

Article

Studying Jewish Meditative Techniques: A Phenomenological Typology and an Interdisciplinary View

Tomer Persico

The Shalom Hartman Institute, 11 Gedalyahu Alon Street, P.O. Box 8029, Jerusalem 9108001, Israel; tomer.persico@shi.org.il

Abstract: The field of mystical and meditative research lacks a basic typology delineating the varied genres and characteristics of the mystical experience and of the meditative practices that may be correlated to those. Such a state hinders the comparative study of mysticism and meditation through different philosophical, religious and spiritual traditions, or along the chronological development in a single tradition. In this article, I introduce phenomenological typological tools developed in a previous monograph dealing with the Jewish meditative tradition and illustrate how these can be used to analyze the adjustments and the variations between previous and contemporary Jewish mystics, through examining the four different types of mystical experience and five different characteristics of meditative techniques.

Keywords: Judaism; meditation; mysticism; Hasidism; Neo-Hasidism; contemporary spirituality; Bratslav Hasidism; New Age



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1. Introduction

The chapter under the title “Meditation” in Gershom Scholem’s book *Kabbalah* (Scholem 1978) stretches across a total of three and a half pages. This is the place allotted to meditative techniques in a work of almost five-hundred pages. In Scholem’s other books, even this modest amount is missing. As Scholem explains in that same chapter, “The instructions on the methods to be employed in performing meditation form part of the hidden and secret teachings of the kabbalists which, apart from some general rules, were not made public.” (p. 370). It seems that, for Scholem, even if meditation was practiced, we simply have no way of knowing how.

In spite of using the word “mysticism” to describe the Kabbalah, the first generation of academic researchers treated the materials they studied first and foremost as an esoteric body of knowledge, less so as testimonies—and instructions—of and for achieving mystical states. It was only towards the late 1980s, with the publication of Moshe Idel’s *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (Idel 1988a) that the study of mystical techniques was given significant place. As a scholar who consciously set out to change the attitude towards mystical techniques in this field of study, Idel writes that “despite the great importance of these practices, their history and description have received only scant attention in the modern study of Jewish mysticism” (p. 74).

Things have improved since then, mainly due to a younger generation of scholars, such as Haviva Pedaya and Jonathan Garb. In studies such as Pedaya’s *Vision and Speech* (Pedaya 2002), Garb’s *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Garb 2011) and Adam Afterman’s *Devekut* (Afterman 2011), we find close examination of the techniques used by kabbalists in order to bring themselves to different experiences of revelation. Yet, a comprehensive typology of the meditative practices used throughout the Jewish tradition is still lacking.

Later research (Persico 2016) dealt with Jewish meditative techniques, past and present, while trying to both compare these between themselves and to determine whether any of them had developed through interaction with meditative techniques of other traditions.

I hold that analytical and comparative study of mystics must take note of their theology, but lay more stress on their meditative techniques. Furthermore, in order to phenomenologically analyze different meditative techniques developed at different periods of the same tradition, and at similar times across different traditions, a phenomenological typology of different meditative practices, as well as of the mystical experiences these practices were said to lead to, is required, and that again in different times and traditions. In the following, I wish to present a suggestion for such a system, supplemented by a demonstration of its use and advantages.

2. Meditation and Mysticism as Anchored in the Body

Understanding mystical traditions as comparable through different times and cultures situates this paper clearly outside of the constructivist view in the study of mysticism, which sees the phenomenon wholly as a social construct. I hold a structuralist approach which takes the mystical experience, and the operation of meditative techniques, as manifestations of similar patterns of life coming into expression in different cultural languages and anchored in the very physicality of the human body. I find ground for this view in contemporary neurological research (Persico 2012, pp. 19–25), though I wish to emphatically state that I do not in any way want to reduce mystical experiences to brain activity alone, and hold that we should do all in our power to resist such a temptation.

As any student of the field knows, since the 1970s a great battle has been fought between two opposing camps over the nature of the mystical experience. On the one side, naming it according to its most radical stance, we have the perennialist camp, while on the other, again designating the group by its extreme point, are the constructivists.

Chronologically speaking, the history of the study of mysticism has had its fashions, just like any other field. Out of the Romantic currents which germinated in Europe in the 19th century grew the conviction that there are special experiences that the individual may be blessed to have, and whether we call them “religious”, “spiritual” or “mystical”, the notion was that they are the heart and soul of religion, the font of its life as well as their culmination and end. This conception was made flesh in three monographs that had tremendous influence in the 20th century: James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), Underhill’s *Mysticism* (1911) and Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1917).

Since the 1970s, this stance has met with strong opposition. Different voices have fiercely criticized the essentialist presumption it builds on and have suggested that the mystical experience, just like any other, is conditioned and even constructed by the socio-cultural background of the individual. Thinkers such as Steven Katz (1978), Wayne Proudfoot (1992), Robert Sharf (1995) and Boaz Huss (2020) deny any mutual base for religious experiences of different cultures (Huss even suggests not to use the word “mysticism”, which assumes a mutual semantic field).

Notwithstanding the excellent arguments these thinkers bring for their position, it is reasonable to assume that the popularity it has won owes something to the postmodern linguistic turn characterizing the humanities since the 1970s (Taves 2009; Hollenbeck 1996). The burgeoning of insights and methods of analysis birthed in university literature departments brought winds of relativism and deconstruction. These were based on the assumption that in a very deep way language constructs our view of reality and that this reality is made up of fields of knowledge and power met at an eternal battle for hegemony.

The background for the rise of the constructivist stance is instrumental, as it hints at the thought structure at its base. I am referring to an anti-essentialist (and dualistic) view of the person as made up of a consciousness being shaped by its political-social surroundings, but maintaining an almost severed existence, in terms of influence upon it, from the body. This view is extremely efficient if one wishes to struggle against racism or for multi-culturalism because, by disconnecting consciousness from the body (i.e., genes, sexual phenotypes, physical surroundings), it does not allow any expression of inequality based on biological essences to lay claim on man or woman. When society is wholly and only a battle for hegemony between narratives, and when the whole world is “text”, a

perpetual spiritualization of any matter into a pure linguistic matrix takes place, in which anything is potentially possible.

My main criticism of Katz and his successors is that they dangerously disregard the embodied nature of consciousness. The connection between consciousness and the brain has been studied since the 1960s, but only since the 1990s have we witnessed a major leap forward concerning the width and depth of neurological research into mystical experience, much thanks to new technology then introduced (Hollenbeck 1996; Austin 1998; Azari et al. 2001; Vaitl et al. 2005; Beauregard and Paquette 2006; Lutz et al. 2007; Taves 2009; Ataria 2022). I fully agree with Katz that the mystical experience is culturally constructed, in as much as it is heavily influenced by the individual's particular religion, time and place. But I believe it is no less influenced by (though not reducible to) the structure of her brain, by the biological base that is, finally, a human organism.

Of course, the question of the relative strength of the body's influence vis-à-vis the cultural conditioning still remains, but my assumption is that biology's contribution to the mystical experience is fundamental and definitive and gives the base on which culture's contribution—significant in itself—is built. Indeed, anyone who believes that the average, mundane, “baseline”, state of consciousness is similar (though not same) amongst different cultures shares this assumption. If we eliminate the central function of physiology on consciousness, how can we assume that humans from different cultures sense routine and plain reality in an analogous and comparable way?

Mystical experience, then, like any other experience, is an embodied experience. Thus, on the one hand, there is no way to experience a purified, distilled experience, one detached from the biological body and the organs experiencing it—that is, contrary to what Robert Forman claims (Forman 1990), there is probably no such a thing as “pure consciousness”. There is also no experience existing, as some perennialists would assume, separate and distinct, “before” its interpretation. Every experience is always mediated. Not all properties of the mystical experience, however, are culture and language dependent—that is, contrary to what Stephen Katz claims, some are dependent on nature, genes and neurology—and are therefore common to all those who share the same.

Looking closely at the relationship between the body and mystical experiences is particularly important for the study of meditative practices, since these of course are manipulations of the physical body in order to engender changes in consciousness—meditation exercises are, without exception, deliberate actions, efforts and exercises, mental and physical, designed to bring about a transformation of consciousness interpreted by owner as being religiously significant (usually by way of epistemological, soteriological or therapeutic transformation). Hence, in effect, you cannot separate the study of meditative techniques from the assumption that physical and neurological conditions and changes, and, accordingly, the lack of changes thereof, affect human consciousness (or at least the subjective experience of it) in a decisive way.

Moreover, we can estimate that more than any belief held by the mystic, the nature of her mystical experiences is affected by the meditative techniques she applies (with the express purpose of reaching these experiences), and that even before we get to her physio-neurological makeup. It seems that this simple insight was ignored by many scholars of mysticism, including scholars of Jewish mysticism. Instead of checking the theology of the mystic, we would do well to examine her meditation technique. That, in part, is the purpose of this article.

3. A Phenomenological Typology of Mystical Experiences

I define the mystical experience (not “mysticism”) as the feeling and/or cognitive knowing of the intensification of the presence of an Otherness in the life of the mystic, from his or her point of view (Persico 2016). I separate the mystical experience into four different genres:

3.1. Trances

Entering into a trance is probably the most common background for mystical experience, usually those of possession, visionary or audial revelations, and automatic speech or writing. In this context, it is important to distinguish trance, which is a common liminal state of mind, and the experiences mentioned above, which are of course already constructed cultural phenomena (Taves 2009, pp. 78–79). Trance states have been studied, although not in what would be considered today a scientific manner, since the 18th century, with the growing popularity of Franz Anton Mesmer and his methods (Hanegraaff 1998, pp. 430–35, 484–90). Accordingly, from the beginning of its research, trance was linked to hypnosis, though there is no necessary connection between them, since trance is a universal, and very basic, human experience (Taves 2009; Garb 2011).

3.2. Concentration and Recollection

Different meditative methods can lead to internal convergence and to disconnection from sense data. These results are almost always achieved intentionally by proactively empowering the concentration and focusing the consciousness on a single object. Such a gathering can be accompanied by feelings of acute pleasure and a sense of oneness, hence the religious value they hold for those aiming to achieve them (Brown 1986; Hollenbeck 1996). Concentration and Recollection are mentioned here therefore not as techniques, but as end results, as another genre of mystical experience. Intense concentration, deep one-pointed absorption, is itself a sort of mystical experience, often described as a thoughtless, blissful abiding, being cut off from the phenomenal world and seemingly in touch with something infinite.

3.3. Emotional Ecstasy

Reading various studies on mysticism one may get the impression that the signifier “ecstasy” can indicate almost anything in the emotional-experiential religious field (Underhill 1955; Laski 1990). Here, I wish to denote by it only those mystical experiences characterized by an emotional surge and outpouring, a rapture of pleasure and joy or suffering and pain. This sensory arousal is mainly due to the deliberate amplification of physical and mental activity, such as prayer, singing, dancing, reading, memorizing and so on. Here, too, as in the mystical experiences from the genre of concentration and recollection, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the meditative method and the result that follows. It is one sequence of physiological hyperactivity (Lewis 2003).

3.4. Manipulation in the Phenomenal Self Model

These are experiences in which the self is experienced as out from the body, expanding, shrinking or simply gone. I define this genre using the research and writings of Thomas Metzinger. At the center of his thought stands what he calls the Phenomenal Self Model, which is the human organisms’ way of representing itself to itself. Since this genre is a bit more complex, I will bring some words of explanation by Metzinger:

The content of the PSM is the content of your conscious self: your current bodily sensations, your present emotional situation, plus all the contents of your phenomenally experienced cognitive processing. [. . .] Intuitively, and in a certain metaphorical sense, one could even say that you are the content of your PSM. (Metzinger 2004, p. 299)

What we have been calling “the” self in the past is not a substance, an unchangeable essence or a thing (i.e., an “individual” in the sense of philosophical metaphysics), but a very special kind of representational content: the content of a phenomenally transparent system-model. It is the content of a self-model that cannot be recognized *as* a model by the system using it. The phenomenal experiences of *substantiality* (i.e., of being an independent entity that could in principle exist all by itself), of having an *essence* (i.e., of being defined by possessing an

unchangeable innermost core, an invariant set of properties), and of *individuality* (i.e., of being an entity which is unique and cannot be divided) are special forms of conscious, representational content as well. (Ibid., p. 563)

Manipulations of the Phenomenal Self Model are cases in which a mystical experience involves some sort of change in the way a human experiences his self. *Unio mystica*, for example, falls into this category, as do out-of-body experiences.

In an out-of-body experience, the subject places her self-model to a site external to her body. From this site, she “watches” (usually below her) a figure representing her unconscious body (Ibid., p. 489). A state of Buddhist nirvana, i.e., a loss of self perception, is also caused by manipulation of the PSM. In fact, the basic assumption of Metzinger’s theory, regarding the non-existence of a fixed self or identity, is very similar to the basic assumption of different Buddhist schools. Metzinger is of course aware of this. He writes that

[I]f a human being’s self-model became fully opaque [=not transparent, perceivable—T.P.], then this person would experience herself as nonexistent—the phenomenal property of selfhood would not be instantiated anymore. [. . .]. I take this to be the natural explanation for [. . .] prolonged spiritual and mystical experiences. (Ibid., p. 460)

Our thoughts are not visible to us as objects external to us because their representation is opaque; that is, it is clear to us that they are our own brain creation. If our PSM appears opaque to us we will not be able to produce the illusion that we have a center of self—we will perceive the whole organism as operating as one unit, without a center (this makes clear that Buddhist “nirvana” is not a mystical experience per se, but an insight combined with a change in the state of consciousness).

In this context, it is also possible that the whole world will appear to us as mind-stuff. Indeed, we are familiar with mystical reports in which the whole world seems like a dream or an illusion. The reason for this is because these mystics manage to see themselves, and the whole world, as a mere representation. The transparency of *all* their mental systems has disappeared, and they are confronted with a reality that is perceived as the normal person perceives thoughts—that is, as creatures of the mind and not as objects “out there”. In other words, the whole world loses its objectivity and undergoes subjectification.

I would like to suggest that even mystical experiences in which the mystic reports that the world is full of divine “light”, that it is *in* the Divine, *in* the Holy Spirit, or that the whole world is the deity itself are a result (at least in some cases) of self-model manipulations. Perception of the whole world as the creation of the thought can easily be perceived as a perception of the world as the creation of the divine mind, or of the whole world as full of divine affluence, since this vision occurs when the subject has no focus of self. That is, she cannot attribute the creation of the illusory reality to herself. Reality, then, can easily be perceived as the divine being that illuminates and produces reality immanently.

These, then, are the four genres of mystical experience I suggest. Needless to say, they represent ideal-types, which can almost never be found in their pristine purity. While they outline the major trends, so to speak, no doubt many mystical experiences are a multilayered combination of two or more of these genres.

4. A Phenomenological Typology of Meditative Methods

While at times spontaneous, mystical experience is often the result of intentional effort, that is, meditation. Like the word “mysticism”, the word “meditation” has many different meanings and uses, though unlike the former, few attempts have been made to give a comprehensive definition, and academics usually presuppose an obscure consensus holding that meditation simply means some sort of concentration. Concentration is indeed used in many meditative systems, but it is far from being a sole defining element of the field. In order to better analyze divergent meditative methods a typology delineating them is essential.

Scholarship devoted to meditation has been published since the 1960s, but usually is lacking in any systematic demarcation. In an impressive anthology of articles edited

by Charles Tart (1972, originally published 1969), for example, Arthur Deikman bases meditation on concentration (Deikman 1972) and Arthur Maupin states that “Meditation is first of all a deep passivity” (Maupin 1972, p. 184). These general, catch-all classifications clearly leave out very much. The state of research improves in the 1980s, specifically with the publication of Davidson and Davidson’s anthology, *The Psychobiology of Consciousness* (Davidson and Davidson 1980), in which Marjorie Schuman offered a psychophysiological model of meditation (Schuman 1980) underlining the correlation of the meditative techniques and patterns of brain activity and insisting that scholars should concentrate on the relationship between the meditator and her world, before and after practice.

Since the nineteen nineties, adding to the research on the psychobiology of mystical experiences, and growing out of a new legitimacy to deal with the subject, intensive research on the neurological correlations of meditation has been conducted. Using the technology of three dimensional imaging that did not exist before (with facilities such as the PET scan, the SPECT, the MRI and, more recently, the MEG), psychobiology research encourages a broader vision of meditation, one that includes techniques that involve movement (walking, dancing, singing, etc.) along with “silent” meditation, performed sitting down, itself now firmly differentiated into methods of concentration and methods of open awareness (Andersen 2000; Vaitl et al. 2005; Lutz et al. 2007).

Out of such studies, specifically the integration offered in Frederick Travis’ “States of Consciousness Beyond Waking, Dreaming and Sleeping” (Travis 2011) and relying on the examination of the textual material, the following typology for meditative techniques is suggested here:

4.1. Fundamental Structure

Whether the meditation in general cultivates *awareness*, *concentration* or *automation*. As noted above, concentration as a meditative path leads many times to a mystical experience of the concentrative genre, but not always. It can lead towards a trace state, as can, of course, automation. Awareness here is a general openness and mindfulness to whatever is on offer. And automation, usually trance inducing, is the abnegation of agency, at least from the point of view of the meditator.

4.2. Orientation, or Intentional Stance

Whether the meditator seeks her goal outside or inside herself, whether the meditation is inward or outward bent, *introverted* or *extroverted*. For example, introspective Buddhist meditation differs so from extroverted cries to the divine.

4.3. The Emotive Effect

Whether the meditation brings about an enraptured surge of feelings and sense impressions or an equilibrating quieting of the mind, whether it is *ecstatic* or *enstatic*. For example, an emphasis on the emotions in the meditative path often leads to a mystical experience of the ecstatic genre, but we should remember that Kundalini meditation, where the meditator is asked to *concentrate* on a hidden energy base at the end of her spine, also leads to a heightened emotional state and not to a calming of the mind-body.

4.4. The Corporal Locus of the Meditation

Whether it is focused on the mind-consciousness domain, or on the body-emotional arena, whether it is mind and “awareness”-centered or body and “energy”-centered, whether it is, so to speak, *Shaivistic* or *Shaktistic* (Kripal 2007). Obviously, these two are intertwined, and there is no real ability to separate them. But it is possible to characterize a meditative method that “plays” more on the cognitive field or on the physical-energetical. *Nota bene*, we are talking here on the *practice*, not the ultimate goal, namely, the mystical experience. Thus, for example, Kundalini meditation is “energetic”, although its goal is to influence the mind. Guided Imagery Meditation is mind-based but aims, many times, to bring about physical arousal.

4.5. Relationship with the Acknowledged Tradition

Finally, we should ask whether the methods are superimposed on the traditional religious practices or whether they are complete innovations being added to them, whether (in the Jewish case specifically) they are *nomian* or *anomian*.

Again, these are schematic lines of reference, and the actual phenomena are always more complex. Yet I do hold that the above delineation not only permits a rigorous phenomenological analysis of the material but allows us to also notice adjustments and developments through different cultures and ages and discern where the phenomenological building blocks of the meditation have been altered, even though the doctrinal “sign” on the structure remains the same (e.g., Hindu inspired Mantra practices called Hasidic meditation). Alternatively, we can compare the phenomenological similarities between meditative methods from different tradition hiding quietly under the different theological narratives (e.g., Kalonymus Kalman Shapira’s Mindfulness techniques and Vipassana meditation—see [Persico \(2016, pp. 161–200\)](#)).

We can sum up the above typology of meditative phenomena in the Table 1 below:

Table 1. Typology of Meditative Phenomena.

Fundamental Structure	Awareness	Concentration	Automation
Orientation	Introverted	Extroverted	
Emotive Effect	Ecstatic	Enstatic	
Corporal Locus	Shaivistic	Shaktistic	
Relationship with Tradition	Nomian	Anomian	

As we shall see below, some contemporary Jewish spirituality presents an introduction of non-Jewish meditative methods, which are found in wider contemporary spirituality circles. It is, however, possible to differentiate between two modes of their appropriation: either the techniques that are built using Hindu or Buddhist “grammar” (i.e., structure, e.g., a method phenomenologically equivalent to Vipassana meditation), but transliterated, as it were, into “Jewish” vernacular (e.g., “Prayer”); alternatively, the techniques offered will be constructed from Jewish syntax (e.g., phenomenologically the same old *Amidah* prayer), but the transliteration will be into Buddhist jargon (“developing mindfulness”, “cultivating awareness”), which of course directs the traditional worship to quite a different avenue than the conventional custom.

5. Examining Bratslav Hitbodedut, Past and Present—Rabbi Nachman

As an example of a how the above typology facilitates the study of (Jewish) meditation, we will present a diachronic examination of a small but important part of the Jewish meditative tradition.

One of the most popular techniques in the contemporary field of Jewish meditation is Bratslav Hasidic *Hitbodedut*. One of the central characteristics of the Bratslav court, it is hard to overstate its importance in the eyes of Rabbi Nachman and his followers. The term itself has lived long in the history of the Jewish mystical tradition, usually used in the sense of mental seclusion, i.e., concentration ([Idel 1988b](#)). Rabbi Nachman, however, uses it often in its basic and literal meaning, which simply means going into seclusion; at other times, it designates a simple candid talk with God. However, in certain significant passages Rabbi Nachman emphasizes that the seclusion and the frank talk with God are only the preliminary stages to a comprehensive and potent mystical experience, which is the ultimate end and ideal of the mystical path he lays out.

Part 52 of *Likutay Moharan*, Rabbi Nachman’s *magnum opus*, is one of the main sequences in which Rabbi Nachman explains *Hitbodedut* as a meditative practice leading to a mystical experience ([Nachman of Bratslav 1997](#), p. 119):

To acquire that, to be included in his Root (*lehikalel be'shorsho*), that is to go back and be included in the unity of God blessed be He, which is Imperative Reality (*mechuyav ha'Metziut*). That cannot be accomplished by any means other than annulment (*bitul*). That he nullifies himself completely. Until he is included in the unity of God blessed be He. And there is no way to accomplish annulment, but through *Hitbodedut*. Because by going into *Hitbodedut* and laying out a talk between him and his Maker, through that he achieves annulment of all the lusts and bad traits, till he achieves nullification of all his corporality (*gashmiyuto*), and to be included in his Root [. . .] and he should turn his heart and mind (*libo ve'da'ato*) from all matters of this world, and nullify all, till he achieves true annulment [. . .] And later still something remains of him etc., and later that too shall be annulled, until nothing remains of him. And when he achieves true nullification, then his spirit (*nafsho*) is included in his Root, that is in Him blessed be He, which is Imperative Reality. Then the entire world is included with his spirit in his Root, that is Imperative Reality, because everything depends on Him, as we said, and then all the world is made by Him as if it is Imperative Reality.

The mystical flavor of these words is unmistakable: the practice of *Hitbodedut* is able to bring one into *unio mystica* with the divine, following the nullification of his negative traits and bodily faculties. Moreover, it seems that the practice of *Hitbodedut* is a multileveled process: first, it cleanses the *hasids* of their flaws; next, it nullifies their self and makes it void; following this, it unites them with their “root”, which is the divine; and finally, it raises the whole world to the level of “as if [. . .] Imperative Reality”, that is, in Rabbi Nachman’s (Maimonidean philosophical) terms, God, thus presenting the whole world in the eyes of the practitioner as filled with the divine presence.

But how is one to achieve such self-annulment? Emotional experience plays a crucial role in the spiritual path according to Rabbi Nachman. In *Likutay Moharan tinyana* part 99, he underscores the emotional extent which his followers should reach (Nachman of Bratslav 1997, p. 83):

That the primary element of *Hitbodedut* and the talk between him and his Maker in wholeness is that he lays before God blessed be He his words so thoroughly, that he will be very close to abdicating his soul, perish the thought (*Khas Ve'Shalom*), until he almost dies, perish the thought, until his soul is tied to his body only by a thread because of all his real sorrow and longing and craving to God blessed be He.

Here, talking before God brings the *hasid* into an ecstatic emotional fervor that begins with “a great arousal in body and mind” (LM *tinyana* part 98—(Nachman of Bratslav 1997, p. 82)) and ends with a state that is close to the loss of consciousness, perhaps even to the loss of life. Rabbi Nachman does not implore us to beware the danger to our lives but quite the contrary: he entreats us to drive ourselves to it, and that as part of his directions for accomplishing the mystical goal.

Applying Rabbi Nachman’s *Hitbodedut* as presented here into the typology suggested above, it seems Rabbi Nachman offers an *anomian*, *extroverted* meditative path cultivating *ecstatic arousal* of the bodily powers. It is certainly a *Shaktistic* corporal meditation, perhaps leading towards a preliminary mystical experience of the genre of *ecstasy*. The transformation of consciousness is reached here not through manipulating it directly, but through bringing the body to the state of exhaustion, and after some time (during which according to Rabbi Nachman the meditator “annuls” more and more of himself), the meditator is blessed by the mystical experience of *manipulation on the PSM*, leading to their cognitive disappearance and what registers phenomenologically by the subject as *Unio Mystica*.

6. Examining Bratslav Hitbodedut, Past and Present—Rabbi Israel Isaac Besancon

Let us now look at one of Rabbi Nachman’s contemporary students and popularizers, himself part of the unprecedented flourishing of the Bratslav Hasidic court in Israel and the Jewish world today. Since the 1990s, this once small, often mocked Hasidic court has been

an unmatched loadstone for multitudes of Ba'al Teshuva (BT) Jews, that is, Jews who are reengaging with their religious tradition, which in the context of Bratslav means adopting a religiously observant Jewish life while emphasizing a personal spiritual path.

Rabbi Israel Isaac Besancon (b. 1944), a French-born BT Jew himself, leads a community in Tel Aviv, is very popular amongst modern-orthodox youth and offers lessons in *Hitbodedut* as a form of “meditation”. He has written more than two dozen books, one of them, *Hitbodedut: To Talk With God* (2001), is devoted to the practice. Besancon writes that

In its essence, the goal of *Hitbodedut* is to disconnect our consciousness, even partly, from all the stimulations that pull it in different and scattered directions, in order to connect it back to its spiritual Root. This temporary disconnection from the noisy surroundings brings calm, mental stability, that help us establish a personal relationships with our Maker, to learn to be assisted by Him, blessed be He, and to win a measure of *Devequt*—which promises us supreme spiritual happiness. (Besancon 2001, p. 5)

Devequt is a common Hasidic term designating intimate connection with the divine, and is a popular mystical objective of worship in Hasidism. The path to *Devequt*, according to Besancon, passes through calm and mental stability. This calm is achieved by disconnection from the environment, apparently through cultivating some sort of concentration. Following this, Besancon explains that

As far as we will be able to persist in these [*Hitbodedut*] meetings, after a few times we will talk to God blessed be He in our language, we will be able, sometimes, to feel His presence. In the light of this splendor we shall be able with ease to look inside as well, to our real, inner self. Without make-up or fear our ego will be revealed to us under the generous supervision of the divine Being. In this way the secrets of our soul will be disclosed to our eyes, slowly, and we will be surprised to discover in it hidden glamour, which was waiting to be unveiled. At the same time, the spiritual light will shine on the complicated net of our feelings, and expose the sources of wrong patterns of thought and behavior, that we were not aware existed. (Ibid., p. 6)

We can notice that for Besancon that the primary site for spiritual work is the mind, and not the body or the emotional range. Besancon directs his followers not to an ecstatic surge, but to developing “calm” and “mental stability”, which allow for introspection. In fact, more than Rabbi Nachman’s words, the language Besancon uses is similar to that of modern *Vipassana* or mindfulness meditation, in which the meditators are directed to observe their mental and emotional world and are promised that this will liberate them from negative habitual patterns and obstructing emotional complexes.

Besancon’s interpretation of *Hitbodedut* emphasizes introspection, self-analysis, and the discovery of inner treasures. *Unio Mystica* is not the end-goal, and indeed, the divine itself is not a destination or treasure to be reached or won but a tool to be used for one’s betterment: God’s light and supervision facilitates the unveiling of one’s soul, allowing us to discern and amend “wrong patterns of thought and behavior” and to discover concealed light. A far cry indeed from the ecstatic abnegation of one’s self in an ascent that culminates when one is “included in his Root”.

Besancon’s interpretation of *Hitbodedut* is clearly different than Rabbi Nachman’s, but stating the obvious is not enough. Let us subject Besancon’s to our typology in order to better understand in what ways is in indeed different. Besancon teaches an anomian, introverted meditation based on awareness. It is *enstatic* and aims to cultivate *calm*. It is a *Shaivistic* technique, focused on the mind, and aims not really for a mystical experience but at self-healing, a therapeutic goal.

Placing both teachers’ meditative systems’ characteristics in Table 2, and adding the type of mystical experience they lead to, we can observe how distinct they are:

Table 2. Phenomenological Comparison of Meditative Technique and Mystical Experience in Nachman and Besancon.

	Fundamental Structure	Orientation	Emotive Effect	Corporal Locus	Relationship with Tradition	Mystical Experience
Rabbi Nachman	Automation	Extroverted	Ecstatic	Shaktistic	Anomian	Manipulation of the PSM
Rabbi Besancon	Awareness	Introverted	Enstatic	Shaivistic	Anomian	Trance, if at all

We can clearly see that although both the master and his contemporary student talk about *Hitbodedut*, they are in fact teaching totally different meditation techniques. While this conclusion could have been reached without the typology I presented, the typology allows us to analyze exactly what is different and what changes in particular Besancon has made in his development of his Rabbi's teachings. Through using this typology to consider and review other meditative methods, such as *Vipassana* or modern mindfulness meditation, which fits typologically into the very same characteristics as Besancon's technique (applying awareness, introversion, enstasis, shaivistic corporal locus and anomian methods), we can easily compare and perceive a similarity, suggesting Besancon's sources of inspiration.

We can also see a difference, for while *Vipassana*, at least traditionally (that is, usually not what today is called mindfulness meditation), aims at an end goal of a manipulation of the PSM leading to experiencing a loss of selfhood, Besancon's *Hitbodedut* aims at no such thing (even through Rabbi Nachman's different method did!) and is satisfied with the therapeutic care of the self.

In sum, we can note that although the building blocks of Besancon's method are equivalent to those of *Vipassana* or mindfulness meditation, the structure itself displays a sign that says "*Hitbodedut*" on it. What is more, the top floor will not invite one to any radical mystical experience, but will be satisfied with using self-help to improve one's wellbeing (like much of mindfulness mediation, we might note, but unlike traditional *Vipassana*).

7. Examining Bratslav *Hitbodedut*, Past and Present—Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger

Let us take another comparative example from one of Rabbi Nachman's contemporary successors. Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger was born in Jerusalem in 1968 and studied in his youth at the Sanz Hasidic court. In the 1990s, he began to study Bratslav lore, and in the middle of the 2000s, he established a beit midrash and other teaching facilities in Beit Shemesh, called 'Nazar Yisrael'. Kluger is a student of R. Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern, without a doubt one of the greatest Kabbalists of our time and a figure worthy of separate study and is also influenced by him in the way he understands *Hitbodedut*. Jonathan Garb places him as one of the leaders of the "spiritual-mystical revival" in the ultra-Orthodox circles at this time (Garb 2010).

The writings of Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger are diverse, but only one of his works is entirely devoted to *Hitbodedut*: *The Book on the Oneness of Hitbodedut* (Kluger 2011). The name of this book, which is internally divided into various compositions, implies that it teaches the devotee how to attain complete oneness with the deity by practicing *Hitbodedut*. The oneness that Kluger offers is not a fusion between man and the higher reality but an understanding that man has never been separate from it anyway.

Kluger divides the mystical path into two: a lower and more earthly work, which he calls "Messiah, son of Joseph", and a higher and more spiritual work, "Messiah, son of David". The lesser work is prayer, or *Hitbodedut*, that includes pleas for relief and various requests from God. The greater work includes self-nullification, which asks for nothing. Kluger admits that most of the time, *Hitbodedut*, is of the first kind, and it does not usually lead to a mystical encounter with the deity. Nullification is difficult. The difficulty, understandably, is that "the Jew feels that his own is being taken away from him". This, nevertheless, is certainly the ideal that Kluger presents to his followers.

How might this self-nullification be achieved? At the heart of Rabbi Kluger's practice of *Hitbodedut* is the rejection of the thought of the future and the focus on complete acceptance of the present moment. According to Kluger, "future thought", that is, worrying about the future (and the pleas to God that accompany such worrying), is an obstacle to the relationship with the deity. Disengagement from it is extremely difficult, but it is necessary in order to reach an intimate connection with the divine:

Because *the present moment is a speech act from me to you. Hear it and be whole with it.*

[. . .] The main measure is to be one with the present, to calm the present, [with] what feels and lives right now, as it is now. (Ibid., p. 54. Emphasis in original)

The present moment encompasses within it a divine revelation and must be at one with it. The communion is performed by the follower as they "calm the present," that is, presumably, as they calm themselves and become aware, "feel" the present state. Kluger explains:

It is necessary to understand the depth of the concept of connecting to 'present', which is not only about time—that is a union with the 'now' and not with yesterday or tomorrow, etc.—but about a situation. That is, in every situation in which a person is, he must bring the light into it—and not think that the light in question is with regard to another situation that has been or will sometime be. (Ibid., p. 55)

The meditator must be aware of the current situation, while fully accepting it. They must reject any hope for another situation and "must bring the light into it [=the present situation]". This light is, according to Kluger, a manifestation of the divine descending through the sacred persona of Rabbi Nachman and representing total "faith and adherence to God" (Ibid., pp. 71–72). He later explains that the follower must connect to the light:

Had he connected to the light and seen in it a true reality—he would have attached to it every vessel, that is every situation he stood in for the rest of his life. [. . .] This is called 'living with the present'". (Ibid., p. 55)

According to Kluger, the connection to God to which the follower reaches during *Hitbodedut* not only remains a memory after the end of the practice but continues to influence the practitioner and enables them to maintain confidence in God even during daily business. They have a "different view of every matter," which is "as if [seen as] the Holy Spirit". Whoever realizes this lives out of an ongoing awareness of the divine presence:

He who sees everything as manifestations of the presence of His kingdom, then this world and the next world are equal in his eyes—because they are both manifestations of God, Blessed Be He, each in its own rank. (Ibid., p. 288)

Kluger is describing a transformation of consciousness that enables an active life, lived through a spiritual vision of the world. Such a vision in effect epistemologically realizes the ontological oneness with the deity, as "it turns out that there is no reality at all except God is One" (Ibid., p. 15). Self-nullification offers a life lived out of a consciousness of oneness with the deity and a constant witnessing of its presence in this world.

Kluger's *Hitbodedut* practice is therefore a quietist path of self-nullification, realized by a nullification of the will. The latter is achieved by rejecting thoughts about the future or any personal wish and a vigilant awareness of the present, i.e., of the present situation. Such awareness leads, according to Kluger, to a transformation of consciousness which makes it possible to see the presence of God even during the course of daily life. According to the typology I proposed above, this is a meditative technique that emphasizes attention and awareness and leads to a mystical experience of the kind of a moderate manipulation of the self-model, in which the whole world is perceived as the divine.

Let us add this to the former Table 3:

Table 3. Phenomenological Comparison of Meditative Technique and Mystical Experience in Nachman, Besancon and Kluger.

	Fundamental Structure	Orientation	Emotive Effect	Corporal Locus	Relationship with Tradition	Mystical Experience
Rabbi Nachman	Automation	Extroverted	Ecstatic	Shaktistic	Anomian	Manipulation of the PSM
Rabbi Besancon	Awareness	Introverted	Enstatic	Shaivistic	Anomian	Trance, if at all
Rabbi Kluger	Awareness	Introverted/Extroverted	Enstatic	Shaivistic	Anomian	Manipulation of the PSM

As with Besancon, Kluger reinterprets his master's *Hitbodedut* and takes it towards a more pacific, internal and mindfulness-oriented direction. Self-nullification is mentioned, and so a superficial examination of Kluger's methos might assume that he is adhering to his master's instructions, but the emotional excess that characterized Rabbi Nachman's practice is here, again, gone, as well as the upward movement towards an ecstatic absorption in God. In their stead, we have a Shaivistic method in which an awareness of the present moment together with an emphasis on a surrender of the will and an acceptance of "whatever is" leads to a beatific vision in which existence is perceived as the divine.

Such a conception, totally foreign to Rabbi Nachman, can be found in contemporary spirituality circles, as in the teachings of such celebrity gurus as Eckhart Tolle or Byron Katie (Tolle 1997; Katie and Mitchell 2002). Examining their teachings will reveal an emphasis on mindfulness for the present moment, an abdication of will, and a promise of ecstatic fulfillment by "living in the present" discovering "life itself" and "connecting to the source of love and compassion".

Again, while the grammar of Kluger's method is similar to that of the practice of these contemporary spirituality teachers, the story he tells us is about "Self-nullification" through "*Hitbodedut*"—ostensibly the same as Rabbi Nachman. It is rendered in "Jewish" and "Bratslav" idioms. Using the typology suggested above to examine his meditative method, we can propose an analytical assessment of the differences between his method and Rabbi Nachman's and clearly observe how distinct they are.

8. Typological Comparison—And Beyond

There is nothing wrong or illegitimate in the reinterpretation of a tradition or in incorporating influence from a wider cultural context. Indeed, the Jewish tradition, as most, is full of examples of just that. What is meaningful for our research, after comparing the three methods, is examining what social and cultural reasons caused the changes we observed. Assuming Besancon and Kluger had no problem understanding Rabbi Nachman's words, we can assume they must have thought that the meditative practice they are teaching has some advantages over the that of the latter. It is pertinent, then, to ask what social need or purpose is served by transforming the old Hasidic master's *Hitbodedut* from an ecstatic, upward-ascending relationship with the divine culminating in *Unio Mystica* to an introspective, wellness-procuring quest aided by divine luminosity or to a mindful, will-abdicating awareness of the present-as-divine.

In former articles, an attempt was made to address this question with regards to Besancon, underscoring the ways he adjusts Hasidic mystical practices to fit the contemporary palate, catering to a culture having turned towards the subjective, finding in it—in us—sources for attributing meaning, authority and identity beyond the heteronomous world. Besancon departs from Rabbi Nachman's intense, indeed excessive, self-nullifying practice and falls in line with numerous contemporary spirituality and self-help practices, teachings and products, emphasizing a personal therapeutic journey and seeking to find inner resources in order to enhance psychological wellbeing, a positive self-image and, indeed, productivity and utility (Persico 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Much the same can be said

about Kluger. A shift within the Jewish tradition is indicative here of a major transformation in Western culture.

To close, the mere fact that meditative practices in Jewish tradition, separated by two hundred years (let alone two thousand) are different should not surprise us. Analyzing the differences through a phenomenological typology, however, can illuminate us as to the character and the scope of the differences, allow us to evaluate what had changed and what remained the same and prepare us for the examination of the Jewish and extra-Jewish cultural changes and the sources of influence that produced these observed differences.

An interdisciplinary study of meditation and mysticism, using a detailed phenomenological typological classification of the phenomena, thus gives us an analytical anchor on the basis of which we can establish a more comprehensive and rigorous understanding of meditative practices across eras and traditions and of mystical phenomena.

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