
MYSTICAL DEATH IN THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF RAMANA MAHARSHI

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Abstract

The main aim of our study is to contribute to the understanding of mystical death event on the basis of its retrospective reconstruction in the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi, a prominent representative of Advaita Vedānta of the 20th century. Combining biographical, phenomenological and hermeneutical method we reconstruct the course, structure and meaning of spiritual ‘awakening’ as the central hierophany of Maharshi’s life that confirms the universal, i.e., transcultural and transreligious character of the phenomenon of mystical death as a process of ‘ontological’ transformation, in which the archetypal matrix life–death–rebirth re-actualises.

Keywords: mysticism, Ramana Maharshi, Advaita Vedānta, yoga, awakening

1. Introduction

Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), born Venkatarāman Ayyār (later abbreviated to Ramana), was a Tamil *jñānī* considered a prominent contemporary representative of Vedānta darśana – one of the six ‘orthodox’ philosophical systems of India. After his spiritual awakening in 1896 Venkatarāman left his home and settled down in Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu, India), later in several locations of a nearby mountain Arunachala and finally in an ashram built by his followers (Sri Ramanasramam) so that he would spend the major part of his life there, permanently available to all visitors. Maharshi’s life story and teachings are the subject of academic interest for several reasons: their research can contribute to our understanding of mysticism, Advaita Vedānta, neo-Hinduism as well as, for instance, the still widely discussed relationship between an experience and its interpretation (constructivism vs. essentialism). In this study, our interest is focused on examination of the phenomenon of mystical death in Maharshi’s life and teachings, which plays here, as will be shown, the central role as the key hierophany of his life story. However, our interest in comparative morphology of mystical death will not be

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laid aside; in a discussion, we will strive for a more universal understanding of the phenomenon of mystical death.

The authors of the study dealt with the phenomenon of mystical death in two collective monographs that originated within their research project ‘The Phenomenon of Mystical Death in European Tradition and in Selected Fields of Non-European Spiritual Tradition’, i.e., *The Phenomenon of Mystical Death in Selected Fields of Spiritual Tradition* [1], and *On the Problem of Universality and Topicality of the Phenomenon of Mystical Death* [2].

For the purpose of our examination we have applied an understanding of mystical death as proposed by Martin Dojčár [3]: “By mystical death we understand a transcending movement of consciousness directed from individualized consciousness (consciousness ‘ontologically’ defined by individual psychosomatic structure, so called ego) to trans-individual consciousness (consciousness ‘ontologically’ transcending individual boundaries of individual psychosomatic structure) that is followed by processes of a psycho-spiritual-somatic character resembling dying in the sense of a description of objective, possibly subjective thanatology”. The structure of this process is expressed by the matrix *life, death and rebirth*, which corresponds to *mysterium paschalis* – ‘paschal mystery’ in the Christian tradition, the key event of the Christian faith – death of the old man and rebirth of a new man (Ephesians 4.22–24) – represented by the symbolism of Christ crucified and risen.

When Slavomír Gálik [4] interprets the aim of every mysticism in trans-individual completion of a mystic in Being that transcends all divine epiphanies and the subject-object distinction, he argues in favour of universality of the process of mystical death, based on two axioms: (1) “a man is physiologically, socially and psychologically basically the same everywhere, which is expressed by the very term a man”, and (2) “in all religions it is acknowledged that there exists a personal and impersonal, unconditional, omnipresent and transcendent Being” [4, p. 48]. These axioms, considered Gálik, draws the thesis about universality of mystical death that remains universal even if articulated in various cultural ways.

In our study we aim at examination of validity of this thesis in the case of spiritual awakening of Ramana Maharshi.

2. To the phenomenon of mystical death

The term mystical death relates to the well-known matrix that is often found in religions – *death and resurrection*. According to Mircea Eliade, this matrix is widespread across religions because it represents a vital condition for opening to a new, spiritual, and sacral dimension, and is perhaps even a key to understanding all religions [5]. However, since this matrix can exist in a variety of meanings in these religions, we are primarily interested in how is understood in Christian spirituality.

In Christian spirituality, the term ‘mystical death’ relates to the death and resurrection of Christ. Since it is generally true that members of all religions follow their founders, it is also true for Christians that they attempt at following Christ’s death and resurrection. According to Paul Ricoeur, the Apostle Paul transferred *kerygma* – (proclamation of the Gospel, death, and Christ’s resurrection) to the existential situation of an old nature’s death and a new birth. Ricoeur, for example, says this: “Saint Paul creates this second modality of Christian hermeneutics when he invites the hearer of the word to decipher the movement of his own existence in the light of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. Hence, the death of the old man and the birth of the new creature are understood under the sign of the Cross and the Paschal victory. But their hermeneutic relation has double meaning. Death and resurrection receive a new interpretation through the detour of this exegesis of human existence.” [P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Religion-Online, 46, <http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-2/Religion-Online.org%20Books/Ricoeur,%20Paul%20-%20Essays%20on%20Biblical%20Interpretation.pdf>]

The Apostle Paul emphasizes it several times and in various letters. For example, in his letter to the Romans Paul writes: “Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ... Because we know our old human was crucified along with him to have the sinful body destroyed, to stop being slave to sin.” (Romans 6.4-6) In his letter to the Ephesians, he further analyses the new existential situation of Christians: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness“ (Ephesians 4.22–24).

Paul’s interpretation of Christ’s death and resurrection set a firm foundation for both Christian mysticism and an understanding of the phenomenon of ‘mystical death’. His interpretation is also supported by Jesus’ speaking to Nicodemus about being reborn of water and the Spirit, which anticipates death of the previous way of life (John 3.3–7).

In the early modern period Christianity there is mentioned an explicit idea of mystical death in *Treatise on Mystical Death* that dates back to the 16th or 17th century and is wrongly supposed to be written by Saint Paul of the Cross [6]. The unknown author speaks of mystical death as follows: “My Jesus, I must die and obey! You ask too much of me in one thing, because You want me to die with You on the Cross. A mystical death, a death however sweet, it’s too hard for me because I must undergo a thousand deaths before dying! ... I will die completely to myself and live for God alone...” [***, *Treatise on Mystical Death (Studies of St. Paul of the Cross)*, The Passionists of Holy Cross Province, 1–5, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/47280069/treatise-on-mystical-deathpdf>] The unknown author writes about the phenomenon of mystical death in several ways. On one hand he distinguishes mystical death and normal death. On the other hand, however, he also draws our attention to similarities: mystical

death is a ‘crucifying’ of all the desires, likings, and self-love; it is a complete surrender to Christ. The author even speaks about poverty, nothingness in respect to the body and thinking, which evokes speech of Meister Eckhart or John of the Cross.

Meister Eckhart, in his sermon *On Separation*, claims: “When I am to preach, I always speak of separation, that man needs to jettison himself and everything” [7].

According to Josef Sudbrack, in the history of Christian spirituality *mysterium paschalis* found its expression in the “mysticism of the cross”, later also identified with the “mysticism of the night” in the teachings of Saint John of the Cross [8].

John of the Cross also assumes ‘nothing’ when he speaks about two nights (senses and spirit) and total emptying of the soul: “Of all these forms and kinds of knowledge the soul must strip and void itself, ... it remains without form and without figure, its imagination being lost and itself being absorbed in a supreme good, and in a great oblivion, remembering nothing. For that Divine union voids its fancy and sweeps it clean of all forms and kinds of knowledge and raises it to the supernatural.” [9] Freeing oneself from all desires and tastes, reaching the state of complete ‘purity of the soul’, equals mystical death, which is a condition for unity with God since, nothing as restricted (Me) can be united with the almighty (God).

Mystical death is then ‘death’ or the act of detaching from the empirical Me, with its tastes and, desires, leaving empirical Me completely empty. Thus, human consciousness is freed and identified with the deeper Base, the very Self, or let us say – with God (nothing limited ‘me’ can reach unlimited God. After mystical death, the consciousness still keeps its bind with the body, or the temporary created ‘me,’ but without the element of dependence, since such structures are conquered and a higher spiritual position is reached.

We apply the above mentioned understanding of the phenomenon of mystical death on the spirituality of Ramana Maharshi by the means of analogy.

3. Methodology of the study of mystical death in the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi

Considering the main aim of our research, the retrospective reconstruction of the mystical death event and its significance in the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi, we decided to build our methodology on biographical method that is applied in examination of ‘life history’ from perspectives of its participants. Biographical method is understood as a written record or oral reproduction of ‘life history’ of a specific historical subject, a collection of narratives related to life of the given subject or life of their contemporary (a historical document of a narrative character).

Biographical method is understood in accordance with its meaning in cultural anthropology and history as the method based on investigation of a written record or oral reproduction of ‘life history’ of a specific historical

subject, i.e., an investigation of a collection of narratives related to life of the given subject or life of his/her contemporary aiming at reconstructing a personal history of a subject, particularly in regard with its key epiphany(ies) [M. Svoboda, *Biografická metoda v antropologii*, AntropoWebzin, 188, <http://www.antropoweb.cz/cs/biograficka-metoda-v-antropologii>]. Thus, in our study, we work with biographical narratives on the event of Maharshi's spiritual 'awakening' (*sāhāja-nirvikalpa-samādhi*) as the core event of Ramana's life (*epiphany*).

Given the character of our research, which falls within the field of personal spirituality, we hold it necessary to supplement our research design with phenomenological and hermeneutical method. Both of these methods are mutually complementary and demonstrate a potential to capture the particularity (*invariant structure*) and meaning of spiritual phenomena, which are, in the form of mystical death event, at the centre of our research interest. We apply hermeneutical enquiry in order to provide us with the interpretation of the phenomenon of mystical death in the sense of *Verständnis* in accordance with the distinction made by Johann G. Droysen and developed by a Canadian theologian and religious studies scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (*The Meaning and End of Religion, Towards a World Theology: Faith and The Comparative History of Religion, Questions of Religious Truth*, etc. [10]).

For the purpose of our enquiry, we understand phenomenological description in its broader sense, distinct from its philosophical meaning as developed in classical Husserlian phenomenology; that is a description of phenomena given to consciousness, which is primarily concerned with identification of attributes characterizing the phenomena under investigation [11]. The outcome of such an enquiry is thus a retrospective reconstruction of mystical death event, where the key hierophany of Maharshi's life, the event of his spiritual 'awakening', becomes the subject of our interpretation based on the analysis of narratives of a traditional type and uncovering of its invariant structure and meaning.

The main source for our research of mystical death in the life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi is represented by written records. All of the historical Maharshi's biographies present an account of mystical death in connection to Ramana's spiritual awakening, however, without referring to the notion of mystical death directly.

The first who briefly reported on Ramana's 'death experience' at the age of 16 (although he incorrectly mentions that Ramana was 17 at the time) was Frank H. Humphreys in his book *Glimpses of the Life and Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi* [12] (1925) (the book is based on articles published in *The International Psychic Gazette* in 1913). Humphreys was probably the first European who visited Maharshi at Arunachala (1911). Nevertheless, the most influential biographical report about Ramana was the one of B.V. Narasimha Swami *Self-Realization: The Life and Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (1931) [13]. As the first major biography, Narasimha's *Self-Realization* became the basis of all classical biographies – those of Paul Brunton

(1934) [14], Arthur Osborne (1954) [15], and Alan W. Chadwick [16] (1961, written under the pseudonym Sadhu Arunachala). They all rely on Narasimha's account and more or less reproduce his description of Ramana's 'death experience'.

Although Narasimha Swami acknowledges that he had not recorded Ramana's exact words [13, p. 20], nevertheless, his description was recognized as authentic and repeatedly published by Sri Ramanasramam in multiple editions of his book.

However, Narasimha's biography is a compilation of several conversations held at Arunachala in 1930 between Narasimha and Maharshi. Two of them were published in 1981 in *The Mountain Path*, an English language journal of Sri Ramanasramam, under the title *The Death Experience of Bhagavan* [The Mountain Path, 18(2) (1981) 67–69]. We find this text the most important source of our investigation.

An important source for studying Ramana Maharshi is the work by Paul Brunton, an influential popularizer of the Tamil sage, his book *A Search in Secret India* [14] in particular, which includes a record of Brunton's meeting with Maharshi in 1931. The significance of Brunton's testimony about Maharshi is even more important due to the fact that Maharshi himself acknowledged its authenticity and recommended the book explicitly [17].

It was Brunton's book that overshadowed both preceding biographies (Humphreys, Narasimha) immediately after its publication. While writing it, Brunton drew on his own experience with Maharshi as well as on the reports by Ramana's disciples and historical written records, mainly the two preceding biographies. "Bit by bit, from his own reluctant lips and from those of his disciples, I piece together a fragmentary pattern of his life story." [14, p. 281] The story of Ramana's death and awakening appears again in the narratives by Arthur Osborne [15, p. 18-19] and Major A.W. Chadwick [16, p. 6-8].

We will examine the structure and meaning of the mystical death event, which appears to be in the core of it, by a close reading of the traditional account of Ramana's awakening. We will look at Narasimha's biography, as well as other biographies of Ramana in order to reconstruct Ramana's own understanding of his experience.

4. Phenomenology of mystical death in the story of Ramana Maharshi

The following text presents the outcome of our analyses of the traditional narratives of Ramana's story and uncovers the structure of Maharshi's 'death experience' as well as its meaning for Ramana himself and his teachings.

4.1. Characteristics of Ramana's 'death experience'

According to our examination all traditional narratives of Ramana's story display the same structure of his 'death experience'. Despite certain differences among them, in particular those of Narasimha Swami, we may conclude that the

invariant structure of the event of mystical death of Ramana Maharshi consists of the following phenomenological elements: (1) fear of death, (2) *avēsam*, (3) introversion (introspection), (4) devotion, (5) indifference, (6) acceptance of death, (7) self-enquiry, (8) the awareness of the transcending Self as distinguished and different from the body and mind structure.

Our analyses of traditional narratives of Ramana's story show that distinction between the individualized I or ego, and primordial I or Self, as well as the immediate and non-mediated character are typical of Ramana's 'death experience'.

Maharshi's distinction between individualized I or *ego*, and primordial I or *Self* is pointed out by Narasimha Swami [13, p. 21–22], Paul Brunton [14, p. 144–145], Arthur Osborne [15, p. 19], and Frank Humphreys [12, chap. 1].

A report from Brunton's conversation with Maharshi clarifies the distinction between the individualized I and trans-individual Self in the context of Maharshi's method of self-enquiry, as it is obvious from the following excerpt: "At last his lips open and he says gently, 'You say I. I want to know. Tell me, who is that I?' 'What does he mean?' He has now cut across the services of the interpreter and speaks direct to me in English. Bewilderment creeps across my brain. 'I am afraid I do not understand your question,' I reply blankly. 'Is it not clear. Think again!' I puzzle over his words once more. An idea suddenly flashes into my head. I point a finger towards myself and mention my name. 'And do you know him?' 'All my life!' I smile back at him. 'But that is only your body! Again I ask, 'Who are *you*?'"

"I cannot find a ready answer to this extraordinary query. The Maharishee continues, 'Know first that I and then you shall know the truth.' My mind hazes again. I am deeply puzzled. This bewilderment finds verbal expression. But the Maharishee has evidently reached the limit of his English, for he turns to the interpreter and the answer is slowly translated to me: 'There is only one thing to be done. Look into your own self. Do this in the right way and you shall find the answer to all your problems.'" [14, p. 144–145]

Frank Humphreys expresses the distinction between ego and Self in another form – he does so in the background of *distinction between the observer and the observed*. Humphreys consequently formulates the principle of Maharshi's method of self-enquiry on its basis: "Do not fix your attention on all these changing things of life, death, and phenomena. Do not think of even the actual act of seeing them or perceiving them but only of that which sees all these things. (...) Keep your eyes open, and try to keep the mind unshakenly fixed on That Which Sees. It is inside yourself. (...) From now onwards let your whole though in meditation be not on the act of seeing nor on what you see, but immovably on That Which Sees." [12, chap. 1]

According to the traditional account, Ramana's 'awakening experience' was spontaneous or immediate, in other words, direct and non-mediated. Ramana's awakening was immediate as far as it was sudden, and non-mediated, i.e., not based on previous religious or spiritual practice and study. Although he may have read excerpts from the *Bible*, the *Periapurānam* (stories of 63 Tamil

saints), the *Tayumanavar* (hymns on the saint Tayumanavar), and the *Teváram*, but he himself denies that his awakening experience might be somehow generated by any readings. D.S. Sarma puts it in these words: “illumination came to him suddenly, without any previous training or effort” [18]. However, this conception contradicts the usual viewpoint, according to which, practice (Greek *praxis*, Sanskrit *sāadhanā*, ‘spiritual effort’) precedes theory (Greek *theoria*, Sanskrit *jñāna*, ‘liberating wisdom’). “But, in the case of the Maharshi, there were no periods of *sāadhanā*, no stages of the mystic way and no laborious practice of yoga.” [18, p. 81]

During his visit to Ramanasramam in 1946 D.S. Sarma asked Maharshi the following question: “In the lives of the western mystics we find descriptions of what is called the mystic way with the three well-marked stages of purgation, illumination and union. The purgatory state corresponds to what we call the *sāadhanā* period. Was there any such period in the life of Bhagavan?”

In the answer to D.S. Sarma’s direct question Maharshi explicitly claims that his awakening occurred immediately, with no effort and conscious preceding preparation: “I know no such period. I never performed any *prāṇāyāma* or *japa*. I knew no mantras. I had no idea of meditation or contemplation. Even when I came to hear of such things later I was never attracted to them. *Sāadhanā* implies an object to be gained and the means of gaining it. What is there to be gained which we do not already possess? In meditation, concentration and contemplation, what we have to do is only not to think of anything, but to be still. This natural State is given many names – *moksha*, *jñāna*, *ātma*, etc., and these give rise to many controversies. There was a time when I used to remain with my eyes closed. That does not mean that I was practicing any *sāadhanā* then. Even now I sometimes remain with my eyes closed. If people choose to say that I am doing some *sāadhanā* at the moment, let them say so. It makes no difference to me. People seem to think that by practicing some elaborate *sāadhanā* the Self would someday descend upon them as something very big and with tremendous glory and they would then have what is called *sākshātkāram*. The Self is *sākshāt*, all right, but there is no *kāram* or *kritam* above it. The word *kāram* implies one’s doing something. But the Self is realized no by one’s doing something, but one’s refraining from doing anything – by remaining still and being simply what one really is.” [18, p. 80-81].

Despite various cultural and religious influences on Ramana (neo-Hinduism, Christianity, Advaita Vedānta, Tantra, etc.), Maharshi persistently claims that his experience of awakening to the Self was direct and non-mediated. In the next passage we will see that such understanding is fully in accordance with Ramana’s teachings.

4.2. Implications of Ramana’s ‘death experience’ in his teachings

‘Death experience’ of Sri Ramana had a determining influence on his teachings. It is proved by his method of self-enquiry (the basic method of

Maharshi's version of *jñāna yoga*), Bhagavan's concept of liberating wisdom (*jñāna*) as the aim of *ātma-vichāra*, as well as his ideal of *jīvanmukta*, "the liberated in life" [19], whose embodiment he was supposed to be.

Venkatārāman's experience of mystical death found its immediate expression in the very core of Maharshi's spirituality, in his method of contemplation. Maharshi's method of spiritual enquiry, known under the Sanskrit name *ātma-vichāra* – 'enquiry into the Self' or 'self-enquiry' represents an original variant of *jñāna yoga*. The originality of *ātma-vichāra* is marked by the fact that Ramana's method of contemplation was his own 'discovery'; he did not take it over from anyone else, because he did not have any human teacher.

The foundation of *jñāna mārga* is a conviction that the last reason of new and new creation of *karma*, and thus 'imprisonment' in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, is the *ontological ignorance* (*avidyā*). On the contrary, liberation (*moksha*) is the fruit of *ontological knowledge* (*vidyā, jñāna*) of the "one's own ground of being" (*ātman, brahma*) [20].

Maharshi's interpretative framework is not different. He also ranged with the ancient tradition promoting the primacy of *liberating wisdom* (*jñāna*): "Aspiring for spiritual eminence," he claims, "one has mainly to realize his real nature, the Self, on which are based all his actions and their results" [21], for the "knowledge is the supreme end of all other practices" [22].

Maharshi's distinctive form of *jñāna yoga* re-actualizes the mystical death event when it uncompromisingly heads toward the transcendence of individuality. For an Indian *jñānī*, individuality is connected to thinking and mind is a flow of thoughts. In the background of every thought there conceals the basic 'I-thought', *ego* [23]. Ego is the first thought that a man is born with and the last thought one dies with. As a golden thread 'I-thought' connects all the thoughts in the course of human life.

It is this thought in particular, or more precisely, its transcendent source that Maharshi turns our attention to [21, p. 28]. It is the 'trail' of Being, the key to *liberating wisdom* [21, p. 29]. Firm concentration on the 'I-thought' connected with inquisitive attunement to her source stands at the foundation of *ātma-vichāra* [21, p. 29].

Maharshi's method resides in a single question 'who am I'. "The thought 'who am I?' will destroy all other thoughts, and like the stick used for stirring the burning pyre, it will itself in the end get destroyed." [24] The question 'who am I' has no other purpose than to divert the attention from distracting thoughts of any kind and to return it to the central 'I-thought', or the awareness of 'I am', more precisely, to the "fundamental fact of consciousness" [25]. Whenever a mental movement appears, it is necessary to ask 'who is aware of it'. In this way, *self-enquiry* leads from the periphery of existence to its very core.

Another expression of Maharshi's experience of mystical death is his conception of the aim of spiritual practice as a *natural state of being*. The primary outcome of self-enquiry is contemplative immersion (*enstasy*) – *samādhi*. It is *ātma-vichāra* that is supposed to open the space for *liberating wisdom* (*jñāna*) in the contemplative insight, where the revelation of Being

happens (*samādhi*). And though it prepares prerequisites for it, it does not create it, for its very realization is the work of grace. Mystical death is therefore a ‘threshold’ through which a mystic enters the *natural state of being*.

Thus the *natural state* of *sāhāja-nirvikalpa-samādhi* is the state of wisdom (*jñāna*), insight [24, p. 25]. Maharshi rejects identification of wisdom with occult knowledge: “Telepathy, knowing past, present and future happenings and clairvoyance do not constitute wisdom-insight”; wisdom consists only in abiding in the Being [24, p. 25–26]. Sage is a man whose mind was dissolved in Being and who remains quiet at all times [24, p. 25]. Only knowledge of this kind can overcome suffering [21, p. 29] and bring release [24, p. 28].

Wisdom (*jñāna*) is not different from desirelessness (*vairāgya*); ‘desirelessness is wisdom’, the sage of Arunachala states. “Desirelessness is refraining from turning the mind towards any object”, Sri Ramana explains. “In other words, not seeking what is other than the Self is detachment or desirelessness; not leaving the Self is wisdom.” [24, p. 26]

In *nirvikalpa-samādhi* the primordial reality reveals itself as Being (*Sat*), Consciousness (*Cit*), and Bliss (*Anānda*). According to Maharshi, “[h]appiness is the very nature of the Self; happiness and the Self are not different. There is no happiness in any object of the world. We imagine through our ignorance that we derive happiness from objects. When the mind goes out, it experiences misery. In truth, when its desires are fulfilled, it returns to its own place and enjoys the happiness that is the Self.” [24, p. 24]

In the course of self-enquiry supernatural powers may appear [21, p. 10]; sometimes, they accompany *jñāna* itself. In spite of this, their value remains relative and their meaning secondary. “Enlightened enquiry alone leads to Liberation. Supernatural powers are all illusory appearances created by the power of *māyā* (*māyā-shakti*). Self-realization which is permanent is the only true accomplishment (*siddhi*). Accomplishments which appear and disappear, being the effect of *māyā*, cannot be real. They are accomplished with the object of enjoying fame, pleasures, etc. They come unsought to some persons through their karma. Know that union with Brahman is the real aim of all accomplishments. This is also the state of Liberation (*aikya mukti*) known as union (*sayujya*).” [22, p. 17]

Either with or without the supernatural powers a sage never identifies with the body [18, p. 40]. “Whether with or without the body the realised abides in the Self.” [20, p. 67] “Jīvanmukti is firm in abidance in the Self unaffected by grounds of convictions, spiritual or temporal” [21, p. 65], such is the natural state of a man [22, p. 16].

“In speech he is extremely soft; in look, a cool shower of grace; (...) he is cheerful, bright and beaming; his mind is a vacuum and like a moon during day-time. In heart, he is in full luster, like the sun in the sky.” [21, p. 81]

“Without illusions, greed and thoughts, he is always in the festive mood. He ever helps others to cross over the ocean of *saṃsāra* but for him it is a rewardless task.” [21, p. 82] “Powerful but full of peace, devoted yet without a sense of difference, non-attached but benign towards all the world, he is born

in the glory of a god but is humble in action.” [21, p. 87] “Abiding in this state of bliss, beyond bondage and release, is steadfastness in service of the Lord.” [23, p. 29]

The ontological knowledge of Vedānta is universal, since the *natural state* of a man is realized in it. If *jñāna* regards radical transcendence of phenomenal reality through the primordial Being, thus, “[t]he realization of truth is the same for both Indians and Europeans. Admittedly the way to it may be harder for those who are engrossed in worldly life, but even then one can and must conquer.” [14, p. 160]

Maharshi is not a constructivist, his teaching is in a direct contradiction with the constructivist view of reality, according to which all our experiences are somehow constructed or mediated by our previous thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, etc., as it is clear from the following statement. “Abidance in the Self is the same for all, and the destruction of the bondage is the same for all, and there is but one *mukti*. A sense of difference between *muktas* lies only in the minds of others.” [21, p. 66]

Even the very core of Ramana’s spiritual teachings, his method of self-enquiry, derived from his ‘experience of awakening’, must not be confused with self-reflection as we have already pointed out. In no way it is a ‘thought experiment’. When Glenn Friesen describes it as “a kind of thought experiment” [G.J. Friesen, *Hindu and non-Hindu Interpretations of a Jivanmukta*, 2006, 25, <http://www.members.shaw.ca/abhishikatananda/jivanmukti.pdf>], he directly contradicts Bhagavan’s own interpretation. Self-enquiry is an ‘awareness process’, not a ‘thought process’ – the movement of awareness or attention from objects to the awareness or attention itself. The contemplative method of Ramana Maharshi has a non-object or objectivity transcending character since it is not realized through the medium of thinking or relating to an object of consciousness, but instead in turning the awareness of consciousness to the consciousness itself through the awareness of one’s own existence or the ‘I-thought’ (ego).

While describing his method, Maharshi often uses *distinction* between the individualized I, ego, and the primordial I, Self, as well as *distinction* between *objects of attention* and the *attention as such*. Both distinctions aim at separating the subject of awareness or attention from its object. Ramana’s method of self-enquiry is thus fundamentally based on direct experience from its very beginning to the end, and Bhagavan’s emphasis on direct experience has to be derived from the immediateness and directness of his own ‘awakening experience’.

5. Conclusions

Our effort to understand the phenomenon of mystical death in the background of personal testimony and teachings of the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi leads us to a hermeneutical question about its universality.

We have demonstrated that the mystical death event resides in the very centre of Ramana's story as his central epiphany that grants Maharshi's life fundamental orientation. We could see that Maharshi's teachings reflects the mystical death event that he experienced aged 16 – the moment of mystical death is present in Maharshi's method of contemplation (*ātma-vichāra*), in his conception of *liberating wisdom* (*jñāna*), as well as in his life ideal of *jīvanmukta*. In the personal experience and teachings of Ramana Maharshi, mystical death appears to be a 'gateway' or 'breaking point' of a transformation process whose completion is the restoration of the 'natural state' of being, 'awakening' to the *liberating wisdom* (*jñāna*) in the soteriological, ontological, as well as epistemological sense as it is expressed by Maharshi's ideal of *jīvanmukta*, 'the liberated in life'.

The phenomenological analyses of Ramana's 'death experience' demonstrate that the mystical death event is also characterized by distinction between the ego and Self, immediateness and directness (spontaneous and non-mediated character). It is its non-mediated character that explains why Sri Ramana points to the necessity of direct experience and frequently refers to it. Maharshi's emphasis on the direct experience also puts into question the mainstream Western constructivist paradigm, according to which, there is no experience possible beyond conceptualization or any kind of mediation at all. Life and teachings of Ramana Maharshi are thus of great importance for our understanding of mystical experience in particular, and human experience in general.

Non-mediatedness characterizes both the process and the outcome of *ātma-vichāra*. Culmination of Maharshi's method of self-enquiry is a non-intentional "experience" [26] – "a wakeful but contentless (non-intentional) consciousness", which can be termed "*pure consciousness event*" [27]. Precisely through non-intentionality, through the fact that "the subject is awake, conscious, but without an object or content of consciousness – no thoughts, emotions, sensations, or awareness of any external phenomena" [28], the pure consciousness event is to be differentiated from a 'common' experience that is in its focus on an object (intentionality) always an experience of 'something'.

Morphology of mystical death of Ramana Maharshi certifies that the final aim of mystical spirituality is transcendence of the human condition, actualization of the "non-conditioned mode of being" [29]. Various mystics, regardless of the time and place, attest a transition through a psycho-spiritual process of "dissolving" of the sensational "existence" (*Dasein*) [30], known as 'mystical death' in the Christian spiritual tradition. Together with mystics we can conclude that it is the end of the sense of separateness, so called mystical death, Eliade's ontological 'break', characterized by liberating from every conditionality, which enables rebirth in the "unconditioned mode of being" [20, p. 8].

The phenomenon of mystical death represents a 'turning point' in the dynamics of this 'ontological metamorphosis'. The structure of the transformation process of mystical death is expressed by the *matrix life, death*

and rebirth, where the phenomenon of mystical death takes the position of the middle member between two ultimate positions – *mystical union* and *individual self-alienation*. Consequently, in mystical death, as in the ‘turning point’ there occurs a qualitative ‘transformation’ of consciousness in the context of dynamics of its transit from a ‘conditioned’ (ego) to a ‘non-conditioned mode’ (Self). In other words, consciousness has a transitive character; it is characterized by the ability to transcend, i.e., pass beyond any form (ego) [31].

Since mystical death presupposes “consciousness as a dynamic act, released from the contamination of contents” [32], its precondition is an optimal reduction of sensory perceptions and psycho-mental processes [33]. The very reality of consciousness is not created in contemplation in any way; on the contrary, it is contemplated directly. While in three states of consciousness (wakeful consciousness, dreaming, dreamless sleep) our awareness is absorbed by observing various contents of consciousness, in mystical contemplation it releases itself from the absorption by its correlates and it turns to itself, so that observing itself, it gets to know itself as unconditioned consciousness that is a precondition of a possibility of every awareness. As *a transcendental precondition of the possibility of every cognition*, consciousness is not objectively given, it escapes every attempt for reification, grasp in an intentional act of knowing [20]. Indirectly, consciousness can be thematized in a relation to the precondition of the possibility of knowing, wanting and acting; however, directly, i.e., non-mediate, consciousness is only given to consciousness. Therefore, the essence of every effective introspection, as well as the core of the Maharshi’s teachings on contemplation, consists in turning the awareness away from everything that can be observed, and subsequently, turning the awareness to awareness itself. Primordial ‘experience’ of subjectivity in the form of a ‘pure consciousness event’ expresses itself as the non-mediated act of observation of awareness as such [34].

The assumption that the aim of every mysticism is a trans-individual completion in a transcendent Being, transcending the subject-object distinction [4], parallel to the postulated unity of human nature [4, p. 48], which derives its legitimacy from the existence of shared constitutive elements of *humanum* – human actuality such as corporeality, discursivity, speech, sociability or consciousness – the ability to be aware of one’s self and observed objects, the objects of consciousness, entitle us to draw a justifiable conclusion about the universality of the phenomenon of mystical death as a psycho-spiritual process of the transit from the conditioned to the unconditioned mode of being, in which the archetypal matrix *life–death–rebirth* re-actualizes.

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