted upon Franciscan nuns and Tibetan monks, d’Aquili and Newberg noted the diminished activity of the OAA during periods of meditation-centering prayer and chanting, respectively. In this case, they argue, “the brain has no choice but to perceive the self as endless and intimately interwoven with everyone and everything the mind senses” [15].

Newberg contends that their findings are not reductionist, but are affirmations “that the brain has quite naturally developed the mechanisms for religious experiences” (2001:16). This information is precisely what Searle (1997:195) called for. Searle requests the scientific community to provide “an explanation of exactly how neurobiological processes in the brain cause our subjective states of awareness or sentience; how exactly these states are realized [sic] in the brain structures; and how exactly consciousness functions in the overall economy of the brain and therefore how it functions in our lives generally” (1997:192).

Although Newberg and d’Aquili do not answer Searle’s query; they maintain that the functions of the brain provide the context for religious experience [15]. If this is the case for religious experience, we can conclude by extension that “the same tangled neurological pathways and physiological structures of the brain” provide the context for experiences of the zone as well.

For our purposes-to consider the experience of the zone, we review Söderblom ‘s classification of non-religious mysticism: mysticism of the infinite and mysticism of personal life [18]. Broadening the discussion through the use of the terms transcendent and immanent [19], we come closer to identifying aspects of the zone that interface with the mystical experience.

Mysticism of the Infinite

Pettersson and Åkerberg [18] present a classification of non-religious mysticism that was developed by Söderblom as early as 1892. In this theory there are two “poles” of mystical experience: mysticism of the infinite and mysticism of personal life. Those experiences in which a person finds him/herself in unity with a force or essence that is suprahuman fall within the range of mysticism of the infinite. There is a sense of being lifted beyond ordinary life while at the same time experiencing oneness with nature. Another way of expressing mysticism of the infinite is in the word “transcendence” that which is beyond [18,20]. There are non-personal terms for the transcendent Wholeness, Deliverance, Goodness, Righteousness, Peace [21]. The question is: “Can in-finity-spacelessness, timelessness, by definition outside space and time with their implication of limitation be ‘experienced?’” [17].

American Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem “Renescence” describes the experience of the transcendent as the poet recalls lying on her back trying to touch the sky. As she stretched, to her utter surprise, “-Infinity /Came down and settled over me; /Forced back my scream into my chest; ...Until it seemed I must behold / Immensity made manifold” [22]. Millay’s experience remembered later, or “recollected in tranquility” (Wordsworth), was intense. Her sense of “Infinity” was immense and manifold. The title “Renescence” means re-birth, as surely the experience seemed to be for Millay. “Renescence” dramatizes a mystical experience that results in the speaker’s new birth, and the realization of the depth of love and the power of the soul [23].

Mysticism of Personal Life

Mysticism of personal life, or what could be called “mysticism of relational life” includes experiences that occur within an “I - Thou” relationship with the suprahuman [18] and usually occur within the context of a faith commitment. For Buber “our personalities are called into being by those who enter into relation with us” [24]. In the relationship of I-Thou a person grows in mutuality in relationship, responding from “a center of inwardness”. Immanence is nearness, “closer to us than our inmost part” [19]. “The quest for the Absolute is no long journey,” writes Underhill, “but a realization of something which is implicit in the self and in the universe: an opening of the eyes of the soul upon the Reality in which it is bathed”.

Immanence is the presence of the divine in the real world, in ordinary things. Kavanagh expresses immanence in life lived simply in an Irish farming village:

Men build their heavens as they build their circles
Of friends. God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday
A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears,
A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty [25].

In a quite different example, Thomas Merton describes his experience in the middle of a shopping district in Louisville, Kentucky on March 18, 1958. It is a classic example of “immanence”, an infusion of the divine into human life. While in the center of a shopping district, Merton “was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers....There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun” [26]. Merton’s experience was one of unity and connection with all the people he saw on that street. Like other mystics, he experienced the universe “as a unity based on love” [27]. Payne’s [28] generalized description of mystical consciousness begins to sound like the zone: “There are certain intentional, perception-like states in which the subject is aware of something (or someone) ultimate which nevertheless cannot be seen, heard, tasted, touched or smelled”. Some people in a mystical experience have no awareness of the external world. In his few moments on the Louisville street, Merton experienced people who appeared unified and transfigured by the underlying ultimate [29] which they seemed to disclose.

Conclusion

A year before he died, Carl Rogers recalled times “when I am at my best,” in group facilitation or counselling sessions. “When I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems to be full of healing” [30]. In Rogers’ narrative, we see the two elements of mysticism—the transcendent and the immanent—and his inability to cause or force an experience. “There is nothing I can do to force this experience (when his presence is “releasing and helpful”). But he knows that attentiveness to his inner self, “the transcendental core of me” will allow his relationship with a client to “transcend” itself and become part of something larger. Rogers experiences the expansiveness of mystical awareness. Was he in the zone?

A neurologist on roller skates, John Kitchin states clearly that throughout history people have used different language to describe the universal experience of being in the zone [31]. Kitchin’s visual field allows him to create a tunnel in which he skates towards a light in the center without having to focus on the peripheral. Is this a mystical experience? In the examples above, there was a sense of identification or unity, accompanied by a feeling of self-transcendence and inner transformation. Bodily experiences such as these exemplify Söderblom’s “mysticism of the infinite” and are examples of natural experiences that occur outside normal waking consciousness [18].

Being in the zone is a non-religious mystical event. As such it partakes in both the transcendent and immanent aspects of mystical experiences—unity, flow, well-being, infinity, and a heightened consciousness. As Rogers wrote, “Our experiences, it is clear, involve the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others, have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension” (1986: 137-138) [32-34].

Conflict of Interest

No funds were received for this article.

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