

## **When the Absolute is Not the Ultimate: The Mystical Experience of *Akṣarabrahman* as the Guru in the Swaminarayan Tradition**

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### ABSTRACT

The term 'Mysticism' is a constructed category: fluid and encompassing a wide semantic range. However, within this range, there are certain preconceived notions about its contents, and their characteristics. Its roots in European enlightenment ideals can be problematic and restrictive. The framework of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity argued by William James, as well as some of his implicit assertions (intangibility, some degree of spirituality), are central to the definition of the category. This framework is broken when one considers the experience with the manifest form of Brahman, the second highest being in the Swaminarayan ontology, as a mystical experience. This article utilizes the notion of the Brahmasvārūpa Guru (the manifest form of Brahman) in the Swaminarayan tradition, and the concept of *divyabhāv* (divinity) to broaden the Eurocentric, enlightenment definition of the 'mystical experience' and its partialities in light of other non-European religious traditions.

Keywords: *Mysticism, Hinduism, Brahman, Ontology, Experience, Divinity, Swaminaraya*

# **When the Absolute is Not the Ultimate: The Mystical Experience of *Akṣarabrahman* as the Guru in the Swaminarayan Tradition**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**T**here are, if simplified greatly, two approaches to the study of mysticism. The first has the experience at the core and assesses various individual experiences in order to determine whether they would be considered mystical. The second approach is with the tradition at the core and would assess the theology and ontology of a tradition in order to determine whether there was a valid theoretical space for mystical experiences.

The present study is not an anthropological or ethnographical study of mysticism within the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) Swaminarayan tradition, whereby one would survey a number of individuals in India and the diaspora in order to understand the particular mystical experience of the followers. Rather, this study aims to explore the theological and ontological basis for a mystical experience within the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, and by understanding the caveats and nuances of the tradition and its relation to the mystical, we shall be able to assess and adjust our conceptualization of the mystical in accordance with our findings. We shall explore three particular features of the tradition, for the purpose of firstly understanding whether these features align with the mystical, and if they do not, help to determine the boundaries of the mystical.

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We shall divide this study into several sections. We shall first gain an understanding of the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition and their conception of the ontological levels of various entities. From this we shall examine our first caveat, where we shall examine whether followers of the tradition can still have a mystical experience if the experience is of an ontological being that is not the Ultimate, and we will argue that this indeed is a mystical experience within this tradition. Then we shall examine the nature of the knowledge itself, as well as its transmission, and will also determine a mystical quality to these. Finally, we shall also examine whether having this ontological being manifest in human form on Earth affects whether the experience can be considered mystical and acknowledge that the thought-process and state of understanding of the follower determines whether the interaction, on a human level, can be considered mystical, which will challenge and develop our notion of the mystical.

This study will largely refer to two texts. The first text is the *Vacanāmṛt* – a Gujarati record of the discourses of the tradition’s founder, Swaminarayan, which expound the basic philosophy of the tradition. It is in question-answer format, rather than commentarial format, and contains 273 dialogues between Swaminarayan and his followers, and in the present day ‘his answers provide the texts for regular discourses given in the temples and for... philosophical and theological work.’<sup>2</sup> This text, then, is ideally suited for this investigation due to its theological nature, and its regular usage by the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition today. The second is the *Upaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam*, a Sanskrit-language commentary of the Upanishads written in a medieval-Sanskritic style by Sadhu Bhadrashdas<sup>3</sup>, which interprets BAPS Swaminarayan ontology in

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 187.

<sup>3</sup> Arun Brahmabhatt, ‘The Swaminarayan Commentarial Tradition,’ in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation, Modernity*, ed. Raymond Brady Williams, Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 143.

the words of the Upanishads.<sup>4</sup> Though this text is more nuanced and specialized (it is written in Sanskrit, therefore the majority of the lay following of the tradition are unable to access it), the text is based upon the theological and ontological interpretation provided in the *Vacanāmṛt*<sup>5</sup>, and it links these teachings to wider Hindu literature, which allows us to compare the mystical nature of the tradition with the larger context of Hinduism as well.

## INTRODUCTION TO BAPS SWAMINARAYAN ONTOLOGY

Before exploring the mystical experience within the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, we must first understand the ontology of the tradition. There are some similarities of this ontology with Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism) of Rāmānujācārya, most notably the notion that during the process of attaining *mokṣa* (liberation) the *jīva* (also seen as *ātman* and similar to the Abrahamic concept of the ‘soul’) becomes Brahman (*brahmarūpa*) itself. However, unlike the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānujācārya, the BAPS Swaminarayan ontology contains five distinct ontological categories (*jīva* [akin to soul], *īśvara* [powerful beings], *māyā* [the illusory layer], *brahman* [here it is also called *Akṣarabrahman* or simply *Akṣara*] and *parabrahman* [the highest entity, also called *Puruṣottama*]), whereas Rāmānujācārya only describes three ontological categories (*ātman*, *māyā* and *brahman*). Moreover, the BAPS Swaminarayan ontology gives *Akṣarabrahman* four distinct forms, which are: *Cidākāśa* (conscious space); *Akṣardhām* (the abode of *parabrahman*); *Akṣardhāmmā Sevak* (servant in the abode); and *Pragaṭa* (manifest on earth in human form).<sup>6</sup> The form of *Akṣarabrahman* which the Abrahamic mystical

<sup>4</sup> I will assess, in particular, the comments upon the Mundaka Upanishad, where the ontology of the tradition is seen particularly prevalently.

<sup>5</sup> Translations of both of these texts, in the present study, are my own.

<sup>6</sup> Smit Ghadia, “Akshara and Its Four Forms in Swaminarayan’s Doctrine,” in *Swaminarayan Hinduism: Tradition, Adaptation, and Modernity*, ed. Raymond Williams, Yogi Trivedi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 162-163.

understanding most closely aligns with is that of the *cidākāśa* (conscious space). The *Vacanāmṛt*, a Gujarati scripture which is held in high regard by the followers of the BAPS Swaminarayan Tradition, states in Gadhada 1.21 that ‘*ek to nirākār ekras caitanya che tene cidākāśa kahie*,’<sup>7</sup> ([One form of Akṣara] is formless and purely *caitanya* [consciousness], it is called *cidākāśa* [conscious space]). The form of *Akṣaradhām* is akin to notions of a heavenly realm or paradise. These two can be considered easily within current constructions of mysticism, as they resemble forms that we can see in other traditions such as Christianity and Islam. The *Akṣardhāmmā Sevaka* is a physical form of *Akṣarabrahman* in this heavenly realm. However, the fourth form, the *pragata* (manifest) form challenges our current construction of mysticism greatly, as the notion of a mystical experience suggests a removal or a distance from the human state or the physical realm. Therefore, it is this aspect which will be explored in greater detail within this study.

## MYSTICISM AND SWAMINARAYAN

Mysticism continues to be a contentious term to define and is in itself encapsulated within intricacies of language and power. It is also a largely descriptive definition, rather than prescriptive, and is informed by the constructions of Christian Mysticism, where the study of it originated in the seventeenth century<sup>8</sup>. Developing upon this, William James states four conditions for the mystical experience, which are: ineffability (direct experience), noetic quality (a state of knowledge), transiency (experiences are temporary), and passivity (though the individual can will it, the control of the event is held by the higher power).<sup>9</sup> These four qualities largely frame the modern construction of mysticism, however there are certain

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<sup>7</sup> *Vacanāmṛt* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2001), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Stoeber, “The Comparative Study of Mysticism,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Mystical Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 380-381.

implied distinctions which James alludes to, but neglects to specifically mention. One of these is the quality of intangibility, where the mystic practitioner interacts with a higher power that is not ordinarily tangible unless in a higher state of consciousness. The BAPS Swaminarayan interpretation of the *Akṣarabrahman* guru, conversely, implies a form that is always tangible and manifest. Moreover, it cannot simply be any interaction which is “union with the Absolute, and nothing else,”<sup>10</sup> as Evelyn Underhill argues, because any mundane action between the *Akṣarabrahman* Guru and an individual would be classified as mystical. Rudolf Otto compares the concept of Mysticism in the Hindu tradition through the lenses of Eckhart and Śāṅkara. Otto demonstrates the similarities between the two lenses in order to suggest a commonality between all mystical experiences, though he does offer some slight difference on the semantic level between the Śāṅkara concept of *brahman* and Eckhart’s concept of God, which manifests as a difference between the two mystical experiences.<sup>11</sup> Otto comments upon the nature of the experience being informed by its unity in the case of Śāṅkara, arguing that the knowledge is not one that can be learnt through logical means (*tarka*) and therefore its proof only exists within the experience of it, an aspect which we can attempt to find in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition. Most significantly, Otto’s work also determines that an experience of unity with *brahman* can be considered a mystical experience.<sup>12</sup> This unity with *brahman* also constitutes the mystical experience of the follower of the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, as the mystical experience occurs between the individual and an *Akṣarabrahman* form.

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<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1911), 71.

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1932), 84.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Additionally, John Carman conceptualizes “Hindu ‘Bhakti’ as Theistic Mysticism,”<sup>13</sup> which is useful as the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition being a *Bhakti sampradāya* (tradition of *bhakti* – devotion). He offers three categories which are common to definitions of mysticism and argues that mystical traditions ‘tend to stress’<sup>14</sup> one or more of these features, namely, “a particular ontology... an immediacy or intensity of experience... [and/or] a separation from the physical,”<sup>15</sup> and these features are common to both Hindu conceptions of mysticism as well as Abrahamic ones. However, this model explores the mystical relationship between the personal deity (akin to *Parabrahman* in the BAPS Swaminarayan ontology) and the individual (*ātman*) through *bhakti*, as opposed to the relationship between the individual (*ātman*) and the Guru who is *Akṣarabrahman*. Therefore, this model too has its flaws. Indeed, the introduction of the manifest form of *Akṣarabrahman* as the Guru adds its own intricacies and nuances to the nature of the mystical experience, and as such, these will have to be evaluated largely on their own terms, through the scriptures of the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition itself.

### **WHAT IF BRAHMAN IS NOT ULTIMATE?**

Where the Abrahamic mystical experience would explore the union between the soul and God or the Ultimate absolute, the BAPS Swaminarayan experience would explore the union between the *ātman* and *brahman*, where *brahman* is not the highest or most powerful entity within the ontology. Here we find our first juncture, as models provided by previous academic study of mysticism tend not to encounter this issue. For instance, Otto’s work on Śaṅkara does not distinguish between *parabrahman* and *brahman* in the same way as the BAPS Swaminarayan

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<sup>13</sup> John Carman, “Conceiving Hindu “Bhakti” as Theistic Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Stephen Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 191-225.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

tradition does. The commentary of Sadhu Bhadreshdas remarks upon the following verse of the Mundaka Upanishad:

*Divyo hyamūrtaḥ puruṣaḥ sa bāhyābhyantaro hyajaḥ. Aprāṇo hyamanāḥ śubhro hyakṣarātparataḥ paraḥ* (Mundaka Upanishad 2.1.2)

Puruṣottama [Parabrahman] is divine, above *māyā* [the illusory layer], pervasive inside all, and unborn. It is breathless, without worldly desires, pure, and is higher than the high, the *Akṣara*.

In his evaluation of the last clause of this statement (*hyakṣarāt parataḥ paraḥ* - it is higher than the high, the *Akṣara*), Bhadreshdas makes the case that *Akṣarabrahman* is not the highest ontological entity. This would challenge the notion of a mystical experience, as an experience of *brahman* is not necessarily with the highest ontological power, therefore it has the possibility of being considered as a non-mystical union by Underhill. However, *Vacanāmṛt* Gadhada I-37 argues ‘*ane je evā yatharth bhagavānnā bhakta che teṇu darśan to bhagavānnā darśan tulya che*,<sup>16</sup> (and the sight of this bhakta [*brahman*] is equal to the sight of *parabrahman* himself) suggesting that it is possible to consider an experience with *Akṣarabrahman* as equivalent to an experience of *parabrahman*. Furthermore, Sadhu Bhadreshdas elaborates that this *Akṣarabrahman* is the bridge by which the aspirant reaches *parabrahman* (*teṣu... mumukṣubhaḥ... paramātma-sahajānanda-paramānanda-prapta...*)<sup>17</sup> as *Akṣarabrahman*, though not the Ultimate absolute, can still only be perceived in that way by human minds, therefore this would be akin to a mystical union.

<sup>16</sup> *Vacanāmṛt*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Sadhu Bhadreshdas, *Upaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam: Īśādyāṣtopaniṣatsvāminārāyaṇabhāṣyam*. Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, (2009), 251.



## IS THE KNOWLEDGE MYSTICAL?

Having determined that the mystical experience of the *ātman* meeting the non-ultimate *brahman* can be considered mystical, we need to evaluate whether the nature of the knowledge of the itself can be considered mystical, and therefore fulfils the criteria of the noetic quality argued by James<sup>18</sup>. In comparison to early Biblical and Greek mystical traditions, there is a notion of *mysteria* contained within the knowledge, something secret which was only supposed to be “known to the initiated (*mystes*)... which though not necessarily difficult to understand, should not be revealed.”<sup>19</sup> We shall see that the BAPS Swaminarayan Tradition holds a very similar idea to this knowledge of the *mysteria*, however, with the small caveat that though the knowledge can be revealed or seen, it can only be understood (and experienced) by the grace of the Guru who is *Akṣarbrahman*, fulfilling James’ quality of passivity.

We see this distinction between the scriptural knowledge of the Vedas and the knowledge of *mysteria* alluded to by the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition in the following verse of the Mundaka Upanishad. It states:

*Tasmai sa hovāca. Dve vidye veditavye iti ha sma yadbrahmavido vadanti parā caivā’parā ca* (Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.4)

[Angirasa] said to [Shaunaka]: ‘There are two ‘knowledges’ to be known,’ say the knowers of Brahman. ‘The higher, and the non-higher.’

Here, we can see a specific distinction between scriptural wisdom and this other, more hidden knowledge. The commentary of Bhadrashdas argues that ‘*parā*’ (higher) refers to the knowledge which the best and relates to liberation. It is on the subject of *Akṣar* (Brahman) and *Puruṣottama* (Parabrahman) which is in the form of *aparokṣa* (made unhidden)

<sup>18</sup> James, *Varieties of Mystical Experience*, 380.

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World’s Religions* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), 9.

knowledge which is produced by the words of the *Śāstra* (scriptures) which are explained by the Guru (*parā guru-tad-upadiṣṭa-śāstra-vacana-janyā'parokṣa-jñāna-rūpā'kṣara-puruṣottama-viṣayiṇī sākṣān-mokṣa-karīti*)<sup>20</sup>. In the glossing of *parā*, we see that there are several features of the knowledge which give an appearance of the mystical. Firstly, there is reference to the knowledge being of a higher nature. Secondly, the knowledge is hidden, or imperceptible to those who do not have the understanding. The third apparent feature is that the knowledge is passed down by a teacher (*guru*) to his student, which builds an idea of a tradition and a lineage, similar to that of the Mahāsaṅgīca school of Buddhism<sup>21</sup>. Finally, we see that the knowledge is contained within *śāstra* (scripture) but it is not immediately perceptible, suggesting that the knowledge is present only in the subtext of the larger Vedic corpus, and exists above it.

The nature of the knowledge is further explained in the following verse:

*Tatrā'parā ṛgvedo Yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo'tharvavedaḥ śikṣā kalpo vyākaraṇaṃ chando jyotiṣamiti. Atha parā yayā tadakṣaramadhigamyate.* (Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.5)

There the non-higher is the Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva Vedas as well as articulation, rituals, grammar, etymology, prosody and astrology. Thus the higher is that by which Akṣara (brahman) is understood.

Here, the distinction between scriptural and mystical knowledge is made even clearer, as the higher knowledge is that which leads to the understanding and the experiencing of Akṣarbrahman. The first part of the statement is explicit in categorising the vast corpus of the four Vedas and the six Vedāṅgas, which themselves compromise the basis of 'Vedic' knowledge, as being of the lower kind in relation to the knowledge of Akṣara. Certainly, in light of this statement, we are able to see the inklings of a mystical knowledge in this tradition, as there is this element of a

<sup>20</sup> Bhadrashdas, *Upaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣyam*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> Sadhu Santideva, *Mysticism in Jainism and Buddhism* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2000), 64.

hidden knowledge which exists within, but, is positioned above the core scriptures of the larger tradition (in this case the Vedas and their Vedāṅgas). However, the last statement in the verse is where the greater links to a mystical tradition lie. Bhadreshdas states that ‘*parā*’ (higher) here is that which is the main objective of teachings of the Upanishads. It is that of *brahmavidyā* (knowledge of Brahman) which is comprised of knowing both *Akṣara* and *Puruṣottama* (*parabrahman*). ‘*Yayā*’ refers to that *vidyā* (knowledge) which is obtained by the contact and the teachings etc. of the Guru who is the form of Brahman (‘*brahmasvarūpa-guru-dṛḍhatama-prasaṅg-opadeśādi-prāpta-vidyayā*’<sup>22</sup>). Here we see even more clearly that the knowledge can only be obtained (*prāpta*) by the contact (*prasaṅga*) with the Guru, which again suggests the need for a lineage and a tradition, in order to pass the knowledge forward, and for it to be understood in the first place.

The notion of a lineage is alluded to again in a later verse, which states:

*Tasmai sa vidvān upasannāya samyak praśāntacittāya  
śamānvitāya. Yenākṣaram puruṣam veda satyaṃ provāca taṃ  
tattvato brahmavidyām* (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.13)

He [the Guru], knowing it, teaches it to that student, who takes refuge in him, who is joined with restraint, who does not have any worldly attachments or flaws. *Brahmavidyā* is that by which *Akṣara* and *Puruṣa* (*Puruṣottama*) are truly known.

Again, we see the importance of lineage within the transmission of this mystical knowledge. The only way in which the knowledge can be truly (*satyaṃ*) known is through the Guru, or teacher. Therefore, we can argue that the knowledge of *brahmavidyā* [knowledge of *brahman*] does appear to have similarities with a mystical notion of knowledge, and therefore we can consider this knowledge mystical, both in its nature and its transmission. Furthermore, this also suggests that the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition is a mystical tradition as the knowledge of both

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<sup>22</sup> Bhadreshdas, *Upaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhashyam*, 236.

*Akṣarabrahman* and *Parabrahman* being distinct entities can be found within the Vedic corpus, however it appears hidden to those outside of the tradition, and therefore can only be experienced fully by those within the tradition.

## THE GURU AS AKṢARABRAHMAN

Having now established that the mystical can be experienced in a non-ultimate entity (*Akṣarabrahman*) and that the knowledge of this *Akṣarabrahman* can be considered mystical due to its hidden nature and its method of transmission via a Guru, we must now align the two concepts. We see this conflation in the commentary of Sadhu Bhadreshdas, who references the twelfth verse of the second part of the first book of the Mundaka Upanishad:

*Parīkṣya lokān karmacitān brāhmaṇo nirvedamāyānnāstyakṛtaḥ  
kṛtena. Tadvijñānārtham sa gurumevābhigacchetsamitpāṇiḥ  
śrotriyam brahma niṣṭham* (Mundaka Upanishad 1.2.12)

Examining the world as being obtained by karma, the knowers of Brahma find that which is unmade [*brahman*] cannot be attained. For the sake of that knowledge, he goes to that Guru, who knows the scriptures, is Brahman, and is fixed, with gifted hands.

We are relayed the notion that only the Guru is able to give mystical knowledge. But the verse elaborates upon this by suggesting that the aspirant seeks the refuge (*abhigacchet*) of the Guru and resorts to him totally. Furthermore, the aspirant goes to the Guru *samitpāṇiḥ* (with a gift in his hand, traditionally wood for his fire. The notion here is of sacrifice, according to the commentary).<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the commentary qualifies the Guru with three adjectives: the Guru is ‘*śrotriyam*’ (he knows the scriptures well) and therefore is able to give the mystical knowledge which is hidden within the scriptures; the Guru is also *niṣṭham* (he is fixed, non-

<sup>23</sup> Bhadreshdas, *Upaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhashyam*, 254.

moving, non-perishing etc.) and this is by virtue of him being *brahman*; here, the commentator takes ‘*brahma*’ to mean *sākśādakṣaraṃ brahma* (he is the *Akṣara* who is manifest/direct/in front of the eyes).<sup>24</sup>

Bhadreshdas suggests that the Guru is the manifest (*pragaṭa*), human form of *brahman*. This marks the knowledge given by *brahman* as direct knowledge, as it is not mediated through a scripture or a book, but from the source itself. But more significantly, the explanation suggests a direct experience of *brahman* itself on behalf of the aspirant, which fulfils another qualification of James’ definition: ineffability.

### **THE MANUSHYABHAV-DIVYABHAV PARADIGM**

With the contentions of a non-ultimate absolute, the nature of the knowledge and the transmission of the knowledge being addressed, we can conclude that there are somewhat mystical tendencies to be found within all of these. Ultimately, when viewed from a *laukika* (worldly perspective), we are met with a unique contention: with the Guru as *Akṣarbrahman* being manifest upon earth today, does every meeting (mundane or sacred) between any individual (*ātman*) and the *Akṣarbrahman* Guru necessarily count as a mystical experience? If a mystical experience is taken *only* to suggest a union between the Absolute and the individual, then, in all circumstances, every meeting of the *ātman* and the *Akṣarbrahman* Guru can be considered mystical. However, the reality is that, at least outwardly, these interactions do not appear mystical in every case. Therefore, there must be some indicator or differentiator between the mystical and the non-mystical experiences. Hanna Kim argues that “Swaminarayan *bhakti* rests on appreciating the relationship of devotees to guru and to God and on recognizing that each is also a distinct ontological entity.”<sup>25</sup> Her

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Hanna Kim, “Svāminārāyaṇa: *Bhaktiyoga* and the *Akṣarbrahman* Guru,” in *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, ed. Mark Singleton, Ellen Goldberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 239.

explanation suggests this difference in the Guru, the Guru being *Akṣarabrahman* and therefore ontologically higher than human, but also suggests that the relationship between the Guru and the follower is the differentiator between the types of experiences one may have with the Guru. She continues, arguing that as “the means,’ *sāadhan bhakti* serves to help Swaminarayan devotees achieve the desired ontological state, known as *brahmarūpa*, that will make possible an eternal offering of devotion, *sādhyā bhakti*, to God.”<sup>26</sup> The distinction being made here is that the aspirant performs *bhakti* towards the Guru until they become *brahmarūpa* (literally, with the ontological form of *brahman*). This, arguably, is the mystical experience of the devotee, as their ontological state is literally being merged with that of *brahman*, a higher ontological being. The transformation, or the union, of the individual with *brahman* is the result of mystical knowledge, but it is also the mystical experience in itself. Once this state and experience has been achieved, the action of *bhakti* changes from being *sāadhan* (a means of having this experience of *brahman*) into *sādhyā* (for the experiencing of *brahman* and *parabrahman* by devotion to *parabrahman* as *brahman*), which suggests a continuation of the mystical experience perpetually, which breaks the final feature of James’ argument.

I believe that the moment of distinction argued by Kim is sufficient in demonstrating that there is a potential for mystical experience with the manifest form of *Akṣarabrahman* as the Guru. However, the perception of the mystical experience is also marked by another significant factor. In the *Vacanāmṛt*, in *Pancālā* 4, we are given a description of *manuṣyabhāv* (human characteristics) and *divyabhāv* (divine characteristics) which can be seen within *Parabrahman*, and by extension of this, in *Akṣarabrahman*. The text argues “*Ane e bhagvān manuṣyanā dehane*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

*dhāraṇ kare che tyāre manuṣyanā jevī ja krīya kare che,*<sup>27</sup> (and when that God takes a human form, he performs actions like a human), suggesting that the manifest form of *Akṣarabrahman* not only has a human form, but also performs actions like a human. However, the text also argues that “*ene darśane karīne manuṣyane potānā kalyāṇano niśchay nathi thato je, ‘marū kalyāṇ thayu,*”<sup>28</sup> (merely by the sight of [*akṣarabrahman/ parabrahman*] the human is not convinced that her liberation is fixed, or thinks “my liberation has been achieved”). This suggests that merely seeing *Akṣarabrahman* in the form of the Guru is not enough to have the complete mystical experience, and nor would any mundane interactions such as speaking to or touching *Akṣarabrahman*. In short, when the interactions are characterised by an understanding of the manifest form of *Akṣarabrahman* having *manuṣyabhāv* (with human characteristics), the experience of contact with this Guru is a mundane experience. However, when the interaction is characterised by the understanding of *divyabhāv* (divine characteristics) within the *Akṣarabrahman* Guru, then the experience appears to manifest itself as a more mystical experience. The same *Vacanāmṛt* passage argues, “*emā kāik divyabhāv che te buddhivānanā jāṇyāmā āve che; teṇe karīne bhagavānpañāno niśchay kare che.*” (The intelligent one believes that there are some divine characteristics in [the manifest forms of *Parabrahman* and *Akṣarabrahman*] and in doing this he develops conviction in [*Parabrahman* and *Akṣarabrahman*]). This is where I argue the true distinction between mystical interaction of the individual and the *Akṣarabrahman* Guru, and ordinary interaction lies. When the individual is both conscious of the true nature of the *Akṣarabrahman* Guru and also sees *divyabhāv* within him, the interaction between the two has the potential to be considered mystical. Of course, the caveat explored earlier still stands: it is at the discretion or the compassion of the Guru to grant

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<sup>27</sup> *Vacanāmṛt*, 336.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

the experience and the knowledge in the first place, however, without the understanding of a *divyabhāv* nature, the interaction of an aspirant and the *Akṣarabrahman* Guru might not be considered mystical, as the individual would not have the ability to obtain the ontological state of *brahmarūpa* required to have this mystical experience in the manner explained by the tradition. Therefore, in this way, we are able to include the caveat of the particular perspective of the individual in defining whether their interactions with a manifest form of *Akṣarabrahman* can be considered mystical or not.

From the nuance demonstrated by the perspective of the individual in this case, we can argue that perhaps our definition of the mystical may need to be adjusted in order to account for this notion. While on the surface, a *manuṣyabhāv* and *divyabhāv* experience of *brahman* may appear the same, they differ greatly in their reception by the individual, and also differ on an ontological and theological level. By extension of this feature in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, we may also argue that the perspective of any individual is a significant factor in determining the mystical nature of an experience in a tradition, as without the appropriate thought-process and understanding, an experience or interaction with a higher being may either be categorized as ordinary by the individual or may be understood as something else. Furthermore, it could be argued that without the right understanding in the first place, the mystical experience of an individual may never occur at all. Therefore, we may argue that the nuance of understanding of an individual is a significant factor in any mystical experience.

The nature of mystical experience of the manifest form of *Akṣarabrahman* within BAPS Swaminarayan tradition also allows us to expand the notion of the mystical to that which can be seen physically on the Earth, and not one that merely exists outside of the physical realm. Because the



*Akṣarabrahman* Guru is physically present in a human form on Earth, according to the tradition, and the Guru walks, talks, and eats, we cannot simply limit our understanding of the mystical to that which is otherworldly or occurs only in separation to the physical body as alluded by Carman earlier, as the mystical experience of the follower in the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition can and does occur in the physical realm, and is experienced by the physical body at the seemingly ordinary level of consciousness. Indeed, because of this distinction, we must further expand our definition of the mystical to encompass these physical interactions, and not simply refer to them as occurring totally separate to and outside of ordinary interactions and experiences.

Through the examination of the nuanced ontology of the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, we are able to find new criteria upon which we can critique and adapt the academic construction of mysticism and its particular understanding of the mystical experience. And through the understanding of a non-ultimate *brahman*, the notion of a mystical experience being limited to the union with an ultimate absolute has been challenged and critiqued to a certain extent, though we still find that within the ontological conception and understanding of the tradition, this experience is still akin to the experience of the ultimate *parabrahman*. From this provision, we are able to determine that the nature of the mystical knowledge of *Akṣarabrahman* and *parabrahman* can be considered mystical, even though the two can be seen in the Vedic corpus, as the mystical experience with *Akṣarabrahman* can only be experienced by followers of the tradition who have been given the understanding and experience by the Guru. Furthermore, the nature of the direct experience given by the Guru suggests that the method of transmission of the knowledge is of a mystical variety as well. The significant contention to the implicit notion of the mystical experience being of an ethereal or intangible nature is challenged by the tradition's conception of the

*Akṣarbrahman* Guru as being manifest on Earth in human form. Here we have seen that due to this tangibility, the mere interaction of an individual and the manifest form of *Akṣarbrahman* is not enough to constitute a mystical experience in itself. However, by examining these constructions through the lenses of *manuṣyabhāv* (human attributes) and *divyabhāv* (divine attributes) we are able to acknowledge that the state of consciousness and thought-process of the individual within the experience is also a factor in determining the nature of an experience, and is a factor in its quality, as a mystical experience.

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