

# Comparative Mysticism: Tamil Bhakti Saints and Global Mystical Traditions

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## Comparative Mysticism: Tamil Bhakti Saints and Global Mystical Traditions

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *One of the greatest mystical traditions of the world is the Tamil Bhakti literature. It is literature of devotion focused on inner realization and the unitive experience with the Divine. For instance, this paper presents a comparative study of some Tamil Bhakti saints, primarily the Nāyaṇmār and Ālvārs, and the global mystical traditions of the Indian subcontinent Sufi, Christian Mysticism, and Zen Buddhism. Being an independent literature with its own theological, historical and cultural frameworks, the Tamil Bhakti literature in this instance, shares the greatest commonality with the aforementioned global mystical traditions. Love, surrender, self-annihilation, and the experiential knowledge of the Divine beyond the prescribed rituals and dogmas are some of the common themes of this literature. Using a comparative mystical approach, this paper illustrates Tamil Bhakti literature's engagement with a universal mystical tradition while also being anchored in South Indian religious traditions*

**Methodology:** *In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.*

**Analysis/Results:** *By illustrating how Tamil Bhakti literature mysticism transcends the South Indian religious traditions' theology, the paper enhances interreligious scholarship by establishing the mysticism's soteriological grammar of interiority. The paper concludes by placing the Tamil Bhakti saints within a contemporary mystic's global community, highlighting their relevance to modern search for spirituality and peace.*

**Originality/Values:** *In the Tamil Bhakti literature, divine intimacy is the central theme, and the literature is characterized by ego-negation, paradoxical statements, and the transcendence of organized religion. It has been documented in the various mystical traditions globally that the Escaped the institution literature love, grace, and experience share a commonality with the Sufi literature on *ishq* and *fanā*, Christian literature on *agape* and *unio mystica*, and Zen literature on *satori*. Mystical devotion in a culture, devoted literature and mystical expression in a culture, is often documented.*

**Type of Paper:** *Exploratory Research*

**Keywords:** *Tamil Bhakti; Comparative Mysticism; Sufism; Christian Mysticism; Zen Buddhism*

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Numerous religious traditions are centered around the concept of mysticism, focusing on the individual's experience of the ultimate reality that lies outside of the organized doctrine and ritual. A very precious and vibrant example of this kind of mystical literature is the Tamil Bhakti literature. It is considered one of the most magnificent devotional and mystical literary works of the Tamil saints of the sixth to ninth centuries CE, among them Appar, Sundarar, Māṇikkavācakar, Nammālvār, and Āṇḍāl, who, through their poetry, celebrated their mystical devotional experience and love/surrender/ and emotional richness towards the Divine. Their lyrical devotion to the Divine transformed their devotion

from merely an outer experience to an inner one, thereby transcending the need for outward expressions of devotion [1-2].

The similar mystical impulses can also be found in other world religions. In the Islamic tradition, for example, Sufism highlights the concept of divine love (*ishq*) and the complete dissolution of the ego (*fanā*) through the love of God. In Christian mysticism, from Meister Eckhart to St. Teresa of Ávila, this concept is referred to as the union with the Divine through interior/mental prayer, self-emptying, and divine grace. Although Zen Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, it also has similar concepts by advocating direct experience through attentive meditation, which is referred to as *satori*, and rejects all forms of conceptual distraction. Despite the fact that other world religions have many differences, the primary similarity is that they emphasize the importance of direct experience and not intellectual understanding [3-4].

This study utilizes a comparative methodology to examine affinities between Tamil Bhakti mysticism and the aforementioned global traditions. The study acknowledges and engages with these traditions' differences and respects the doctrinal distinctions, but foregrounds the spiritual, paradoxical, symbolic, and ethical transformative structures. Such understanding enables Tamil Bhakti to be seen as a phenomenon beyond the regional, as it situates the Tamil Bhakti tradition within a broader context of the mysticism of the world [5-7].

In an age of religious conflict, comparative mysticism articulates an approach predicated upon a shared spiritual encounter. This study places the Tamil Bhakti saints alongside Sufi, Christian, and Zen mystics, as a way of fostering understanding across traditions and demonstrating the relevance of these mysticism traditions to the moral crises of the contemporary world.

## 2. OBJECTIVES :

- (1) To identify core mystical themes in Tamil Bhakti literature and global mystical traditions.
- (2) To compare experiential, emotional, and philosophical dimensions of mysticism across cultures.
- (3) To assess the relevance of comparative mysticism for contemporary interreligious dialogue.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

- (1) Kamil Zvelebil emphasized Tamil Bhakti as an experiential and emotional tradition, aligning it with global mystical expressions of interior devotion and surrender [8].
- (2) Ninian Smart provided a comparative framework for mysticism, identifying experiential and ethical dimensions common across religious traditions [9].
- (3) Annemarie Schimmel highlighted Sufism's language of love and annihilation, offering strong parallels with Tamil Bhakti's emphasis on *anbu* and grace [10].
- (4) William Johnston explored Zen and Christian mysticism comparatively, demonstrating how paradox and silence function as universal mystical tools [11].

Further, Tamil Bhakti Saints and Mystical Traditions are discussed in detail in many scholarly publications [12-23].

## 4. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF COMPARATIVE MYSTICISM :

Comparative mysticism rests on the premise that mystical experience—however diverse in expression—reveals structural patterns that transcend specific religious traditions. Its conceptual foundations draw from philosophy, phenomenology, theology, and cross-cultural hermeneutics, creating a framework for understanding how different cultures articulate encounters with ultimate reality. At its core lies the recognition that mysticism involves a mode of knowing that is experiential, transformative, and often resistant to ordinary language. Comparative study therefore seeks not to homogenize traditions but to illuminate the shared dynamics and distinctive inflections of mystical life [24].

A key foundation is phenomenological analysis, which examines the structures of mystical experience: unity, ineffability, ego-transcendence, interiority, and ethical transformation. Thinkers such as William James and later scholars like Robert Forman and Steven Katz debate whether these structures are universal or tradition-specific. This tension—between perennialism and contextualism—forms a central conceptual axis of comparative mysticism [25].

Another foundation is hermeneutics, the art of interpreting mystical texts, symbols, and practices. Comparative mysticism requires sensitivity to linguistic nuance, cultural context, and doctrinal frameworks. It recognizes that metaphors such as “light,” “emptiness,” “union,” or “inner fire” carry different ontological meanings across traditions, even when they appear superficially similar.

A third foundation is embodied practice. Mysticism is not merely a set of ideas but a disciplined transformation of consciousness through meditation, prayer, ritual, yoga, asceticism, or ecstatic devotion. Comparative study therefore attends to the technologies of the self that shape mystical insight. Finally, comparative mysticism rests on an ethical and epistemic humility. It acknowledges the limits of conceptual categories when approaching experiences that claim to transcend them. Rather than forcing equivalence, it cultivates a dialogical space where traditions illuminate one another [26].

Together, these foundations enable a nuanced, multidimensional understanding of mystical experience across cultures, revealing both shared human aspirations and the rich diversity of spiritual expression.

## 5. MYSTICAL LOVE AND DEVOTION IN TAMIL BHAKTI LITERATURE :

Tamil Bhakti literature offers one of the most profound explorations of mystical love in the global history of devotion. Emerging between the 6th and 9th centuries through the hymns of the Nāyanmārs (Śaiva saints) and Āḷvārs (Vaiṣṇava mystics), this tradition transforms religious experience into an intimate, affective, and often ecstatic relationship with the divine. Mystical love (*anbu*, *bhakti*, *parābhakti*) becomes both the path and the goal, dissolving the boundaries between devotee and deity.

At the heart of Tamil Bhakti is the idea that God is not a distant metaphysical principle but a beloved presence—approachable, emotionally responsive, and deeply involved in the devotee’s inner life. Saints like Appar, Sundarar, and Māṅikkavācakar articulate devotion as a total surrender of the self. Their hymns portray Śiva as father, friend, lover, and master, revealing a spectrum of emotional registers through which the divine–human relationship unfolds. This relational fluidity allows mystical love to transcend social categories, making devotion accessible to all regardless of caste, gender, or learning.

In Vaiṣṇava literature, especially in the works of Nammāḷvār, Āṇḍāl, and Periyāḷvār, mystical love takes on an even more intimate and embodied form. The devotee yearns for Viṣṇu with the intensity of a lover separated from the beloved. Āṇḍāl’s *Tiruppāvai* and Nācciyār *Tirumoli* exemplify this bridal mysticism, where longing (*viraha*) becomes a transformative spiritual fire. Separation is not a failure but a catalyst for deeper union; the ache of absence sharpens awareness of the divine presence within.

A defining feature of Tamil Bhakti is its fusion of metaphysics and emotion. Mystical love is not merely sentimental; it is a mode of knowing. Through love, the devotee perceives the divine immanence in the world and in the self. Māṅikkavācakar’s *Tiruvācakam* repeatedly affirms that love is the highest form of wisdom, surpassing ritual, scripture, and intellectual speculation. In this sense, Tamil Bhakti aligns with the broader Siddha insight of *Uḷle Śivam*—the divine discovered within through the refinement of consciousness.

Another hallmark is the democratizing power of devotion. Mystical love becomes a force that dissolves social hierarchy. Saints like Nandanar, a Dalit devotee of Śiva, embody the radical claim that divine grace overrides caste boundaries. The emotional immediacy of Bhakti—its songs, tears, dances, and ecstatic states—creates a spiritual community grounded not in birth but in shared longing.

Tamil Bhakti also cultivates a poetics of intimacy. Its metaphors—lover and beloved, mother and child, servant and lord—serve as vehicles for expressing the inexpressible. The divine is approached through the language of the body, the rhythms of daily life, and the textures of human emotion. This embodied poetics makes mystical love tangible, accessible, and deeply human.

Ultimately, mystical love in Tamil Bhakti literature is a transformative force. It dissolves ego, awakens ethical sensitivity, and reorients the devotee toward compassion and humility. Through its songs, Tamil Bhakti reveals that love is not merely a feeling but a spiritual technology—one capable of reshaping consciousness and opening the heart to the infinite [27-29].

## 6. SUFI MYSTICISM: LOVE (*ISHQ*) AND ANNIHILATION (*FANĀ*) :

Sufi mysticism places *ishq* (divine love) and *fanā* (annihilation of the self) at the heart of its spiritual psychology. These two concepts form an intertwined path: love draws the seeker toward God, and annihilation dissolves the ego so that only the divine reality remains. Together, they articulate one of the most powerful expressions of experiential monotheism in the Islamic tradition [30].

*Love (Ishq):*

In Sufi thought, *ishq* is not ordinary affection but an overwhelming, transformative force that reorients the entire being toward God. Poets such as Rūmī, ‘Attār, and Ḥallāj describe love as a fire that burns away illusion and awakens the heart to divine presence. This love is both longing and intimacy: the seeker yearns for the Beloved yet also discovers that the Beloved has always been nearer than the self’s own breath. *Ishq* thus becomes a mode of knowing—an epistemology of the heart—where emotional intensity leads to metaphysical insight.

**Annihilation (Fanā):**

*Fanā* refers to the dissolution of the ego, the erasure of the false self that imagines itself separate from God. It is not physical destruction but a spiritual unmaking, where personal desires, pride, and self-identity fall away. In classical Sufi manuals, *fanā* is followed by *baqā*—abiding in God—where the seeker returns to the world transformed, living ethically through divine qualities such as compassion, humility, and justice.

**The Interplay of Love and Annihilation:**

Love propels the seeker toward annihilation: the more intensely one loves, the less room remains for ego. Conversely, annihilation deepens love, for when the self dissolves, only the Beloved remains. This dynamic shapes Sufi poetry, ritual, and contemplative practice, from the whirling of the Mevlevi to the silent remembrance of the Naqshbandis.

Ultimately, *ishq* and *fanā* express a vision of spirituality where the human heart becomes a mirror for divine reality, polished through longing, surrender, and inner transformation [31-33].

## 7. CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM: INTERIOR PRAYER AND DIVINE UNION :

Christian mysticism places profound emphasis on interior prayer as the primary pathway to divine union, a transformative encounter in which the soul participates in the life of God. Rather than focusing on external ritual alone, Christian mystics cultivate an inward attentiveness—an opening of the heart—through which divine presence becomes experientially real. This inward turn is rooted in biblical themes such as “the kingdom of God is within you” and develops through centuries of monastic, contemplative, and theological reflection.

Interior prayer, often described as silent, imageless, and wordless, aims to quiet the mind so that the soul may rest in God. Figures like the Desert Fathers, Evagrius Ponticus, and later John Cassian articulate prayer as a movement from vocal recitation to pure stillness. Medieval mystics deepen this trajectory: The Cloud of Unknowing teaches that God is approached not through concepts but through a “loving intention” of the heart, while Meister Eckhart speaks of a ground of the soul where God “births” Himself in the seeker. Interior prayer thus becomes a discipline of unknowing, a stripping away of ego and distraction.

Early Christian Monastic Tradition- The Desert Fathers (3rd–4th centuries) emphasized inner stillness (*hesychia*) and constant prayer. They taught that prayer gradually moves from spoken words to interior silence, where the mind rests in God. Evagrius Ponticus (345–399) defined prayer as: “Prayer is the laying aside of thoughts.” He taught that pure prayer occurs when the mind becomes free from images and distractions. John Cassian (360–435) transmitted the teachings of the Desert Fathers to the West. In Conferences, he describes prayer evolving from vocal prayer to continuous interior prayer, sometimes using a simple repeated phrase to quiet the mind.

Medieval Mystical Development- Medieval contemplatives deepened this apophatic (negative) approach. The Cloud of Unknowing (14th century) teaches that God cannot be grasped through intellect or concepts. Instead, the seeker approaches God through a “blind stirring of love” or loving intention, beyond thought. Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1328) speaks of the “ground of the soul” where God is born in the human soul when the ego and attachments are emptied.

Concept of “Unknowing”- Many contemplative traditions describe prayer as a movement beyond images, words, and concepts. This is sometimes called apophatic spirituality (knowing God through unknowing). The purpose is not emptiness for its own sake but inner stillness where the divine presence can be realized.

Divine union—*unio mystica*—is the culmination of this interior journey. It does not imply ontological fusion with God but an intimate participation in divine life through grace. Mystics such as Teresa of Ávila describe union as a “spiritual marriage,” where the soul and God share a mutual indwelling marked by joy, clarity, and ethical transformation. John of the Cross frames union through the metaphor of the dark night, where purification prepares the soul for luminous intimacy.

Across these traditions, interior prayer and divine union express a coherent mystical vision: that God is encountered not primarily through external mediation but through the depths of the transformed heart. This inward encounter radiates outward as compassion, humility, and renewed ethical life [34-36].

## 8. ZEN BUDDHISM: NON-DUAL AWARENESS AND SUDDEN AWAKENING :

Non-dualism challenges how we see reality and ourselves. This concept, which has its roots in Indian philosophy and religion, presents a radical alteration from our usual dualistic thinking that creates a gap between subject and object. The term "nonduality" comes from the Sanskrit word "advaita," which means "not-two" or "one without a second".

The experience of nondual awareness reveals a state where everything exists without division. While Western philosophy tends to separate things, non-dualism surpasses the either-or way of thinking that has shaped most of our understanding. You'll find this view of reality in a variety of spiritual traditions. Hindu Advaita Vedanta, Buddhist Madhyamaka and Zen, Taoism, and some elements of Christian mysticism and Sufism all embrace these ideas. The concept goes beyond theory - it suggests that everything we once thought was separate actually exists as one unified whole.

Let's take a closer look at what non-duality means and how it affects us. We'll see how the nondual view has influenced spiritual practices around the world, especially through Zen Buddhism's teachings. We'll also clear up common misconceptions about this deep concept and explore how modern science has started to study these unique states of consciousness [37-38].

### What is Non Dualism?

The philosophical concept of non-dualism offers a viewpoint on reality that surpasses ordinary categorical thinking. Non dualism challenges how we notice ourselves and the world around us at its deepest level.

The English word "nonduality" translates from the Sanskrit term "advaita," which means "not two" or "one without a second". Nonduality indicates that reality is "not more than one" rather than claiming everything is one (which would be monism). This difference matters. Ancient contemplative traditions recognized dualistic thinking's limits in understanding ultimate reality and developed this concept.

Non-duality describes a state of consciousness that exists before conceptual thought - a background field of unified, immutable awareness. Our usual way of seeing reality through sharp divisions like me versus you, mind versus matter, and human versus nature faces a challenge from this viewpoint. Non-duality doesn't just change our understanding of reality - it completely transforms our experience of it.

### Difference between nondualism and monism:

Nondualism and monism represent different philosophical positions, though people often use them interchangeably. Monism claims everything reduces to one fundamental substance or principle. Nondualism specifically denies that dualities and multiplicities are ultimately real without necessarily claiming oneness.

Different traditions make this difference clearer. Advaita Vedanta Hinduism teaches that Brahman (ultimate reality) is "one only without a second" – *ekamevadvitiam*. Madhyamaka Buddhism takes a different approach to nondualism. It describes ultimate reality as emptiness (*śūnyatā*) – closer to zero than one. Philosopher Alan Watts noted that monism often sees reality as a single entity, while nondualism points beyond conceptual frameworks entirely.

The phrase "without a second" carries special meaning. It doesn't just state oneness but denies anything can exist separate from ultimate reality. Nondualism goes beyond saying "all is one" to suggest our perceived distinctions and separations lack ultimate reality.

Non-duality serves as the life-blood of many spiritual paths worldwide. Buddhism emphasizes emptiness and interdependence, while Advaita Vedanta identifies Atman (individual self) with Brahman (universal consciousness). This viewpoint tackles humanity's deepest existential questions.

Nondual understanding goes beyond theory. Contemplative traditions throughout history created practices to help people experience nondual awareness directly. Buddhist meditation techniques break down the sense of separate self, and Advaita's self-inquiry practice of "neti neti" (not this, not this) guides practitioners.

A nondual viewpoint naturally creates ethical implications. Compassion emerges when the boundaries between self and other dissolve. Many traditions see nondual realization as transformative wisdom that changes one's relationship with existence, not just philosophical understanding.

Non-duality helps us understand apparent contradictions in spiritual experiences. It provides a way to embrace paradoxes as complementary aspects of reality beyond logical categories. This makes it both a destination and pathway in contemplative traditions worldwide.

### **The Core Principles of Nondual Awareness:**

Nondual awareness builds on several core principles that set it apart from ordinary consciousness. Our traditional view splits experience into subject and object, but nondual awareness shows a deeper reality beneath these apparent divisions. These core principles help us understand why non dualism has stayed central to contemplative traditions for thousands of years.

#### **Subject-object dissolution:**

Nondual awareness primarily involves the dissolution of the conventional subject-object relationship that rules our ordinary perception. We usually feel separate from what we observe—there's "me" and then there's "everything else." But in nondual awareness, this difference fades away.

Zen practitioners describe this as moments when "the bell and I" become pure sound—without a separate hearer and heard. This marks a dramatic change from how we usually experience reality. The state reveals a unified field of experience instead of making you feel like a distant observer watching the world from behind your eyes.

This dissolution isn't just philosophical speculation. It reflects a genuine experiential state where, as one practitioner notes, "What we're looking at, is what is looking". The lines between self and environment become blurry until we see them as conceptual rather than fundamental. In spite of that, distinctions don't completely vanish—they just don't mean separation.

#### **Unity of all phenomena:**

The recognition of how all phenomena fundamentally connect goes beyond subject-object dissolution. Nondual traditions consistently point to reality as an "integral whole" rather than separate objects.

This unity exists beyond theory and shows up in direct experience. A contemplative teacher explains it simply: "non-duality is all about moving from believing and judging to purely experiencing". Practitioners in this state report seeing reality as "a singular, interconnected whole" where diversity exists without separation.

The unity principle shows that:

- Everything depends on each other, and relationships create meaning
- Boundaries between things work practically but aren't ultimately real
- You can't separate the individual from the whole

This view reshapes our relationship with existence. Nondual awareness shows that "we are indivisibly one with our environmental context, which is as necessary as any organ in our body". Self and world create "an interdependent singularity—one event", just like inside and outside define each other.

#### **Beyond conceptual thinking:**

The third key principle of nondual awareness exceeds ordinary conceptual thinking. Non dualism philosophy acknowledges how our rational, intellectual mind naturally creates distinctions to understand experience. Yet nonduality points to a way of knowing that goes beyond these mental frameworks.

Michael Taft explains this as realizing that "you are simply the awareness of sensory signals and are none of the content". Nondual awareness exists as "a basic non-conceptual, non-propositional awareness, without dualistic structuring of experience".

You can't grasp this state through intellectual understanding alone. Trying to think about or imagine nondual awareness misses the point because "the one trying to get it is what has to fall away". A curious paradox emerges—the state appears exactly when you stop trying to reach it.

Meditation practices can "reveal more subtle, ordinarily unconscious layers of conceptual mentation" until even simple concepts about subject and object fade away. Yet "a basic nondual awareness can still remain, vividly present and knowing".

A fully realized nondual awareness appears "transcendent and immanent in contents and states that co-occur with it". It becomes both the silent aware space throughout experience and the substance creating everything, like "the way water in a glass is both the medium in which ice cubes float and the substance out of which they are made" [39-40].

### 9. NON-DUALISM IN ZEN BUDDHISM :

Zen Buddhism stands out as one of the most radical and direct paths to experiencing non dualism in any spiritual tradition. This practice emerged in China and later thrived in Japan. Zen puts direct experience above theory, which makes it uniquely suited to convey nondual awareness through methods that bypass the conceptual mind [41].

Zen challenges the Aristotelian either-or logic that rules conventional thinking. Traditional logic splits reality into two parts. People need to pick one part while ignoring others as irrelevant. Zen believes this approach goes against a basic principle of knowing - understanding anything requires knowledge of the whole.

Yes, it is true that Zen questions dualistic viewpoints as poor representations of reality. According to Zen philosophy, "when this logic is applied to the whole, it compels the user to choose one part, while disregarding the other part(s) as irrelevant or meaningless". This kind of prioritization creates a one-sided view that Zen sees as both limited and illusory.

Zen practice wants to free practitioners from what one teacher calls "the prison of dualistic appearance". This freedom comes from understanding that seemingly separate things can't exist on their own—they connect and depend on each other naturally. A Zen text puts it this way: "Heaven and Earth share the same root, and I and the myriad things are one (-body)".

Koans are the most distinctive Zen tools that break through dualistic thinking. These mysterious stories, questions, or statements work as psychological instruments that share philosophical messages about enlightenment. Unlike regular riddles that need logical solutions, koans resist rational analysis.

We used koans mainly in Rinzai Zen (though sometimes in Sōtō too). Examples like "Mu" or "What is your original face before your parents were born?" create mental roadblocks. A practitioner explains, "By concentrating wholeheartedly on Mu, repeating the sound Mu over and over, ceaselessly, the dualistic sense of a self that is doing it can become attenuated". This focus can lead to kensho—a breakthrough where practitioners briefly see beyond subject-object duality.

Koans work by:

- Forcing the mind to confront paradoxes that ordinary thinking can't solve
- Creating conditions where conceptual frameworks collapse temporarily
- Triggering sudden insights when logical problem-solving fails
- Allowing direct experience of reality beyond dualistic categories

Zen values direct, unmediated experience as the path to nondual awareness. Many traditions rely heavily on doctrine or philosophy, but Zen sees direct experience as vital to genuine understanding. One master explains, "the point of a sitting practice is to wholeheartedly study, as intimately as possible, the moment-to-moment activity of your body and mind until big mind swims into view".

Silence plays a significant role in this process—both external quiet and internal mental stillness. Zen practice views silence not just as the absence of sound but as "a practice—a discipline or a passion—which is essential if we want to understand the deep meaning of our existence". Practitioners use silence to create conditions where nondual awareness emerges naturally.

The Soto Zen practice of Shikantaza ("just sitting") shows this approach perfectly. Most meditation methods try to achieve specific mind states. Shikantaza involves complete attention without striving. One teacher explains, "If you fully embrace the Soto Zen path, concepts like Realization, Quiet Mind, and Samadhi are not used as goals but are descriptions of what happens as you *let go*".

Dogen, who brought Soto Zen to Japan, described this as "dropping off the body and the mind". This state dissolves the dualistic relationship between mind and body, along with distinctions between self and other. Practitioners might experience kensho or "seeing into one's nature," where seeing becomes one's nature rather than something a separate self does [42].

### 10. COMPARING NON-DUALISM ACROSS TRADITIONS :

Human history shows us how different spiritual traditions have reached similar non-dual insights independently, even though they emerged from different cultural backgrounds. This remarkable pattern suggests something basic about consciousness itself. Ancient wisdom traditions worldwide found comparable truths through different paths.

#### **Advaita Vedanta and the Self:**

Advaita Vedanta stands as one of the most systematic explanations of non-dualism in Hindu philosophy. The word "Advaita" means "not-two" or "one without a second," which shows that only Brahman—the ultimate reality—truly exists. Advaita teaches that the individual self (Atman) is similar to Brahman, and the world of multiplicity we see is an illusion or Maya.

Shankara, a renowned philosopher who organized Advaita, expressed its core idea in one statement: "Brahman is the only truth, the world is illusion, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and individual self". While some traditions believe liberation happens when the soul merges back into God, Advaita states there is no individual soul to begin with—just the appearance of separation caused by ignorance (avidya).

Advaita uses specific contemplative methods like "neti neti" (not this, not this)—a systematic denial of everything that can be seen until pure consciousness remains. The mantra "aham brahmasmi" (I am Brahman) serves both as philosophical understanding and the realization when enlightenment happens.

### **11. TAOISM AND THE WAY :**

Taoism presents a unique Chinese view of non-dualism philosophy centered on the Tao—the indescribable source and substance of existence. The Tao Te Ching starts by acknowledging its limits: "The Tao that can be explained is not the eternal Tao".

The yin-yang, Taoism's most recognized symbol, serves as a philosophical representation of nonduality rather than a religious symbol. This symbol shows how complementary opposites flow into each other, with each containing the seed of its opposite. We can see how apparent dualities become inseparable aspects of a unified whole.

Taoist thought reveals non-duality meaning through paradox and going beyond binary thinking. Scholars explain that "dualistic thinking in itself isn't the enemy—we need opposites to define things". Binary thinking becomes "too simplistic and immature to discuss things like human relationships and spirituality". Taoism accepts both distinction and unity at once, seeing how they depend on each other.

Christian mysticism has a rich tradition of nondual mysticism, despite Christianity's mainly dualistic theology that separates Creator from creation. This mystical tradition shows "a continuous but evolving effort to experience direct union with God, understood not merely as intellectual belief or moral obedience but as a lived transformation of consciousness".

Figures like Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* stated experiences close to non-dualism. Eckhart spoke about "the ground of the soul and the Godhead beyond God, suggesting a level of reality where God and the soul are united without distinction".

Christian mysticism describes the experience through relationships, focusing on "love, surrender, and grace rather than metaphysical identity alone". It's worth mentioning that Christian non-duality believes union with God "does not erase personal identity but transforms it". This union happens when the mind enters the heart—not just emotion over intellect but the physical heart as "an organ of spiritual perception".

Sufism also shows expressions of nonduality, especially in the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* ("unity of being") and Persian mystic Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī's ecstatic words "I am He". These traditions in different cultures show how non-dualism surpasses cultural and religious boundaries, revealing humanity's universal ability to see reality beyond subject-object division.

#### **Common Misunderstandings About Nonduality:**

The subtle nature of non-dualism makes it easy to misunderstand and misinterpret. Practitioners often fall into conceptual traps that distort their understanding and practice as they learn more about nondual views. We can clear the path toward authentic nondual awareness by recognizing these common misconceptions.

**Nonduality is not nihilism:**

People often confuse non dualism with nihilism—the belief that life is meaningless. This confusion starts when they hear statements like "there is nothing to get" or "everything is emptiness" and see them as life-denying. These philosophies are fundamentally different. Nihilism focuses on negation and turns nothingness into a thing and meaninglessness into a meaning. Non dualism exceeds both existence and non-existence.

A practitioner explains that what seems like emptiness at first usually reveals itself as total fullness. The detachment and seeming pointlessness ("nothing matter!") gives way to joy beyond words and contentment without name. Even absolute detachment from life can be completely dualistic—it needs a person to be detached and a world to be detached from. Authentic nonduality sees both form and emptiness as inseparable aspects of the same reality.

**It's not about detachment or passivity:**

Many people wrongly think non dualism philosophy promotes withdrawal from life's responsibilities or emotional connections. This misunderstanding comes from mixing up ego transcendence with lack of action. Authentic nondual awareness guides us toward greater, not lesser, involvement with life.

True detachment flows naturally through proper awareness, not forced renunciation. Practitioners often find that nonduality doesn't need them to abandon worldly life—it changes their relationship with it instead. Most people who experience nondual awareness move from believing and judging to purely experiencing. This brings them closer to life rather than pushing them away.

Non duality's meaning covers both being and doing, rather than promoting passivity. A teacher puts it this way: "Nothing to do, lots to do. Nothing, something. Self, no self. No need to stick to either polarity." This view allows full involvement without attachment to outcomes and creates spontaneity and effectiveness that goal-oriented action often lacks.

The "enlightenment fantasy" might be the most common misconception. Many believe nondual awareness arrives suddenly and permanently, turning them into perpetually blissful beings. This myth creates unrealistic expectations that lead to disappointment.

Experienced practitioners widely believe constant non-duality is a myth. Nobody can stay in a continuous nondual state while functioning in the world. The body needs dualistic functioning for simple survival. The idea of one-time awakening ignores the brain's neuroplasticity—our neural pathways need consistent practice to establish new patterns.

**Table 1:** Comparative Study of Tamil Bhakti, Sufi, Christian, and Zen Mysticism

Feature	Tamil Bhakti Mysticism	Sufi Mysticism	Christian Mysticism	Zen Buddhism
1. Core Motif	Mystical love ( <i>anbu/bhakti</i> ) as total surrender	Divine love ( <i>ishq</i> ) and ego-annihilation	Interior prayer leading to divine union	Direct awakening ( <i>satori</i> ) beyond concepts
2. Primary Affective Tone	Emotional intensity, longing, devotion	Burning passion, yearning for the Beloved	Loving surrender, interior stillness	Calm clarity, non-attachment, equanimity
3. Relationship Metaphor	Lover–Beloved, child–parent	Lover–Beloved, friend of God	Bride–Bridegroom, soul–God	No relational metaphor; non-dual presence
4. Interiorization of the Divine	God as inner presence ( <i>Uḷle Śivam</i> )	God “closer than the jugular vein”	God indwelling the soul	Buddha-nature inherent in all beings
5. Role of Longing/Separation	<i>Viraha</i> (separation) intensifies devotion	<i>Shawq</i> (yearning) fuels <i>ishq</i>	Dark night deepens desire for God	Longing transcended; craving seen as illusion
6. Ego-Transformation	Ego melts in love and service	<i>Fanā</i> (annihilation) and <i>baqā</i>	Purification and detachment	Dissolution of ego through insight into emptiness

Feature	Tamil Bhakti Mysticism	Sufi Mysticism	Christian Mysticism	Zen Buddhism
7. Ethical Outcome	Compassion, caste-transcending equality	Mercy, humility, justice	Charity, humility, forgiveness	Compassion, mindfulness, non-harm
8. Attitude to Ritual	Ritual relativized; song and remembrance prioritized	Ritual present but secondary to <i>dhikr</i>	Sacraments valued; deepest prayer interior	Ritual (zazen, bowing) as discipline, not salvation
9. Language Style	Sensual, poetic, vernacular	Ecstatic, symbolic, wine metaphors	Apophatic, symbolic, nuptial	Minimalist, paradoxical, koans
10. Gendered Imagery	Strong bridal mysticism (e.g., Āṇḍāl)	Feminized soul before God	Bridal mysticism (Teresa, John)	Non-gendered; beyond dualities
11. Community Form	Temple, kīrtan, pilgrimage	Sufi orders, <i>khanqahs</i> , <i>dhikr</i> circles	Monastic and lay contemplative groups	Zen monasteries, sanghas
12. Epistemology of Love/Insight	Love as highest knowledge	Heart-knowledge ( <i>ma'rifa</i> )	Knowledge through union, not concept	Insight through direct experience, not doctrine
13. View of the Body	Body as instrument of devotion	Body disciplined through fasting, movement	Body as temple; ascetic refinement	Body as gateway to awakening (zazen posture)
14. Social Critique Potential	Challenges caste and ritual hierarchy	Critiques legalism and worldly power	Calls for inner conversion over formalism	Critiques conceptual rigidity and ego-structures

### Synthesis:

These four traditions reveal a spectrum of mystical strategies:

- Tamil Bhakti: Embodied, emotional, egalitarian devotion.
- Sufism: Love as fire that burns the ego into *fanā*.
- Christian mysticism: Interior stillness culminating in divine union.
- Zen: Radical non-conceptual awakening through direct insight.

Together, they map the global diversity of mystical consciousness while showing shared commitments to inner transformation, ethical clarity, and the transcendence of ego. Non-dualism marks a significant shift in perspective that challenges our fundamental beliefs about reality and consciousness. This perspective, a form of ancient wisdom, has emerged in numerous spiritual traditions, revealing a profound insight - when we look closer, the superficial division of self/other, subject/object, and the dualistic way of thinking, diminishes. Different cultural traditions convey this idea - Advaita Vedanta discusses the unification of Atman and Brahman, Zen emphasizes direct experience beyond thought, Taoism speaks of the unification of opposites, and Christian Mysticism speaks of the mystical union. All of these traditions, and many more, lead to the same conclusion. The concept of non-dualism often gets misinterpreted. Some associate it with a form of nihilism, detachment, or even having some permanent, unreachable state of enlightenment. In contrast, genuine nonduality awareness actually means staying fully engaged with life, rather than losing touch with it. It means fully embracing existence without the need to pull away, and without the perception of existential division.

Ancient wisdom is increasingly being substantiated by contemporary science. Modern neuroscience identifies specific brain networks associated with non-dual states. Psychological research shows the positive impact of these states on mental and emotional health. The convergence of both streams shows that we might be approaching a more profound understanding of consciousness than we have ever had.

The journey towards nondual awareness is one that requires dedication and patience. Rather than pursuing one-off enlightening experiences, practitioners come to the gradual realization that what they have been searching for is the awareness that all experiences occur within. This awareness, while deeply impactful, does not remove the practical distinctions that function within the differences in the lives we live. The differences we use to function within society are not removed, just redefined.

Non dualism does not just stop at philosophy and the analytic, it compels one to move towards the experience; what Zen masters mean when they have described “seeing into one’s true nature.” This kind of seeing is an experience and transcends the analytic. It also, because of the experience, naturally gives rise to the compassion that is absent when the distinctions between self and other are removed. The non dualism experience has always been there to discover. It was the focus on the separation, on the division, on the individual parts that caused us to miss it.

## 12. CONCLUSION :

The juxtaposition and comparative study of the Tamil Bhakti saints and the other mystical traditions such as the Sufi, Christian, and Zen reveal the same mystical core and architecture of various religions. From the different cultures, the mystics are describing the same inward journey: complete ego dissolution, movement beyond the boundaries of prescribed rituals, and transformational engagement with the absolute. Tamil Bhakti’s focus on love, grace and devotion parallels Sufi poetry, Christian contemplative theology and Zen.

However, each of the traditions maintains its own distinct and unique theological and cultural identity. Tamil Bhakti is theist and relational, Sufism nurtures relational intimacy within the Islamic monotheism, Christian mysticism is relational and Trinitarian, and Zen is within non-dualism. All of these differences only further build on the comparative study as they show the different ways the same mystical impulses are manifested around different religions.

The study reiterates the fact that the mystic tradition of any faith, is showing us the strongest alternative to the strong dogmatic and sectarian divisions of the faith and traditions. By privileging the experience over the belief and ideology, the mystics of the different faiths create room for empathy, and with that humility, and responsibility in the ethics of the faith and traditions. In our world of divisions, comparative mysticism offers the best basis for dialogue, from the stress of transformation, and not confrontation.

Ultimately, the Tamil Bhakti saints within a global mystical dialogue adds to both local and global perspectives on spirituality. Moreover, it emphasizes the persistence of relevance of mysticism as a bridge to cross different cultures, unifying in diversity through the transcendence and meaning that humanity seeks.

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