

The Mystical Tradition: Assignment

1. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* tells us: “In the beginning it is normal to feel nothing but a kind of darkness in our mind or, as it were, ‘a cloud of unknowing.’ We will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing, except a naked intent toward God in the depths of our being.” The expression “a naked intent toward God” seems to grate on modern ears. What is a more understandable expression for people today? Hint: Find a better word than “intent.”
2. It is said that the Christian mystical tradition can be summarized as “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). From this perspective, Christian mysticism seems to be an ordinary experience, an experience available to all. Please comment.
3. The teaching of John of the Cross on self-denial is well-known: “To reach satisfaction in everything, desire satisfaction in nothing. To come to possess everything, desire to possess nothing. To arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing. To come to know everything, desire to know nothing.” (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I, 13, 11). In this passage John speaks of *negative* desires. What *positive* desire(s) would help a person accomplish John’s goals?
4. The writer Nikos Kazantzakis has observed:

“Truly, nothing more resembles God’s eyes than the eyes of a child; they see the world for the first time, and create it. Before this, the world is chaos. All creatures – animals, trees, men, stones, everything: forms, colors, voices, smells, lightning flashes – flow unexplored in front of the child’s eyes (no, not in front of them, inside them), and he cannot fasten them down, cannot establish order. The child’s world is not made of clay, to last, but of clouds. A cool breeze flows across his temples and the world condenses, attenuates, vanishes. Chaos must have passed in front of God’s eyes in just this way before the Creation. ... When I was a child, I became one with the sky, insects, sea, wind – whatever I saw or touched. ... Shutting my eyes contentedly, I used to hold out my palms and wait. God always came – as long as I remained a child.” (Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco* [New York: 1965], pp. 44-45)

What does this say to us about the ‘mysticism of everyday life’?

5. “In truth I tell you: unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest” (John 12:24). Can you relate personally to the idea that it is sometimes necessary for us to “die” in order to live a “new life”? If so, please explain.