

# **“*Dun* 頓”: A Chinese Concept as a Key to “Mysticism” in East and West**

URS APP

If one disregards the particular forms and examines the content, one will find that Shakyamuni and Meister Eckhart teach the same thing.

—Arthur Schopenhauer

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

When Paul Demiéville first explored the theme of *dun* 頓 and *jian* 漸 in an article entitled “The Spiritual Mirror,”<sup>1</sup> he began with a discussion of the famous verses in the *Platform Sūtra* 壇經, but soon went on to point out Chinese (Zhuangzi 莊子, Huainanzi 淮南子, Xunzi 荀子) and Indian antecedents (Upanishads, Asanga, Yogācāra 唯識, and Shankāra). Then he traced further parallels in the Middle Eastern (Al-Ghazzālī) and European traditions (Plato, Plotinus, Origenes, Dionysios Areopagitus, etc.). Demiéville stated that he tried “to clarify a Chinese philosophical metaphor by contrasting it with parallels inside and outside of China.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul Demiéville, “Le miroir spirituel.” *Sinologica* 1, 2 (1947): 112-137; reprinted in Paul Demiéville, *Choix d'études bouddhiques* (1929-1970), 135-156. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Demiéville, *Sinologica* 1, 2: 137; and *Choix d'études bouddhiques*, 156. Further discussions of this theme are contained in the outline of a course devoted to the discussion of the terms *dun* 頓 and *jian* 漸 in Paul Demiéville. 1949. “Le vocabulaire philosophique chinois, 3: ‘subit’ et ‘graduel,’ ” *Annuaire du Collège de France*: 177-182; reprinted in Demiéville, *Choix d'études sinologiques* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 94-99. Some further considerations are found in Demiéville's “La pénétration du

Since Demiéville's pioneer attempts, the scholarly discussion of this theme in the West has continued unabated. In 1981, a conference devoted to *dun* 頓 and *jian* 漸 took place in Los Angeles, and six years later, contributions to that conference were published together with some additional papers in a volume entitled *Sudden and Gradual*.<sup>3</sup> In the first part of that book, several authors explore the applicability of the sudden/gradual polarity to the study of religions beyond Chan, and in the third part something similar is attempted for Chinese poetry criticism and painting theory. The second and most voluminous part of the book, however, consists of narrow explorations of the concepts of *dun* 頓 and *jian* 漸 in the teachings of major figures of Chinese Buddhism such as Daosheng 道生, Zhiyi 智顓, Shenhui 神會, and Zongmi 宗密.

Both the book's editor Gregory and its reviewer Griffith Foulk pointed out the great variety of different lexical meanings of *dun* 頓 and *jian* 漸 that are present in *Sudden and Gradual*. In his stimulating review, Foulk stated that "it is dangerous to speak loosely of the sudden/gradual polarity or the subitist (sudden) position" because "historically, there were many different polarities and dichotomies, and many different subitist positions."<sup>4</sup> If one wants to make the case for thematic similarities, historical connections, or semantic unity, Foulk contends, one must first make careful case studies such as the ones found in the second part of the book. In this way, one arrives at lexical definitions of the terms in question.

A very similar conclusion lies at the heart of a collection of essays by renowned scholars of mysticism.<sup>5</sup> Most essays emphasize the need to see "mystical" traditions in their cultural and doctrinal context. Indeed, "mysticism" is a concept that in many ways resembles *dun* 頓, not least of all in the fate that is now unfolding as it begins to be "disco-

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bouddhisme dans la tradition philosophique chinoise," *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* 3, no. 1 (1956): 31 ff. (also reprinted in *Choix d'études bouddhiques*, p. 241 ff.)

<sup>3</sup> Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual. Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> T. Griffith Foulk, draft manuscript of a review of Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual. Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

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vered” in various cultural and religious phenomena. “Mysticism” has already been “discovered” in all major religions, and many scholars argued (and continue to argue) that it is a worldwide religious phenomenon that exists apart from historical and cultural circumstances. The volume of essays edited by Steven Katz is primarily a reaction against this tendency; its emphasis lies on the unique features of specific kinds of “mysticism” and their deep cultural, historical, and doctrinal foundation. Without taking sides in this ongoing dispute,<sup>6</sup> it needs to be said that the focus of proponents of “mystical relativism” on specific objects of study is mostly informed by ideas about the nature of “mysticism” that are every bit as hazy as those of proponents of “mystical universalism.” The lack of a precise definition (or precise definitions) of mysticism drives a good part of these well-meant discussions around in circles. Furthermore, the lack of differentiation between different *kinds* of definition leads many scholarly criticisms far away from their intended targets. Clarity about different kinds of definition can greatly help in understanding the studied phenomena and the scholarly literature about them.

Foulk’s review of *Sudden and Gradual* takes some authors to task for a lack of such clarity in criticizing Demiéville on lexical grounds where he aimed for a stipulative rather than a lexical definition.

Stipulative definitions function to establish the meaning of a symbol for use within a particular field of discourse, and thus in principle cannot be judged true or false on the basis of evidence of any sort. Because they are essentially arbitrary, stipulative definitions need not accord in any way with their lexical counterparts, but often they are used to eliminate ambiguity by giving priority to one of the established lexical meanings of a term.<sup>7</sup>

In his article, Demiéville begins with a stipulative definition of a religious phenomenon and then looks among world religions for instances that fit the typology. The present paper stands in Demiéville’s tradition in that it, though referring to some Chinese texts, does not at-

<sup>6</sup> The introduction by Katz to the book cited in the previous note presents the views of both sides succinctly.

<sup>7</sup> Foulk, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

tempt to present new lexical definitions but rather aims at formulating a typology of *dun* 頓<sup>8</sup>—and, as an extension of Demiéville's "vagabond inquiry," a typology of "mysticism" in general. This kind of inquiry neither belongs to "mystical universalism" nor to "mystical relativism" but rather seeks to formulate some of the (mostly tacit) assumptions of both approaches through examination of some concrete examples.

To establish one (and certainly not the only!) possible typology of *dun* 頓, I will mainly use themes raised in two Chinese texts representative of the beginnings of Chan Buddhism: 1) the Chinese manuscript of the debates about *dunwu* 頓悟 that took place in late eighth-century Lhasa between Chinese and Indian teachers of Buddhism: the *Ratification of Immediate Awakening as the True Principle of the Great Vehicle* 頓悟大乘正理決;<sup>9</sup> and 2) the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經,<sup>10</sup> a text of probable Korean origin that is cited several times in the *Ratification* and played an important role in the formation of Chan 禪.<sup>11</sup> As a Western point of reference, I chose the German treatises and sermons of Meister Eckhart. I will briefly provide some background on Meister Eckhart before launching the typological adventure.

Meister Eckhart was born in 1260 in Thuringia, Germany. In his youth, he became a Dominican friar and quickly rose in the ranks of the Dominican order; at age thirty-four he was already general vicar of Thuringia. In 1300 he was sent to Paris for two years as lecturer. On his return to Germany he was put in charge of all Dominican friars of Saxo-

<sup>8</sup> The typological thrust of this inquiry is very much apparent, for example, in the fact that one of the two major East Asian sources used, the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經, does not feature the term *dun* 頓 at all. Neither do, of course, Eckhart's sermons. Nevertheless, I hold that they are useful in establishing a typology of *dun* 頓 which can help drawing out the religious and philosophical (and even lexical) implications of that term.

<sup>9</sup> Pelliot manuscript no. 4646 from the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris; reproduced in Paul Demiéville, *Le concile de Lhasa*. Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, Collège de France, 1952. Demiéville (p. 23) translates this title as: "De la ratification des vrais principes du grand véhicule d'éveil subit" (On the Ratification of the True Principles of the Great Vehicle of Sudden Awakening).

<sup>10</sup> This text is quoted according to the Taishō edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon 大正新脩大藏經 (vol. 9, no. 273).

<sup>11</sup> See Robert E. Buswell, *The Formation of Ch'an Ideology in China and Korea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

nia and later also of Bohemia. At the age of fifty he was called to teach in Paris for a second time (1311–1313), a rare honor shared only by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>12</sup> On his return to Germany he was active both as head of the Dominican convent of Strasbourg and as the spiritual guide of the Dominican nunneries of Southern Germany. This region had a large number of nunneries; around 1300 there were already sixty-five of them. We can thus imagine that Eckhart must have been very busy preaching and giving spiritual guidance. Many of the Meister's sermons were probably written down by nuns at these monasteries. In 1326, the Catholic church began inquisition proceedings against Meister Eckhart who appealed his case to the pope in 1327 but died soon afterwards. Some propositions of his doctrine were finally condemned by Pope John XXII in 1329.

The work of Meister Eckhart is usually divided by language into a Latin and German part. Only some sections of Eckhart's major work in Latin, the *Opus tripartitum*, are extant; they contain mainly a number of bible commentaries, sermons, lectures, and sermon drafts. Apart from the *Opus tripartitum*, only a few Latin lectures and sermons are extant. The works written in Latin were little known and read, as the scarcity of extant manuscripts shows, and the chronological sequence of these writings is often unclear because Eckhart was frequently revising his commentaries. The Latin work has been described as an “impressive torso”<sup>13</sup> and has had little influence. However, it is important for the study of Eckhart's thought.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, Eckhart's German work consists of a corpus of over two hundred manuscripts; however, the authenticity of some of these manuscripts is questionable. These German materials are usually divided into treatises and sermons. Of the treatises, four are considered genuine.<sup>15</sup> The best known part of Eckhart's work are his *German ser-*

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas was twice called to Paris a few decades earlier, in 1269 and 1273.

<sup>13</sup> Josef Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*. Zürich: Diogenes Verlag, 1979, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart. Analogie, Univozität und Einheit*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983.

<sup>15</sup> These are: *Reden der Unterweisung* (Talks of Instruction); *Über Gelassenheit* (On Detachment); and the so-called *Liber benedictus* which consists of *Das Buch der göttlichen Tröstung* (Book of Divine Consolation) and *Von dem edeln Menschen* (Of the Noble Man). Though the latter is a sermon, it appears to have been written out by Eckhart himself; thus J. Quint classified it as a treatise.

*mons*. Most of these fifty-nine sermons have been transmitted in copies (and copies of copies) of notes taken by members of the audience. It appears that Eckhart authorized some of his sermons for reading during meals at Dominican nunneries, but such early editions have all been lost; the earliest extant manuscripts were edited around the middle of the fourteenth century and are full of sermon material from other, generally unidentified authors. The editors apparently had no intention of collecting Eckhart materials; rather, they produced anthologies of mystical sermons.<sup>16</sup> So the majority of these German sermons were transmitted anonymously, and only centuries later did they come to be attributed to specific figures such as Meister Eckhart.<sup>17</sup> The transmission of these sources thus shows, among other things, that Eckhart stands within a rather broad spiritual movement. An early fourteenth-century song that was transmitted anonymously may illustrate this climate and lead on to the promised typology of *dun* 頓:

The Desert, this good,  
has never been traversed by a foot,  
and no created mind  
has ever reached it.

It is, yet nobody knows what it is.  
It is here, it is there,  
it is far, it is near,  
it is low, it is high;  
it is such that it is  
neither this nor that.

It is bright, it is clear,  
it is utterly obscure,  
without name,  
unknown,  
free of beginning and end.

<sup>16</sup> Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckhart. Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker*. München: C.H. Beck, 1989, pp. 60–61.

<sup>17</sup> The transmission of such materials and questions of authenticity are discussed in the introductions by J. Koch und J. Quint to Eckhart's Latin work (*Lateinisches Werk*, vol. 3) and the German work (*Deutsches Werk*, vol. 1). The transmission of German works is also discussed in vol. 1, pp. xv–xli of the German work.

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Unmoved it stands,  
naked and without dress:  
who knows its place?  
One who knows should come  
and tell us what form it has.

Become like a child,  
become deaf and blind!  
Your own “I” must be destroyed.  
Every “something” and every “nothing” must be lost!  
Let go of space, let go of time,  
get rid of any image!  
Tread, without a way, the narrow path:  
then you will find the trace in the desert.

O my soul,  
get out, God in!  
My entire “something” may sink  
into God’s “nothing,”  
sink in the groundless flood!  
If I flee you  
you come to me.  
If I lose myself  
I find you,  
O good beyond any entity!<sup>18</sup>

In this medieval German song we find explicated some of the central themes of “mysticism”—and a road map to our typology of *dun* 頓. The song points to something formless 無相 and without boundary, something which is said to be both here and there, far and near, something that is “neither this nor that.” This “something” that in fact is no-thing (“beyond any entity”) is portrayed as the goal of the religious path. Yet how is it to be attained if, as the song says, “no created mind has ever reached it”? It can only be attained by treading a path without

<sup>18</sup> From the song “*Granum sinapis*” (The Mustard Seed); cited according to Ruh, op. cit., S. 48–49; the English translation from medieval German is my own. This early fourteenth-century song is exceptionally well transmitted (nine manuscripts) and forms the subject of a scholarly Latin commentary which stems, according to Ruh, either from Eckhart or from his immediate vicinity.

a way, by the destruction of the very seeking "I" and the loss of "every thing" (and even "every nothing") that the seeker faces. Through this loss, a "good beyond any entity" (*uberweselfiches gût*) is found. The song thus portrays the religious quest in terms of an initial basic problem, a way to overcome this problem, and a goal.

Even staunch advocates of "mystical relativism" will admit that this song exhibits elements that are strikingly similar to formulations found in other religious movements around the globe that are usually labeled "mystical." However, instead of throwing everything into pairs of boxes (for example, one labeled "mystic" and the other "non-mystic," or one called "sudden" and the other "gradual") it may be more helpful to think of diverse religious phenomena on a continuous scale with multiple layers or dimensions for a variety of topics. What this paper is concerned with is a portrayal of one extreme on such a sliding scale, namely, the *dun* 頓 extreme. It will be seen that this term is more apt than "mysticism" or similar concepts to convey various layers or dimensions of such religious movements. No claim is made to comprehensively portray the sources and their religious background; the typological thrust of this paper demands not a photograph but rather a phantom image which emphasizes certain important characteristics while ignoring many others.

## 2. MEDIATED IMMEDIACY

The modern German philosopher Helmuth Plessner<sup>19</sup> characterized the specific mode of being of the human person by three main concepts: "natural artificiality," "mediated immediacy," and "groundless rootedness." All three express what Plessner called the "unsolvable contradiction" or the "absolute antinomy" of being human which religion attempts to overcome. "Mediated immediacy" ("*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*") signifies that man is characterized simultaneously by an inside and outside position, seen for example in man's particular relationship with his body (I am my body yet I am also able to observe

<sup>19</sup> Helmuth Plessner. *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Gesammelte Schriften vol. 4). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981. This book first appeared in 1928.



it and am thus different from it) or his self-consciousness (I am aware of being aware).<sup>20</sup> While the “inside” position shows man’s immediate self-identity, the “outside” position shows that such self-identity (unlike that of plants or animals) is paradoxically established through a distance from oneself and an act of inherent mediation. This “mediated immediacy” is exemplified by the injunction written on ancient Greek temples, “Know thyself.” Being both the subject and the object of knowing, man is conscious of himself; and just this quality has been called man’s essential characteristic by philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. Hegel indicated the broader implications of knowing oneself:

Knowledge of mind (*Geist*) is the most concrete and thus highest and most difficult knowledge. Know thyself: this absolute injunction does not, in itself or historically, only imply knowing one’s particular abilities, character, tendencies or weaknesses; rather, it signifies knowledge of the truth of man and also knowledge of truth in and for itself—the essence (*Wesen*) itself as mind.<sup>21</sup>

Schopenhauer strongly rejected Hegel’s assumption that philosophy can reach such “knowledge of essence”—or, in terms of this paper, immediate knowledge. He realized that philosophy is essentially bound to objective and therefore mediated knowledge and can never breach the subject-object barrier. At its peak, Schopenhauer contended, philosophy can only say that man’s highest knowledge knows “nothing that we know.”<sup>22</sup> The mystic, on the other hand, who in immediate realization has reached this highest knowledge, can speak in positive terms of what he found. Contrasting this with religious tendencies sub-

<sup>20</sup> See the works of Richard DeMartino, for example: “The Human Situation and Zen Buddhism.” In *Buddhist and Western Psychology*, pp. 167–193. Edited by Nathan Katz. Boulder: Prajña Press, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* SW V, Leipzig, 1949, p. 326 (§377). Quoted from A.M. Haas, *Nim din selbes war. Studien zur Lehre von der Selbsterkenntnis bei Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler und Heinrich Seuse*. Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1971, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung II*. Zürich: Haffmanns Verlag, p. 711 (fourth book, chapter 48). The highest knowledge, he says at the very end of the first volume of the same work, is nothing other than the Buddhist “*prajña paramita* 般若波羅蜜多.”

sumed under the label "theism," Schopenhauer describes mysticism as follows:

Theism, designed for the capacity of the crowd, posits the ultimate source of our being outside of ourselves, as an object; all mysticism, Sufism included, gradually finds it again in various stages of initiation inside, in ourselves, as the subject, and the adept finally realizes in wonder and joy that he is himself this ultimate source. This process, common to all forms of mysticism, is found in Meister Eckhart, the father of German mysticism, expressed in form of an injunction to the perfect adept to "not seek God outside of himself," and it is again very naively portrayed in Eckhart's spiritual daughter who after her breakthrough told Eckhart in jubilation: "Master, share my joy: I have become God!"<sup>23</sup>

Schopenhauer thus distinguishes between religious tendencies that focus more on otherness and mediation and tendencies that stress immediacy;<sup>24</sup> and this immediacy peaks in the realization that the ultimate is not different from the seeker.

### DELUDED CONCEPTIONS

What the German song cited above calls "created mind," we may infer, is the mind (subject) that faces all kinds of objects. Objects of the mind are, in the song's terminology, a "this" or a "that," "high" or "low," "far" or "near," "here" or "there." Such objects are seen as such precisely because of a gulf separating the seer from the seen, the mind from its objects, the subject from the object.

However, it is a common feature of movements called "mystical" to regard this state of affairs as the basic human problem. The solution,

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *op. cit.*, p. 711 (fourth book, chapter 48). Had he known about Chan, Schopenhauer would possibly also have adduced the well-known sayings, "The home treasure is not found outside" or even "Kill the Buddha, kill the patriarchs!"

<sup>24</sup> According to Schopenhauer, the latter are characterized by 1) quietism (abandonment of all willing); 2) asceticism (intentional elimination of self-will); and 3) mysticism (consciousness of the identity of one's own essence with that of all things). See Schopenhauer, *op. cit.*, p. 712.

they aver, consists in finding just that which is neither “this” nor “that” and thus can never be attained through mediation, i.e.: *the immediate* (dun 頓). Some major Christian mystics (Dionysius Areopagita, Meister Eckhart, Nicolaus of Cusa) have aptly called this the non-other (*non aliud*), while in the Chan tradition we find such expressions as “no-mind 無心,” or “not anything 無一物.” We will see later how the “immediate” in this sense relates to “mediation” both in an ontological and soteriological sense.

The manuscript known by the title of *Ratification of Immediate Awakening* [dunwu] as *the True Principle of the Great Vehicle* 頓悟大乘正理決 which Paul Pelliot recovered from the caves of Dunhuang and which is labeled with the number 4646 is an interesting source for the study of dun 頓.<sup>25</sup> However one chooses to translate this title, it suggests that *dunwu* 頓悟 (“immediate awakening”) is the essence of the Great Vehicle [of Buddhism]. In the view of the protagonists of this text, the disease that requires the cure that Buddhism proposes is repeatedly described as “deluded conceptions 妄想,” and the *raison d’être* and essence of Buddhism is seen in “getting rid of all deluded conceptions and impregnations 離一切妄想習氣” (folio 129a5).<sup>26</sup> The Chinese protagonist of the *Ratification*, a monk called Moheyan 摩訶衍, provides the following diagnosis:

Living beings are swept along in the course of birth-and-death and cannot extricate themselves because they have since innumerable time periods been unable to free themselves of the triple poison of passions [i.e., the basic attachments of greed, hatred, and error] and the deluded conceptions which their mind has from the outset been impregnated with. (folio 129b4–5)

<sup>25</sup> The fact that this text is probably a very one-sided and polemical portrayal from the Chinese side only enhances its value for our purposes since we are not concerned here with historical reality but rather with expressions of religious intent. Related texts of great importance for this theme are the two oldest Chan texts, the *Treatise of the Two Entrances and Four Practices* 二入四行論 (Stein 2715; Pelliot 2923, 3018, and 4634) and the *Vajrasamādhi Sūtra* 金剛三昧經 (Taishō vol. 9, no. 273).

<sup>26</sup> I rely on the Pelliot 4646 text reproduced in Demiéville's *Le Concile de Lhasa*; quotes refer to folio (as numbered in Demiéville), a or b (for recto and verso), and line number.

In support of this diagnosis, he adduces a scripture<sup>27</sup> that states:

A man is called 'one who has reached it' on account of having eliminated all objects (*dharma* 法), as they are objectified phenomena of his mind which cannot be grasped. (folio 129b6)

It must be emphasized that the diagnosis given in the *Ratification* is not limited to any particular group of persons but rather applies to any person, regardless of time or place: "All beings have throughout been bound by the impregnations of deluded conceptions due to the triple poison of passions" (folio 146b2-3). The role of Buddhism is thus seen in terms of getting rid of an affliction from which every sentient being suffers. "The one thing that matters," stated the Chinese representative, "is to get rid of these deluded conceptions" (folio 133b5). To the question what he means by "conceptions 想" he replied: "A conception is present when the mind's thoughts get moving and take hold of external objects 想者心念起動及取外境" (folio 133b6).<sup>28</sup> The problem, as defined in these and other passages, must thus be seen in the context of duality, the basic subject-object rift that characterizes ordinary human existence and all its manifestations. "Thoughts" or "deluded conceptions" refer in this connection to "dualistic thought." In contrast, no-thought is pointed at in a quote from the *Lankavatara sūtra*:<sup>29</sup>

The gate of genuine truth is far from the duality of the appropriating [subject] and the appropriated [object].<sup>30</sup> (folio 131 [bis] b1)

The twoness or duality of a subject standing against objects, appropriating them in discriminating thought and action, and getting caught up with and attached to them, is the opposite of what one would call "immediacy." The latter, portrayed as "this principle of 'it-

<sup>27</sup> *Zhufa wuxing jing* 諸法無行經, Taishō vol. 15: 754c. Demiéville (op. cit., p. 54, note 1) points out that Fazang 法藏, the third patriarch of Huayan 華嚴 Buddhism in China, classified this text under "Dun teachings" *dunjiao* 頓教.

<sup>28</sup> See also folio 141a1.

<sup>29</sup> Taishō vol. 16: 605b.

<sup>30</sup> I follow Demiéville's emendation of the text, reading 二取 instead of 三趣. See Demiéville, op. cit., p. 66, note 7.

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is-as-it-is’ containing everything 此如如之理具一切,” is reached only through the definitive suppression of all deluded conceptions and passions (folio 130a1-2). D. T. Suzuki formulated this diagnosis in a more modern but essentially congruent way:

According to Buddhism, the antithesis of ‘A’ and ‘not-A’ is at the bottom of our ignorance as to the ultimate truth of existence, and this antithesis is discrimination. To discriminate is to be involved in the whirlpool of birth and death, and as long as we are thus involved, there is no emancipation, no attainment of Nirvana, no realization of Buddhahood.<sup>31</sup>

Meister Eckhart, to whom we shall now turn, also keeps emphasizing that the problem he describes is not one that some people have and others not, depending on their culture, education, or religious faith. Rather, the very fact of being a person entails a “wrong relation to things”:

We may think that man should flee this and seek that, for example these places and these people and these methods or this amount or this activity—but it is not these ways or these things that hinder you: rather, what hinders you in things is *you yourself*, since it is *you* who are in a wrong relation to things.<sup>32</sup>

In a sermon, he puts this concisely: “We are the cause of all our obstacles” (Sermon 5, 177). But what is at the root of this?

People ask what it is that burns in hell. In general, the masters say that what burns is self-will. But I say, according to truth, that it is the ‘not’ that burns in hell. (Sermon 6, 179)

In the same sermon, he explains: “You are imperfect to the degree that you are affected by the ‘not.’ Thus, if you want to be perfect, you have to be free of the ‘not’” (Sermon 6, 179). Eckhart explains this “not” in a manner reminiscent of D. T. Suzuki’s statement cited above: “All

<sup>31</sup> Richard DeMartino, *The Zen Understanding of Man*. Dissertation, Temple University 1969, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Meister Eckhart. *Predigten und Traktate*. Zürich: Diogenes, 1979, p. 55 (*Reden der Unterweisung*).

creatures carry a negation in themselves; one denies being the other" (Sermon 22, 253). It is exactly this "not" which forms the root of all twoness and discrimination and thus of man's suffering:

Where there are two, there is lack. Why? Because one is not the other; this 'not' which creates differentiation is nothing other than bitterness—just as no peace is present there. (Sermon 50, 389)

The realm of "being this and that"<sup>33</sup> where there is temporal and spatial limitation (Sermon 12, 209) is full of restlessness and suffering; it is the realm of "twoness," "manyness," and "mediation" where the soul greedily grasps any number of objects and in so doing ends up losing them. Even the concept of sin which is of such importance in Christianity is interpreted by Eckhart in this manner: "Sin is always a regress from oneness to multiplicity."<sup>34</sup>

Of course, in man's mediated immediacy, man not only attempts to appropriate outside objects; rather, his very structure implies that he also is an object to himself. After analyzing man's ordinary perception of objects as a *mediated* subject-object relationship which relies on representations, Eckhart says the following about the impossibility of man to know himself *as a subject* (rather than just as one more object):

If man receives an image or representation in this [mediated] way, it must of necessity enter from without through the senses. In consequence, there is nothing so unknown to the soul as herself. Accordingly, one master says that the soul can neither create nor obtain a representation of herself. Thus she has no way of knowing herself, for representations all enter through the senses, and hence she can have no representation of herself. Therefore she knows all other things but not herself. Of nothing does she know so little as of herself—just because of lacking mediation. You must know that inwardly the soul is free and void of all mediations and representations, and just this is the reason why God can freely and without

<sup>33</sup> German: "*dies und das sein*"; Latin: "*esse hoc et hoc*."

<sup>34</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Lateinische Werke* 4. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, p. 158. Cited according to Alois Haas, *Nim din selbes war*, p. 17.

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representation or likeness unite with her. (Sermon 57, 417-418)

Yet it is just man's urge and need to know himself that forms one of the major themes of religion in general;<sup>35</sup> and teachings of “mystical” bent tend to emphasize the immediate nature of this quest and its goal. The tenor of such teachings is voiced by the Japanese Zen master Dōgen:

To learn the way of the Buddha is to learn the self. To learn the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be authenticated by all things. To be authenticated by all things is to be free of “self” and “other.”<sup>36</sup>

Eckhart couches this in the words of the New Testament:

The Lord said, “Whoever wants to become my disciple must first let himself go” (Luke 9,23). Nobody can hear my word and my teaching unless he has let himself go. (Sermon 11, 207)

### I AND NOT-I

The *Ratification* sums up its diagnosis by stating that “the triple poison of passions, suffering, and deluded conceptions all originate as transformations from the particularisation of reflective thought” (folio 146b2-3).<sup>37</sup> The most basic differentiation is the discrimination 分別—based on man's self-conscious nature—of myself (“I”) from things that are different from me (“not-I”). Man's most immediate and basic

<sup>35</sup> Alois M. Haas has devoted a whole book (cited in the previous note) to this theme, especially as it appears in the teachings of three major figures of German mysticism.

<sup>36</sup> Chapter “*Genjōkōan* 現成公案” in Dōgen's 道元 *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏. Many similar pronouncements are found both in the Chan/Zen tradition (for example in the *Ten Oxherding Pictures* 十牛圖) and outside, for example in the teachings of *Ramana Maharshi* (see Arthur Osborne, ed., *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1978).

<sup>37</sup> 三毒煩惱妄想皆從思惟分別變化生。Demiéville, op. cit. p. 123, translates this as follows: “All the false notions due to the triple poison of passions are products born by transformation of the particularizing imagination associated with reflexion.”

differentiation found many expressions in religious literature, for example in the Bible's story of man's fall. It is thus not surprising that "mystical" religious movements focus with great insistence on this differentiation; the *Ratification*, for instance, says that "those who get attached to words instead of getting to the bottom of 'I' and 'not-I' drown in duality and ruin themselves and others" (folio 142b6), and the German classic *Theologia Deutsch* states:

I-ness, self-ness, mine, me, etc. all pertain to the evil spirit, and the spirit is evil because of that. Look, the following few words say it all: Be pure and entirely without your self!<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Eckhart says: "If we were free of the 'not,' we would not be impure" (Sermon 5, 176). But what does such freedom of the 'not' mean in terms of "I" and "not-I"?

I say something else and even more difficult: Whoever wants to immediately (*unmittelbar*) stand in the nakedness of this nature [which is one and onefold] must have left behind all distinction of person so that he is as well disposed to a man across the sea whom he has never set eyes on as to the man who is with him and is his close friend. As long as you favor your own person more than someone you have never seen, you are assuredly not all right, and you have never for a single instant looked into this onefold ground. [. . .] And secondly, you must be pure in heart; since only *that* heart is pure that has abolished all created objecthood. And third you must be free of the 'not.' [. . .] I say truly: you are imperfect in so far as 'not' adheres to you. Therefore, if you want to be perfect, you must be rid of 'not.' (Sermon 6, 179)

As long as "one is not the other," Eckhart says, there is lack and therefore bitterness and unrest (Sermon 50, 389), and the major hindrances that he identifies as "self-attachment and ignorance" (Sermon 1, 156) are all based on a "this" which is not "that," a "subject" that is not "object," an "I" set apart from "not-I."

Many teachers consider man's basic I/not-I discrimination to be the

<sup>38</sup> Gerhard Wehr, ed., *Theologia Deutsch. Eine Grundschrift deutscher Mystik*. Andechs: Argo, 1989, p. 87.



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most fundamental source of ignorance and suffering. I will just cite two instances, the first by the Japanese Zen master Bankei (1622–1693) and the second by the modern Indian master Ramana Maharshi:

Your self-partiality is at the root of all your illusions. There aren't any illusions when you don't have this preference for yourself.<sup>39</sup>

\* \* \*

You see, he who eliminates all the ‘not-I’ cannot eliminate the ‘I’. In order to be able to say ‘I am not this’ or ‘I am that’, there must be the ‘I’ to say it. This ‘I’ is only the ego, or the ‘I’-thought. After the rising up of this “I”-thought, all other thoughts arise. The ‘I’-thought is therefore the root thought. If the root is pulled out, all the rest is at the same time uprooted. Therefore seek the root ‘I’; question yourself: ‘Who am I?’; find out the source of the ‘I’. [. . .] Ignorance is the obstruction. Get rid of it and all will be well. This ignorance is identical with the ‘I’-thought. Seek its source, and it will vanish.<sup>40</sup>

In similar manner, the *Gratum sinapis* song cited above says that “your ‘I’ must be destroyed, every ‘something’ and every ‘nothing’ lost” in order to find that “good beyond any entity.” Eckhart has the following to say about this theme:

What hinders you in things is *you yourself*, since it is *you* who are in a wrong relation to things. Therefore begin with yourself and let yourself go! Truly, if you do not flee yourself, wherever you flee, you will only find hindrance and unrest. People who seek peace in outer things—be it in places or in methods, in people or in works, in banishment, poverty, or humiliation—however impressive this may be and whatever it may be, it all counts for nothing and brings no peace. Those who seek in this way seek wrongly; the further they go on, the less they find what they are looking for. They seek like one

<sup>39</sup> Norman Waddell, *The Unborn. The Life and Teaching of Zen Master Bankei*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984, p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> Arthur Osborne, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–118.

who has lost his way: the further he goes, the more he goes astray. But what should he do? He should first let go of himself: then he has let go of everything. In truth, if a man gave up a kingdom or the entire world but kept clinging to himself, he would have abandoned nothing. But if man lets go of himself, then he has let go of everything. (*Reden der Unterweisung*, 55–56).

This theme of “letting go” is central in Eckhart. But how does one go about “letting go”? Eckhart’s words echo those of Dōgen and Ramana Maharshi:

Observe yourself, and where you find yourself, let go of yourself. That is the very best.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. BREAKTHROUGH TO THE IMMEDIATE

#### NO MEDIUM

The overall nature and role of religion is addressed when it is portrayed as a “vehicle” or “medium” that leads an adherent from one state to another: from deluded conceptions to awakened truth, from attachment to freedom, from suffering to bliss, from twoness to not-twoness, etc. At the outset of the *Ratification*, the Indian side asks: “What do you mean by ‘Great Vehicle’?” The Chinese answer is typical for religious movements that emphasize immediacy:

There is neither a vehicle nor anything that is carried:  
It is the non-institution of any vehicle  
That I call Great Vehicle. (folio 129b1)<sup>42</sup>

In another answer, the Chinese respondent cites “practising all practices is non-practice” (folio 131 [bis] b4). The *Ratification* shows a

<sup>41</sup> “Nim dīn selbes war, und swā dū dich vindest, dā lāz dich; daz ist daz allerbeste.” *Deutsche Werke* V, 196/507. Quint translates: “Richte dein Augenmerk auf dich selbst, und wo du dich findest, da laß von dir ab; das ist das Allerbeste.” (*Reden der Unterweisung* 4, 56).

<sup>42</sup> This is a quote from the *Lankavatara sūtra* (Taishō vol. 16, 607b). See Demiéville, op. cit., p. 53, note 1.

pattern of such paradoxical answers that in effect state that only the resolution itself is true practice, i.e., that the only possible way or method is the absence of any way or mediation (*im-mediacy*). Any mediation or gradual approach is thus judged, from the standpoint of resolution, as still being thoroughly in the realm of deluded conceptions. For example, the Indian challenge that the buddhas teach gradual 漸門 rather than immediate access 頓門 is without delay refuted by the argument that concepts such as “gradual” and “immediate” belong to the realm of deluded conceptions and thus constitute the problem rather than the resolution (folio 132b–133b). Again, when the Indian side asserts that for beginning practitioners, conceptions 想 may be necessary and beneficial, the Chinese side emphasizes that just these dualistic conceptions are the problem and that their very elimination is the resolution (folio 134b–135a). But by what means can one rid oneself of deluded conceptions and attachment to objects, asks the Indian side? The answer again fits the pattern:

As long as deluded conceptions arise, one is not awakened and remains in what is called “life-and-death.” When one is awakened, one no more produces acts bound to deluded notions or appropriates objects, and one does not hold on to or rely [on anything]. Then every thought is ultimate liberation and wisdom. (folio 135b3–5)

This pattern is also apparent in answers to questions concerning concrete practices; thus the answer to the question about the meaning of “contemplating mind” 看心 ends with a quote from the *Vimalakīrti sūtra*: “Non-contemplation is ultimate wisdom 不觀是菩提.”<sup>43</sup> Questions about practices leading to liberation are answered in similar manner by “what matters is being free.” In short, any striving towards a goal is seen as simply one more expression of the problem: only in the realm of duality and discrimination is mediation and practice necessary, and such mediation is itself an expression of the problem. Only the thorough cutting off of all deluded conceptions (and thus of all mediation and striving) can be the resolution.

A similar stance is apparent in many texts of the Chan tradition, for example in the following story about Master Shitou 石頭:

<sup>43</sup> Taishō vol. 14, 542b24.

When Chan Master Yaoshan Weiyan 藥山 first visited Shitou 石頭, he asked: "I have a superficial knowledge of the Three [Buddhist] Vehicles' twelve divisions of teachings. Now I keep hearing of Southern [Chan's characterization as] 'directly pointing to man's heart.' This is something I really haven't yet understood, and I humbly request your compassionate instruction."

Shitou said: "This way will not do, and any other way will not do either. No way, neither this way nor any other way will do. What do you do?"<sup>44</sup>

The first part of Shitou's answer presents in a nutshell what the Chinese side in Lhasa reiterated in various forms: any particular way (including *dun* 頓 or *jian* 漸) will not do. Yet the Lhasa discussions also testify to the conviction that indeed, as Shitou challenges his audience, something must be done. To sum up the present argument in the words of a modern Zen thinker:

The basic method of Zen Buddhism tries to get the ego to realize that ultimately there can be no method for it to attain to its True-Self-Awakening apart from the awakening itself. For if there is any "method" that the ego can pursue or cling to, that method contributes to the perpetuation of the ego, and thereby becomes an obstacle to—or even worse, leads away from—the goal. So, Huang-po 黃檗 reprimanded: "As long as you are concerned with 'by means of' you will always be depending on false media." Hence it is that the root Zen method is, finally, a method which would strip away every method, and which itself provides no "method."<sup>45</sup>

Such radicality is perhaps an extreme "immediate" type rarely

<sup>44</sup> *Record of Mazu*, Zokuzōkyō 續藏經 vol. 119, 408c14–17. This statement is echoed in many Chan texts, particularly in koans 公案; indeed, the modern Japanese Zen teacher Hisamatsu Shin'ichi 久松真一 has attempted to formulate the essence of all koans 基本的公案 by "どうしてもいかなければどうするか" ("Whatever you do will not do. What do you do?"). For an expert description and definition of the koan see Richard DeMartino, "On Zen Communication." *Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1983.

<sup>45</sup> Richard DeMartino, *The Zen Understanding of Man*, p. 176. Chan texts feature

found in reality; in the *Ratification*, for example, Moheyan contradicts his own radical statements with apparent ease, particularly in the third memorial (folio 155a–b) and the summary at the end of the document (folio 156a–158a). Though his openly “gradual” statements partially fall under the cover of expedient means 方便 and the Two Truths 二諦說 (as expressions of a verity that is only employed to help the deluded<sup>46</sup>) and are ostensibly motivated by the urge not to frighten a sovereign interested in good deeds, loyalty, etc., some contradictions cannot be denied.<sup>47</sup> A similar tendency is also present in Meister Eckhart. Some of his radical statements match those of some Chan masters, but the materials transmitted as Eckhart’s also contain passages of much more conventional Christian flavor which emphasize prayer and other practices promoted by the Catholic church.<sup>48</sup> However, since this paper neither aims at a comprehensive portrayal of Eckhart’s teaching nor at a comparison of Eckhart with Chan,<sup>49</sup> I will continue to concentrate on the “immediate” and radical side that is present both in Eckhart and the cited Chinese texts.

According to Eckhart, God cannot be found in distinction and two-ness,<sup>50</sup> and no way or medium can “lead towards” that which is not-

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many passages supporting this view; see for example *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 372a5: “Accessing the storehouse of Tathagata is brought about by accessing without accessing 入如來藏者、入不入故.”

<sup>46</sup> Cf. folio 141b6: “All the sūtras of the Great Vehicle point out that it is for the sake of feeble-minded beings of the final period of the Dharma that they speak extensively [of practices to cultivate and study].”

<sup>47</sup> Luis Gómez points out a number of these in his article included in *Sudden and Gradual*, “Purifying Gold: The Metaphor of Effort and Intuition in Buddhist Thought and Practice.”

<sup>48</sup> Various theories have been advanced to account for such discrepancies: church pressure, the development of Eckhart’s own thought and terminology, his skilful means as a preacher, inadequacies of note-taking or transmission, differences in audience or readership, the cultural background, etc.

<sup>49</sup> For such comparisons, see for example Shizuteru Ueda’s *Die Gottesgeburt in der Seele und der Durchbruch zur Gottheit* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1965) and other papers by the same author, for example “Eckhart und Zen am Problem ‘Freiheit und Sprache’” in *Luther und Shinran—Eckhart und Zen*. Köln: E.J. Brill, 1989.

<sup>50</sup> “As long as the soul preserves any distinction, it is not yet all right; as long as there is something protruding or intruding there is not yet Oneness” (Sermon 29, p. 293).

other: "Whoever seeks God in a certain way takes the way and misses God who is hidden in the way." (Sermon 6, 180). Consequently, only "one who seeks God without way [. . .] grasps him as he is in himself" (Sermon 6, 180). But to grasp God without way or manner is altogether beyond the ability of an "I" that is seeking "God":

Saint Paul says: "God dwells in and inhabits a light to which there is no access" (1 Tim. 6, 16). To that [light] there is no access, there is only reaching. Moses says, "Never a man saw God" (2 Mos. 33, 20). As long as we are human beings, as long as something human lives in us and we are in an approach, we will not see God. (Sermon 53, 402)

The *Granum sinapis* song makes a similar point:

Your own 'I' must be destroyed.  
Every 'something' and every 'nothing' must be lost!  
Let go of space, let go of time,  
get rid of any image!  
Tread, without a way, the narrow path:  
then you will find the trace in the desert.

### LETTING GO

The destruction of the subject "I"—and with it of every object "something"—that the song demands points to some important dimensions of *dun* 頓: the resolution cannot be achieved through any mediation and is thus "im-mediate." Furthermore, whatever may precede this breakthrough, it happens in a radical and "sudden" falling away of the very basis of mediation: the opposition of "I" and "not-I" or subject and object. In this radical letting-go, all is let go "at once," comprehensively ("at one stroke"), and "simultaneously"; this release, just like death, is "abrupt," total ("all at once"), and irreversible ("once and for all")<sup>51</sup>—and we will see below that what opens up or is born in this breakthrough is nothing "other" but the "immediate" par

<sup>51</sup> It will be noted that these terms ("im-mediate" in the sense of not mediated, "sudden," "at once," "once and for all," "simultaneously," "at one stroke," "all at once," and "immediately") are all in use as English renderings of *dun* 頓.

excellence, or, in the words of Nicolaus of Cusa, “nothing other than the not-other.”<sup>52</sup>

Though the *Ratification* mentions various practices such as “watching the mind while abstaining from all examination when thoughts arise and even from reflexion about reflexion” (folio 156a1–2), it is adamant that there is only one way to cure man’s disease: “Just get rid of deluded conceptions and [. . .] you will be able to free yourself at once and totally” (folio 146b4–5). In this, supreme wisdom is realized (folio 141a3–6), i.e.: “one realizes that all aggregates are without ‘I,’” and that signifies the “absolute destruction of *any* view” (folio 141b3). Since views are by definition dualistic, the “absolute destruction of all views” is synonymous with the thorough overcoming of man’s characteristic subject-objecthood: “The practice of dhyāna 禪 takes place when not the slightest object can be grasped” (folio 141b2).

The *Vajrasamādhi sūtra*, though ostensibly focusing on a variety of practices, also has a strong “immediate” character and sees the essence of the religious path in similar terms:

Everyone gains the essential,  
Just as he abandons mind and self [. . .]  
And when the original benefit is attained,  
Dualistic views are extirpated.  
Nirvana which is calm and tranquil  
Is also neither lingered in, nor clung to, nor authenticated.  
To access that place of certitude,  
There are neither forms nor practices.<sup>53</sup>

In writings of “immediate” tendency, the image of death is much used for this thorough “abandonment of mind and self.”<sup>54</sup> In Chan texts, for example, we find the expression “Great Death 大死.”<sup>55</sup> This image conveys not only the total (“all at once”) and irreversible (“once

<sup>52</sup> Nicolaus Cusanus, *De li non aliud* (first chapter).

<sup>53</sup> *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 367b8–12. The translation differs substantially from Buswell’s (op. cit., p. 195).

<sup>54</sup> For Christian and Islamic traditions, scholars use the technical term “*mors mystica*” (Latin for “mystical death”). See for example the German dictionary of mysticism edited by Peter Dinzelbacher: *Wörterbuch der Mystik*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1989, p. 364.

<sup>55</sup> See for example case 41 of the *Biyanlu* 碧巖錄 (Taishō vol. 48 no. 2003, 176c9 ff).

and for all”) nature of letting go but also its abrupt (“sudden”) and ultimately personal (“immediate”) character. Both in East and West, this death of the “I” is usually paired with some sort of birth; for example, one of German mysticism’s major figures influenced by Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, said: “Dear child, you must die if the loving God should become your life without medium.”<sup>56</sup> Eckhart portrays the overcoming of duality in the following terms:

One must be dead, thoroughly dead, so that neither joy nor sorrow can touch us. [. . .] Life, too, can never be perfected until it returns to its pregnant source where life is a being that the soul receives when she thoroughly dies, that we may live in that life wherein life is one being. (Sermon 9, 193)

We will come back to the “positive” aspect of breakthrough and the meaning of Eckhart’s “life is one being” after some more detail about his view of “letting go.” Letting go of self and all things is of supreme importance in Eckhart’s teaching. He emphasizes: “What must that man be like who sees God? He must be dead.”<sup>57</sup> One who is “dead to self and all created things pays as little regard to himself as to one who is a thousand miles away. [. . .] This man must have abandoned self and the whole world” (Sermon 13, 216). He leaves no doubt as to the total nature of this letting go: “You have to let *yourself* go, I say, *completely* go, then you have truly let go” (Sermon 31, 300). The result of such total self-abandon is what Eckhart calls “*Gelassenheit*,” a key concept in his works. In a passage where “to let go” (*lassen*), “to be at ease” or “to be released” (*gelassen sein*) and “having abandoned” (*gelassen haben*) are intertwined, Eckhart explains it in terms that again evoke some connotations of *dun* 頓:

To a man who lets go of himself totally for a single instant, all is given. But if a man had abandoned self for twenty years, if he took back self for a single instant, he has never truly let go. That man who has let go and is at ease,<sup>58</sup> who never even for an instant looks back at what he has let go, and who remains

<sup>56</sup> “*Liebes kint, du muost sterben, soll der minnecliche Got din leben one mittel werden.*” Dinzelbacher, op. cit., p. 364 (*mors mystica*).

<sup>57</sup> Dinzelbacher, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> In German, this reads: “*Der Mensch, der gelassen hat und gelassen ist. . . .*” (Sermon 13, 217)



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firm, unmoved in himself, and unchangeable: *that* man alone is “gelassen.” (Sermon 13, 217)

### BREAKTHROUGH

No image is more apt to depict the nature of breakthrough than that of death-and-birth. It underscores its total and irreversible nature<sup>59</sup> as well as its sudden and immediate character. Nothing “other” is at stake here but the most immediate there is, one’s very “I”; what dies is that source of deluded conceptions, the “I” that clings to itself and to objects—and what is born is the “true ‘I’ ” or “true self” that the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* calls the “true ‘I’ that is no-‘I’ 非我真我.”<sup>60</sup> It is characteristic of “immediate” teachings that something like this is realized in an abrupt breakthrough or leap by which a new, nondual view of reality opens up. From this perspective it becomes clear that “reality” was indeed only delusion, and that the reality one has awakened to has been there all along. In the *Ratification* this reality is called “Buddha nature 佛性” (folio 142a3–4), in the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* “womb of the Thus-Come 如來藏” or “amala consciousness 庵摩羅識,” in Huangbo 黃檗 “one mind 一心,” and in Eckhart, as we will soon see, “the spark.”

The immediate nature and continuous presence of this reality is emphasized in various ways, for example by the image of the sun which has been shining all along, even while hidden behind the clouds of delusion (folio 142a3–4), or by the image of a gem one unknowingly owned all along, hidden in a dirty cloth. One just needs to “take off the stained dress of impregnations of deluded conceptions” in order to achieve liberation and see that the gem has been there all along (folio 144b5). This reality is regarded as one’s most immediate and true nature which is beyond any objectification and mediacy; thus there can neither be access to it nor departure from it.

Although all sentient beings are originally free from the

<sup>59</sup> An image used in case 19 of the *Biyanlu* 碧巖錄 is that of a strand of silk cut or dyed all at once: “It’s like cutting a skein of thread: when one strand is cut, all are cut. It’s like dyeing a skein of thread: when one strand is dyed, all are dyed 如斬一綫糸、一斬一切斬、如染一綫糸、一染一切染。” Taishō vol. 48 no. 2003, 159a13.

<sup>60</sup> *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 373c7.

outflows, and all wholesome benefits are originally innate in them, they are being pricked by the thorn of desire, which they have yet to overcome [and thus do not realize that they are originally enlightened].

\* \* \*

O son of good family! It is just the same with the amala-consciousness. It originally is not something from which you have departed. It is not something that has now been accessed. Even though in the past you were unaware of it, it was not nonexistent. Even though now you have awakened to it, it is not accessed.<sup>61</sup>

This sudden realization is often portrayed in terms of a breakthrough or overturning: "Overturning both the appropriated [object] and the appropriating [subject], one accesses the womb of the Thus-Come."<sup>62</sup> Through this "access via nonaccess,"<sup>63</sup> one realizes that "there are neither self nor objects-of-self and neither subject nor object views"<sup>64</sup>—rather, "mind and objects are not-two."<sup>65</sup> What appears like the sun from behind the clouds is that which is "neither unitary nor different, neither evanescent nor permanent, neither produced nor extinguished."<sup>66</sup>

The innermost and most noble faculty of the human soul which Eckhart calls "spark," "castle," etc.—"the ground where God lies hidden"—is characterized in similar terms. In the sermon "Intravit Jesus," Eckhart explains this power of the soul in the following way:

I have sometimes said that there is a power in the mind which is alone free. Sometimes I have called it a guard of the mind; sometimes a light of the mind; sometimes a spark. But now I say: It is neither *this* nor *that*, and yet it is a *something* which

<sup>61</sup> *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 368c15–17 and 369a8–9; the translation is by Buswell, op. cit., pp. 206 and 208. See also Buswell's discussion of Tathagatagarbha 如來藏 and the Immanence of Enlightenment 本覺 on pp. 78 ff.

<sup>62</sup> 轉所取能取、入於如來藏。 *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 372c15.

<sup>63</sup> 入如來藏者、入不入故。 *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 372a5.

<sup>64</sup> 無我我所、能所身見。 *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 373b12.

<sup>65</sup> 心事不二。 *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 370b2.

<sup>66</sup> *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 367c12–13.

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is higher above ‘this’ and ‘that’ than the sky is above the earth. Thus I shall now name it in a nobler fashion than I ever did before, even though it beggars both such nobleness and any mode and transcends them. It is free of all names and void of all forms, entirely bare and free, just as God is bare and free in himself. It is so completely one and onefold as God is one and onefold, so that in no way one can peer into it. (Sermon 2, 163)

Though it is hidden and man is still “not at home” in “the innermost part of his soul” (Sermon 4, 170), this spark appears as One—“so akin to God that it is a unitary One without differentiation” (Sermon 23, 258), above time and space, and uncreated. Thus Eckhart says: “If man were wholly of this [the spark’s] kind, he would be completely uncreated and impossible to create” (Sermon 13, 215). This spark “is the seed of God in us.” Just as with the proper care “the seed of the pear tree grows into a pear tree and the seed of a walnut tree into a walnut tree,” so “God’s seed [grows] into God.” Even though this seed is “covered, hidden and concealed,” it is in every human being and “can never be destroyed nor extinguished in itself.” Its discovery is not causally linked to long periods of practice but can take place immediately:

None of you is so dull or small of capacity or far from it that he could not find this joy [. . .] in himself as it truly is, even before he leaves this church today, yes, even before I finish my sermon; you can find it in yourself and live it and have it as certain as God is God and I am a human being. (Sermon 27, 275–6)

It is characteristic of “immediate” teachings that “birth” or “awakening” or “breakthrough” do not aim at something “other” that can and must be the object of mediation.

People often say to me: “Pray for me!” Then I think: Why do you go outside? Why don’t you stay in yourself and grasp your own good? You *do* carry all truth essentially in yourself. (Sermon 6, 181)

\* \* \*

If the soul were totally stripped or uncovered of all mediation, then God too would be stripped or uncovered for it, and God would give himself to it totally. (Sermon 40, 344)

What is thus without mediation is "the onefold One without manner or characteristics" (Sermon 2, 164) that encompasses everything yet is nothing other than one's very self.<sup>67</sup> Thus, rather than signifying an arrival at some remote destination, the breakthrough or birth is a homecoming.<sup>68</sup> Eckhart contrasts such a homecoming with two other "ways:"

One way is to seek God in all creatures through manifold activities and ardent longing. [. . .] The second is a wayless way, free and yet bound, where one is raised past self and all things and rapt, without will and images, but still without essential permanence. [. . .] The third way is called a way, but is really being at home, that is: seeing God without means in his own being. [. . .] Outside of this way all creatures circle, and are *means*. [. . .] How marvelous: to be without and within, to embrace and be embraced, to see and be that which is seen, to hold and be held—*that* is the goal where the spirit is ever at rest, *one* in joyous eternity. (Sermon 28;284–5)

This birth is the apex of immediacy: "The soul gives birth to itself within itself and from itself, and again into itself" (Sermon 52, 399). It only takes place in true spiritual poverty where there is no wanting, no knowing, and no having whatsoever.

If you want to find this noble birth, you have to let go of all "multiplicity," and return to the origin and the ground out of which you came. All powers of the soul and all its works: all

<sup>67</sup> Alois Halder's paper "Das Viele, das Eine und das 'Selbst' bei Meister Eckhart" (in Dieter Henrich, ed., *All-Einheit. Wege eines Gedankens in Ost und West*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985, pp. 115–135) discusses the connection of manyness, oneness, and self in Eckhart's thought.

<sup>68</sup> This can be related to the statement quoted above that the Great Vehicle of Buddhism features "neither a vehicle nor anything that is carried" (folio 129b1) and to Chan expressions such as "one's home treasure is not found outside" or "your original face."

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that is “multiplicity.” Memory, reason, will: they all make you manifold. Therefore you have to let them all go . . . only then can you find this birth, and not otherwise: that is completely certain. (Sermon 59, 432)

But true spiritual poverty is not just abandonment of self; it must also include abandonment of “God” as some entity that is “other” and that can be mediated.<sup>69</sup> What is broken through is the “not” that Eckhart pointed out as the source of man’s troubles; the resulting oneness is thus called “a negation of negation” (Sermon 22, 253). When this occurs in existential actuality and not just in speculation, the “true poverty” of the “man without station”<sup>70</sup> is realized:

In my breaking-through, where I stand free of my own will, of God’s will, of all his works, and of God himself: there I am beyond all creatures and am neither God nor creature. Rather, I am that which I was and shall remain now and for evermore. [. . .] This breaking-through brings about that God and I are one. There I am what I was, there I neither wax nor wane, for there I am an unmoved cause that moves all things. Here, God finds no station in man, for man wins by this poverty what he has eternally been and shall eternally remain. Here, God is one with the spirit, and this is the strictest poverty one can find. If anyone cannot understand this sermon, he need not worry. For so long as man is not equal to this truth, he cannot understand my words; for this is the undisguised truth which has come without medium from God’s heart. (Sermon 32, 308)

### **4. IMMEDIACY**

The religious quest that was outlined by Eckhart and many other

<sup>69</sup> Eckhart sometimes uses the term “Godhead” to emphasize this immediacy; but his use of terminology is by no means consequent.

<sup>70</sup> In the Chan tradition, the expression “true man without station 無爲の眞人” is found in the celebrated passage of the *Record of Linji* (T47 496c10: 赤肉團上、有一無位眞人、常從汝等諸人面門出入。).

teachers of “immediate” tendency,<sup>71</sup> leads “from a life that is divided to a life that is one” (Sermon 9, 194). Oneness in this sense is not simply opposed to multiplicity or twoness; rather, *any* form of twoness or separation (including that between oneness and twoness or multiplicity) must be overcome;<sup>72</sup> only then is true immediacy realized. Often, portrayals of such oneness, non-delimitation, or “not-twoness” 不二 take a dialectical form<sup>73</sup> and are expressed in apophatic (“neither this nor that”) or paradoxical terms. The great Sufi teacher Ibn al-'Arabi (1165–1240), for example, stated:

God possesses Nondelimited Being, but no delimitation prevents Him from delimitation. On the contrary, he possesses all delimitations. Hence He is Nondelimited Delimitation.<sup>74</sup>

Nondelimitation that possesses all delimitations, or unity that engenders all multiplicity,<sup>75</sup> or an absolute principle that contains all separate objects<sup>76</sup> all exemplify a sort of not-twoness that in mystical literature is often called “coincidentia oppositorum:” the immediate and non-mediatable coincidence (or not-twoness) of opposites.

Because the soul does not possess the *One*, it never comes to rest until everything becomes one in God. God is one; this is

<sup>71</sup> The volume entitled *All-Einheit. Wege eines Gedankens in Ost und West* edited by Dieter Henrich (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985) is a collection of essays on the theme of encompassing oneness in East and West.

<sup>72</sup> A philosophical exposition of this is found in works by Richard DeMartino (cited above) who coined the term “nondualistic-duality” to express this thought.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, the opening pages of the *Record of Baizhang* (*Baizhang guanglu* 百丈廣錄 (Zokuzōkyō vol. 118). Many Chinese Buddhist schemes for the classification of Buddhist teachings (教判) can also be seen as attempts to define nonduality in series of dialectical steps. In classical Chan Buddhism 禪, the term *xiangshang* 向上 (“beyond” or “going beyond”) exemplifies the same tendency.

<sup>74</sup> William C. Chittik, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 109. The quote stems from chapter 341 of Ibn al-'Arabi's *Futuhāt al-makkiyya*, a vast encyclopaedia.

<sup>75</sup> An example from the Jewish Hasidic tradition: “He is the blessed Infinity, and He is all One, and all divisions come from Him, even though He is simple with absolute simplicity. . . . Understand this well, for it is the base and root of Divine unity.” Rachel Ellor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God. The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 97.

<sup>76</sup> Folio 130a1–2; this is quoted from the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273.

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the bliss of the soul and its embellishment and its rest. Some master says that God keeps in all his works all things in consideration. The soul is all things. [. . .] God is everything and one. (Sermon 22, 255).

### NOT-TWONESS

In contrast to forms of religion that emphasize mediation (such as the saving power of some figure, text, practice, or ritual) and thus presuppose sharp differentiations and twoness or multiplicity, religions of “mystical” type stress immediate nondual self-realization.<sup>77</sup> The *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* states that the “access of principle 理入” consists in “having deep faith that sentient beings are not different from true nature, and thus are neither identical nor counterpoised.”<sup>78</sup> This expression exemplifies an important aspect of not-twoness or nonduality: it is not just a unity or oneness because that would again stand against multiplicity or duality. Thus the sutra does not simply equate sentient beings with Buddha-nature but says: “Sentient beings and Buddha-nature are neither one nor different.”<sup>79</sup> The core of the Buddha’s teaching is portrayed in terms that would also fit other “immediate” forms of religion:

All existence is thus free of duality—  
yet it does not linger in oneness either.<sup>80</sup>

This statement could serve as an expression of the essence of many sutras, for example the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* 維摩經. The *Ratification*, too, presents nonduality as the essence of Master Moheyan’s teaching: “Luckily His Majesty has come here to promote and glorify the True Dharma and—though converting by recourse to the three vehicles—to bring people back to the gate of nonduality” (folio 143a2–3).

Oneness, twoness, and the not-twoness of two appear to be the central themes of “immediate” forms of religion such as Meister

<sup>77</sup> Cf. the classification by Schopenhauer cited above.

<sup>78</sup> *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 369c8–9; translation by Buswell, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>79</sup> 衆生佛性不一不異。 *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* T9 no. 273, 370a1.

<sup>80</sup> 此則離於二、亦不在一住。 *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 372b5.

Eckhart's teaching. Indeed, like some other famous mystics, he was condemned by organized religion for transgressing the boundaries of difference that their mediating role necessitates. How could the Catholic church, whose foundation is built on the pervasive difference between man and God, not be critical of statements such as the following?

One has to know him [God] without image, immediately and without simile. But if I should know God in such an immediate way, I have to become absolutely *him*, and *he* must become *I*. More precisely, I say: God must become positively I, and I absolutely God; so completely one that this "he" and this "I" become and are one and work in this existence eternally one work. So long as this "he" and this "I," that is, God and the soul, are not a single "here" and a single "now," the "I" can never work with the "he" nor become one. (Sermon 42, p. 354)

The themes of oneness, twoness, and the not-twoness of two form the basis, for example, of Eckhart's conception of "breakthrough to the Godhead"<sup>81</sup> and "being"<sup>82</sup> or "oneness." These key concepts all aim at a philosophical exposition of nonduality or, as Eckhart calls it, "oneness," "the one as non-distinction,"<sup>83</sup> or "immediacy." In a sermon he describes immediate or nondual knowledge as follows:

That person is two because he does not see God immediately. *His* knowing and *his* being, or: his knowing [*Erkennen*, noesis] and the known-image [*Erkenntnisbild*, noema] never get to be one. One sees *God* only when he is seen spiritually, totally imageless. There one becomes two, two is one. (Sermon 28, 283)

Eckhart went to great lengths to make people understand that oneness

<sup>81</sup> See Shizuteru Ueda, *Die Gottesgeburt in der Seele und der Durchbruch zur Gottheit*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1965.

<sup>82</sup> For Eckhart's conception of God as oneness see Karl Albert, "Das Sein ist Gott." In: Wolfgang Böhme, ed., *Zu dir hin. Mystische Lebenserfahrung von Meister Eckhart bis Paul Celan*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990, pp. 65–77.

<sup>83</sup> See the interesting analysis of Eckhart's "non-distinction that is both distinct and not distinct from all that is distinct" in Mojsisch, op. cit., p. 88 ff.



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refers not to a simple equality or identity but rather to a dynamic non-duality. In the following passage from one of his sermons, he portrays a man who has broken through to true poverty:

So then we say that a man should be so poor that he neither *is* nor *has* any place for God to work in. Where man maintains some station, he maintains distinction. Therefore I pray to God to make me free of God, for my essential being is above God if we take God as the origin of creatures. For in that essence of God where God is above any being and above all distinction: there I was myself, there I willed myself and knew myself so as to create this man. Therefore I am my own cause according to my essence, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is temporal. Therefore I am unborn, and according to my unborn mode I can never die. According to my unborn mode I have eternally been, am now, and shall eternally remain. That which I am by virtue of birth must die and perish, for it is mortal, and so it must perish with time. In my birth all things were born, and I was the cause of myself and all things; and had I so willed it, neither I nor all things would have been. If I were not, God would not be either. I am the cause of God's being God. But you do not need to know this. (Sermon 32, 308)

In true poverty, all distinction is thus broken through—including that between difference and non-difference. In Eckhart's words: “Oneness is difference, and difference is oneness. The more there is difference, the more there is oneness: just that is the difference without difference” (Sermon 11, 206). This “difference without difference” or “twoness without twoness” is expressed in statements such as “the eye wherein I see God is the same eye wherein God sees me; my eye and God's eye: they are one eye and one seeing, one recognizing and one loving” (Sermon 13, 216). Such sight again highlights immediacy:

If there were nothing mediating between God and the soul, then it would see God without further ado; for God does not know any mediation, and he cannot endure any mediation. If the soul were totally stripped or uncovered of all mediation, then God too would be stripped or uncovered for the soul,

and God would give himself to it totally. As long as the soul is not yet free of any mediation, as slight as it may be, it does not see God. (Sermon 40, 344)

### INVOLVED FREEDOM

When the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* states that existence is free of duality yet does not linger in oneness,<sup>84</sup> it addresses a central theme of “immediate” religious literature. A well-known Chan anecdote, for example, goes:

A monk asked Master Zhaozhou 趙州, “How is it when a man brings nothing with him?”

Zhaozhou replied, “Throw it away!”

The monk inquired, “Since I have nothing on me, what could I throw away?”

Master Zhaozhou said, “Well then, go on carrying it!”

“Not lingering” is only possible where the root of all attachment is cut off, i.e., where the minds of sentient beings are free of *any* object<sup>85</sup>—including the “nothing” of Zhaozhou’s student. The *Granum sinapis* song expresses the same when it demands that “every ‘something’ and every ‘nothing’ must be lost.” This absolute freedom is evoked in different forms.<sup>86</sup> The *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* states that lingering in thusness or in nirvana is just another form of bondage.<sup>87</sup> Such lingering is also present when one prefers non-differentiation to the differentiation that is necessarily present in salvific expediency 方便 and any activity in the world. When in the *Ratification* the Indian side suggests that the Chinese are subject to this bondage, Moheyan retorts that, on the contrary, the Buddhas who have attained the “knowledge without differentiation that is non-duality” are, “just because of this nondifferentiating and nondual knowledge capable of differentiating excellently all particulari-

<sup>84</sup> *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 372b5.

<sup>85</sup> *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 369b25–26.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 369b24–25.

<sup>87</sup> 常住涅槃、是涅槃縛。 *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* 金剛三昧經 T9 no. 273, 368c22. Such forms of bondage are often pointed out in Chan literature, for example as “the disease of Bodhisattvas 菩薩病.”

ties of things.” But this kind of differentiation, Moheyan contends, is different from the “differentiation bound to deluded conceptions that characterizes fools and ignorants” (folio 147b6–148a1).

In his comment on this passage, Demiéville observes that all great mystics have insisted with great care on this “movement back to the world by a spirit that is freed from the world.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, both the *Ratification* and the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* keep speaking of this, and one finds this theme at the heart of the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* as well as many Chan materials (for example, pictures nine and ten of Guoan’s *Ten Oxherding Pictures*). Eckhart also stresses this; for example, he says:

What is good? Good is what mediates itself. We call him a good man who mediates himself and is useful. Thus a heathen master says: a hermit is neither good nor evil in this sense, because he does not mediate himself and is not useful. (Sermon 10, 197)

Such mediation is, as one would expect, spontaneous and immediate: “The wiser and mightier a master is, the more immediate his activity unfolds, and the simpler it is” (Sermon 57, 418). In the Chan tradition, such spontaneity of self-expression through action or words is a central characteristic of a free man; indeed, much of the written tradition of Chan consists of tests (koans 公案) or “gateless barriers 無門關” that can only be passed through immediately, i.e., without the slightest hesitation, by someone who is utterly free of “every something” and “every nothing” and can express this immediately and spontaneously.

In Buddhism, such expression is most often subsumed under the twin labels of supreme wisdom (prajña paramita 般若波羅蜜多) and boundless compassion 慈悲; other religious traditions such as Christianity or Islam tend to emphasize love. Mystics like Rumi or Eckhart put special weight on this “twoness without twoness”:

By its very nature, love flows out and originates from two as one. One as one produces no love; neither does two as two. It is two as one that necessarily results in natural, passionate, fiery love.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Demiéville, op. cit., p. 129 (note 5).

<sup>89</sup> Büchlein der göttlichen Tröstung. Quint, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, p. 116.

But interestingly, Eckhart values compassion even higher than love: "I say: Above these two, above knowledge and love, towers compassion" (Sermon 8, 189).

As in Chan, Eckhart's compassion has its roots in freedom which is "the existential place of all of Eckhart's sermons and tractates, from the early *Talks of Instruction* to the late sermon about spiritual poverty."<sup>90</sup> The German works in particular show a strong emphasis on breaking all fetters to attain absolute freedom which then can be expressed in an immediate, spontaneous, and free manner through action in the world. Like most Chan masters, Eckhart puts much more weight on leading his disciples to freedom than on telling them specifically how to act in the world;<sup>91</sup> the emphasis is on how they should *be*, rather than what they should do:

People ought not to reflect so much about what they should *do*; rather, they should think about what they should *be*. If people were good and their ways were good, their works would shine brightly. If *you* are just, all your works will be just, too.<sup>92</sup>

In Eckhart's philosophical effort, the consequent movement beyond any twoness is exemplified by the progression from analogy to univocity and oneness,<sup>93</sup> and in practical terms by his emphasis on the need to become free of anything mediate, for example prayers,<sup>94</sup> fasting and sleep deprivation (Sermon 1), ecstatic rapture (Sermon 28), and even God insofar as he is "other" (Sermon 32).

That man who recognizes in truth that, even if he lets go of himself and all things, it still amounts to nothing: oh, the man

<sup>90</sup> Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckhart. Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker*. München: C.H. Beck, 1989, p. 192. The sermon about spiritual poverty is no. 32 in Quint's modern German edition.

<sup>91</sup> Alois Haas says in this context that Eckhart embraced the scholastic axiom "*agere sequitur esse*" (action follows being). *Meister Eckhart als normative Gestalt geistlichen Lebens*. Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1979, p. 74.

<sup>92</sup> *Talks of Instruction*. Quint, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>93</sup> Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart. Analogie, Univozität und Einheit*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.

<sup>94</sup> *Traktat von Abgeschiedenheit* (*Deutsche Werke* V, p. 426, line 6 ff.)

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who lives in this way in truth possesses all things. (Sermon 39, 341)

True man is thus “freedom itself” (Sermon 31, 300): “He serves neither God nor man because he is free.”

A man, however, who would not be grounded nor attached to anything: such a man would stay completely unmoved even if heaven and earth were turned upside down because he is not attached to anything nor is there anything attached to him. (Sermon 40, 347)

Though his heart remains unmoved even when his own father and all his friends are killed in front of his eyes (Sermon 35, 321), he does not remain untouched by joy and suffering (cf. Sermon 28, 287). However, he “suffers without suffering” (Sermon 35, 322). Having left the life of division and entered the “life in which there is no opposite” (Sermon 9, 194), he finds true peace and lives as the highest detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*). But such detachment or aloofness does not mean inactivity; rather, it is characterized by intense involvement in the world, as Sermon 27 shows by contrasting the contemplative Maria to the active and involved Martha. Such a free and just man<sup>95</sup> works all of his works out of the innermost ground where “God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground” (Sermon 6, 180) and is “joyful at all times” (Sermon 7, 183).

### VOICING THE IMMEDIATE

Since one who has broken through to the immediate is, in Eckhart’s words, not simply a “master of reading” (*Lesemeister*) but rather a “master of living” (*Lebemeister*), his self-expression can take many forms. When trying to mediate the truth that he has realized, he usually needs to adapt the message to the capacity of the audience and employ terms and expressions that make sense to those who harbor deluded conceptions. In Buddhism, the “immediate” truth is called “ultimate” or “genuine” truth, while the truth mediated for those with deluded

<sup>95</sup> See Ruh, op. cit., p. 192, for references to Eckhart’s definitions of the “just man” in terms of freedom.

conceptions is named “relative” or “provisional” truth. These “two truths” play such a prominent role in Buddhism that already the Indian sage Nāgārjuna remarked:

The Buddhas teach Dharma by resorting to two truths: One is the conventional or provisional truth, the other is the ultimate truth. Those who do not comprehend the distinction between these two truths do not comprehend the deep significance in the Buddha’s teachings.<sup>96</sup>

In the *Ratification*, Master Mahayana time and again points out that the Indian side does not seem to understand the difference between provisional and ultimate truth. In the introduction to the second series of questions and answers, he says for example:

All elements of doctrine are without [intentional] activity and [dualistic] thought. Nevertheless, if sentient beings of dull faculties are unable to gain access to the teaching, the buddhas have during their stay in the world [. . .] established the Triple Vehicle and all sorts of expedient methods. (folio 145b1-2)

The master insists on the clear distinction between statements made from the point of view of absolute truth and those made from the point of view of the “dharma of the world” that employ expedient means 方便 and are compared to medicine prescribed in accordance with specific illnesses (folio 145b6):

In all responses that I have made in past and present concerning the necessity of practicing or not practicing the six perfections and all good practices, I have adopted the strict point of view of absolute truth, from which perspective the question of practicing or not practicing does not arise. But concerning the Dharma of the world, I teach and promote all practices as they are, large or small, from top to bottom, even if it is just a

<sup>96</sup> *Madhyamaka kārikā* 中論 24:8,9 (corresponding to Taishō vol. 30, 32c); translation from Mervyn Sprung, ed., *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedānta*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973, p. 57.

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triple refuge prayer or a single vow said with joined hands.  
(folio 155b3–6)<sup>97</sup>

The question of verbal expression is also brought up several times in the context of the two truths. At the beginning of the second memorial, Master Mahayana says:

All I said was just to respond to questions while referring to sūtra texts; it was not at all the true system of my dhyāna method. My system is without verbal attribute and without attribute of differentiation due to our individual mind; the absolute truth is only transmitted by silence, and the way of words is cut. (folio 155a3–4)

Similar views about the inability of language to capture reality are found in other teachings of “immediate” kind and form the basis of their “apophatic” tendency. Apophasis and kataphasis have been important themes in Buddhism<sup>98</sup> and pre-Christian as well as Christian thought; we find them for example at the center of Plato’s famous *Parmenides* dialogue, and again in the works of Plotinus and other Neo-Platonists. In Christian mysticism (which was strongly influenced by Neo-Platonism), apophasis is the hallmark of the so-called “negative theology” from Dionysios Areopagita onward. Apophatic locutions are typically combined with paradoxical statements, and I propose that they stand in an essential connection to the two truths: apophasis (“neither this nor that”) can be seen as an expression from the point of view of provisional truth, and paradox (“neither this nor that yet also this and that”)<sup>99</sup> as a verbal expression of the reality of the awakened one (genuine or ultimate truth).<sup>100</sup> The following passage by Dionysios is a typical example:

<sup>97</sup> See also folio 156a3 ff.

<sup>98</sup> See for example Robert Gimello’s “Apophasis and Kataphatic Discourse in Mahayana: A Chinese View.” *Philosophy East and West* 26–2 (1976): 116–136.

<sup>99</sup> In the *Granum sinapis* song, apophasis is found in “neither this nor that,” and paradox in “it is far, it is near, it is low, it is high,” etc.

<sup>100</sup> The eminent researcher and editor of Eckhart’s works, Josef Quint, called the paradox “the most adequate mode of thinking and expression of the speculative mystic.” “Mystik und Sprache. Ihr Verhältnis zueinander, insbesondere in der spekulativen Mystik Meister Eckharts.” In: Kurt Ruh, *Altdeutsche und altniederländische Mystik*. Darmstadt, 1964, p. 150.

Therefore God is known in all things and apart from all things; and God is known by knowledge and unknowing. Of him there is understanding, reason, knowledge, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name and many other things, but he is not understood, nothing can be said of him, he can not be named. He is not one of the things that are, nor is he known in any of the things that are; he is in all things everything and nothing in anything; he is known to all from all things and to no-one from anything. [. . .] The most divine knowledge of God, that in which he is known through unknowing, according to the union that transcends the mind, happens when the mind, turning away from all things, including itself, is united with the dazzling rays, and there and then illuminated in the unsearchable depth of wisdom.<sup>101</sup>

In Eckhart as in other Christian mystics, negation and paradox are the favorite modes of verbal expression of the immediate or "non-other" that they call God. Similarly to Dionysios, Eckhart avers that God is "beyond all names"<sup>102</sup> and made many apophatic statements<sup>103</sup> such as the following which was condemned as heretic by the Catholic church:

God is not good and not better and not best. Whoever says that God is good speaks so wrongly as if he stated that the sun is pale or black. (Sermon 10, 197)

Other statements by Eckhart sound less radical but are no less apophatic:

A heathen master says that man's tongue cannot pronounce any adequate word about God because of the loftiness and purity of his being. When we speak about a tree, we speak about it by means of something which is higher, like the sun

<sup>101</sup> *De divinis nominibus* VII.3: 872a-b. Quoted according to Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*. Wilton CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989, p. 88.

<sup>102</sup> Kurt Ruh, *Meister Eckhart. Theologe, Prediger, Mystiker*. München: C.H. Beck, 1989, p. 66.

<sup>103</sup> See the article by Alois Haas: "Apophatik in Meister Eckhart und Zen." In: *Zen Buddhism Today. Annual Report of Kyoto Zen Symposium*, vol. 2, 1984.



## “DUN 頓”: A KEY TO “MYSTICISM”

which works through this tree. Therefore one cannot speak about God in the true sense because nothing is above him and because God has no cause. Secondly, we can speak about things because of identity. So we cannot speak about God in the true sense because nothing is identical to him. Thirdly, one speaks about things because of their effects: if one wants to speak of a painter, one speaks of the picture he created; the picture reveals the master's art. The creatures are too base to reveal God; they are all nothing compared to God. Thus no creature can say a single word about God in his creations. Therefore Dionysios says: All those who want to make statements about God are wrong because they say nothing about him. But those who attempt to *not* speak about him are right, for no word can express God. (Sermon 21, 247–8)

The second cause Eckhart adduces to support apophasis is echoed in a statement that comes close to the Buddhist two-truths doctrine:

The masters say: When one knows a creature in its own essence, one calls this “evening perception;” there one sees creatures in images of manifold differentiation. But if one perceives creatures in God, it is called “morning perception;” this way one sees creatures without any differences and stripped of all images and freed of all sameness in the oneness that is God himself. (*On the Noble Man*, p. 147)

The paradox of seeing “without any differences” yet “freed of all sameness” or other paradoxical statements like “length without length is length, and breadth without breadth is breadth” (Sermon 19, 238) point back to the “groundless ground” (Sermon 39, 342) of both apophasis and paradox in Eckhart: his view of oneness as a “non-distinction that is both distinct and indistinct from all that is distinct.”<sup>104</sup>

Oneness is difference, and difference is oneness. The more there is difference, the more there is oneness: just that is the difference without difference. (Sermon 11, 206)

This “nondual” conception, which was later developed by Nicolaus of

<sup>104</sup> *Unum qua indistinctum*; see Mojsisch, op. cit., p. 88 ff.

Cusa (1401–1464) in terms of “the non-other” and “the coincidence of opposites,”<sup>105</sup> forms the heart of Eckhart’s thought. And, as I proposed in this paper, it may also be regarded as the core of other religious movements that usually are subsumed under the label of “mysticism” but might be better characterized by the numerous connotations of the Chinese concept of *dun* 頓 that were explored in these pages.

<sup>105</sup> Lat. “*non aliud*” and “*concidentia oppositorum*.” See for example Josef Stallmach, *Ineinsfall der Gegensätze und Weisheit des Nichtwissens*. Münster: Aschendorff, 1989, chapters 5 (pp. 59–67) and 9 (pp. 99–119).