

# Freedom and Language in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism

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## Part Two

### *Zen Buddhism*

WHAT THEN *is* Zen in its own world and context? I am not in the position of the Zen master who can speak from within the tradition: “Clouds float by in the sky above, water lies still in a jug below,” or “Have you already had your breakfast?” Unlike the masters, I cannot give the inquirer a swift kick with my foot, or even reply in gentler, more intelligible terms: “There is nothing at all which can be described as Zen.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among the literature on Zen illustrations, special mention should be given to a work of D. T. Suzuki, which has been translated from English to German: *Leben aus Zen*, Suhrkamp Taschenbücher, (Frankfurt a. M., 1982). In my opinion, Suzuki’s English works remain the most suitable introduction to Zen for the Western world, not only because of his authentic understanding of Zen, but also because he is the only person until now who is both extraordinarily well versed in the world of the original Chinese and Japanese Zen texts, and is also able to express himself in a foreign language (in his case, English) as well as in his mother tongue. The popular image of Suzuki in the United States has him sitting in a pile of Chinese Zen texts, talking with a visitor from Japan in Japanese while speaking to a cat in the room in English. But it should not be forgotten that the main works of Suzuki are written in Japanese. Suzuki’s complete works are in 32 volumes, approximately 400 pages each (2nd. ed, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten).

*Three Zen Drawings*

We need to look for a more accessible approach to Zen for the purposes of our discussion. Basically, Zen is concerned with awakening to the truth of the self and with realizing the true self, which Zen Buddhism understands as “the selfless self.” Zen gives us a very vivid illustration of what this means in a group of three rather simple ink drawings. The triad actually forms the last three in a series of ten drawings graphically depicting the step-by-step development of the self from one situation to the next, ending in the perfection of the self.<sup>2</sup> Just as Hegel spoke of a “phenomenology of the spirit,” one might speak here of a “phenomenology of the self.”<sup>3</sup> The last three drawings of this series are concerned with a “threefold self-portrait of the true self.” It is also a concrete portrait of the overall context of Zen, whose particular manifestation and statements often make it appear surprisingly simple, sometimes sharply focused, sometimes vague, often one-sided, or peculiar, self-contradictory, paradoxical, or even completely meaningless.

A study of these drawings is also helpful in another sense. Our discussion of the topic here is in a language foreign to the original languages of Zen, ancient Chinese and Japanese. The gap between the object to be described and the language that describes it demands our special attention. Describing Zen through drawings will give us room in which to present our topic in a general and vivid way, without having to complicate the matter with linguistic questions.

Let us now take a look at these three drawings. The first drawing is

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<sup>2</sup> *Der Ochs und sein Hirte. Eine altchinesische Zen-Geschichte*, trans. K. Tsujimura and H. Buchner, 3rd. ed., (Pfullingen, 1976). See also the English translation of this edition by M. H. Trevor: *The Ox and His Herdsman* (Tokyo, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> “It [the phenomenology of the spirit] contains in itself the different forms of the spirit as stations along the way, through which the spirit becomes pure knowing or absolute spirit.” (Review by Hegel of his own work, 28 October 1807, cited in *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, 2nd. ed. (Hamburg, 1955) s.v. “Phänomenologie.”) The analogy, however, holds good only if one disregards the “scientific method” in Hegel. Hegel speaks of the “scientific order” into which is brought the abundance of the appearances of the spirit, which at first glance appears as chaos. The ten ox drawings are concerned with a self-ordering of experience through strict self-awareness.

an empty circle with nothing in it. It is therefore not really a drawing at all, but an imagelessness beyond all images, an infinite de-imaging. We are dealing here with absolute, infinite nothingness—but *not* with nothing pure and simple. Nothingness functions here in the first place as an infinite negation, a radical neither/nor that represents a total denial of every kind of duality and unity. This means that the true self is concerned simply with the selflessness of the self, with the imagelessness and formlessness in and as which the infinite nothingness is a nothingness. For the sake of one's true self and in accordance with its unlimited selflessness, one must plunge oneself once and for all into pure nothingness, that is, one must "die the Great Death" as Zen says. It is a "great" death because it is not only the selfish *ego* that must die but the self itself as well. Selflessness exists as such in simple imagelessness and formlessness. This is the first drawing of infinite nothingness.

In this infinite nothingness with its de-substantializing dynamic that does not even allow for making nothingness into a negative substance, in this "nothingness of nothingness," a fundamental conversion takes place in the form "die and become," or "death and resurrection." The imageless now shows itself in a new concrete form, and this brings us to the second drawing, which shows a blossoming tree by a river, nothing more. The accompanying text reads: "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom; the river flows, just as it flows." Seen here on the path of the human self, this is not a portrayal of an external, objective landscape. Nor is it a metaphorical landscape describing an inner state of the soul. Rather, it is a picture of the present reality of the selfless self. Since the subject-object dualism was broken through in the absolute nothingness of the first drawing, here in the "resurrection" from nothingness—its literal meaning for Zen—a blossoming tree by a river is the first and now the only reality, a concretization of the selflessness of the self. A blossoming tree, just as it blooms, embodies the selflessness of the true self in a non-objective way. The blooming of the flowers, the flowing of the river are simply what they are just as they are. Yet at the same time, they are an act performed by the selfless freedom of the soul. In its selflessness, the self blooms with the flowers; in its selflessness, it flows with the river.

In the third drawing, the selfless *self* comes to the foreground qua self, as that whose selflessness has already been embodied in nature.

Because of its selflessness, the “between” of the I-Thou provides maneuvering space. The third drawing shows an old man and a youth encountering each other in the world. These are not just any two persons selected at random. The old man goes out of himself in order to encounter the other in the world. An old man *and* a youth: that means a selfless self-development of the old man. What we have here is a self that has been split asunder into selflessness through absolute nothingness and has become a double self. How the “other” is, is therefore a matter of real consequence for the self in its selflessness. Thus the old man asks the youth: “Where are you from?” “What is your name?” “Have you already eaten?” “Do you see these flowers?” These are all simple, everyday questions. For the other, however, it is as if he were being asked if he knows in reality and is truly aware of where he comes from, if he really sees the flowers just as they bloom. Because of the power of the “between,” the old man simply asks, and for the youth opposite him this becomes a question about himself, his true self: “Who am I really?” The “between” as the selfless maneuvering space of the one is for the other the existential locus of the question about the self.

These three drawings depict the same thing in three different ways, each making it completely real in its own way. This same thing, the selfless self, is only fully real insofar as it can realize itself in three entirely different ways in a threefold transformation. We are dealing here with a movement of Existenz that circumscribes an invisible circle: Nothingness/Nature/I-Thou. Only in and as this movement does the true self come to be, unbecoming without a trace into nothingness, like one recognizing one’s other self selflessly in the encounter with the other, like flowers blooming alone selflessly. This is the entire dynamic context that lies behind Zen’s talk of nothingness. Thus while the three aspects can be objectified as they are described in the three drawings, the dynamic as such cannot be defined objectively or graphically. Here again we find nothingness, a nothingness, however, that is not a mere nothing, but the nothingness of a nothing that is in fact nature and I-Thou.

We can see something analogous to the Zen sense of nothingness in Western thought in Meister Eckhart’s idea of the nothingness of the godhead. Here and there in his German sermons, though infrequently, Eckhart speaks of the “breakthrough through God to the nothingness

of the godhead," in which the soul for the first time lives "free and exempt" from out of its own ground.

In the history of Buddhist thought, it was Zen that brought the Mahāyāna Buddhist unity of negation and affirmation out of the metaphysical-philosophical speculation that enveloped it over the centuries. Zen revitalized this unity existentially, with the result that the notions of absolute, infinite nothingness and the self permeate each other completely. In short, what we have here is a nothingness-self, or in the framework of the notion of self introduced above, *the* nothingness of the selfless self.

Historically, this living concretization of Mahāyāna Buddhism originated in connection with the Chinese sense of reality in its traditional Confucian expression.<sup>4</sup> Mahāyāna Buddhism did not thereby adopt anything alien to its own doctrine of "true emptiness, wonderful being," but only opened itself to a much more concrete development with living reality and brought its dynamic of negation more sharply into focus so that it could evolve into a full act of negation. As a result, a strong affinity grew up between Zen Buddhism and the tradition of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu in regard to the space that is opened up through the interpenetration of nothingness and the self, a space that shows a bit of real-unreal, unreal-real character when viewed statically. Yet Zen differs sharply from this tradition in that by nature it is a realization in negation and in affirmation.

### *The True Self*

Let us now attempt a formal definition of the true self in its dynamic structure, which we have indicated above as *the selfless self in realization*, in order to extract the essence, somewhat abstract though it may be. This essence is: the selfless self. Such a self must not be understood as being substance-like, but rather it occurs *as a movement, a movement from itself and back to itself*. This identity with itself is a real element within the movement, but only in its unity with another element, the denial of the identity with itself for the sake of selflessness. Self-identity and denial of self-identity in mutual unity lead to the move-

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<sup>4</sup> The birth and first flowering of Zen Buddhism extended from the second half of the sixth until the end of the tenth century in China.

ment out of itself and back to itself. The self moves out of *itself* to *itself*. Because of this identity one can say, "I am I." But in doing so one makes a long journey *out of* oneself *back to* oneself. When Zen says: "I am I, precisely because I am not I," the second part of this sentence refers to this selfless journey, during which the encounter with the other as other and with nature as nature occurs, in that these encounters each make up the fulfillment of the selfless self, as we have seen above.

We see the dynamism of the selfless self at work most clearly in the phenomenon of freedom, since freedom is a fundamental function intrinsic to the self. We speak of freedom *from* something and freedom *for* something. This from/for of freedom points to an existential dynamic. The original freedom of the self qua self is actually a freedom from the self itself and for the self itself, a movement of the self from out of itself and back again to itself. If this freedom is in any way disturbed, the result is a sickness of the self, or existential sickness. First, there is the sickness of the self-enclosed self, that is, of a self unable to get out of itself. Second, there is the sickness of the wayward self that is unable to get back to itself. Third, there is the sickness of the self-involved self, in which the movement of the self does not take place in the open but is locked into the narrow framework of the ego.

Openness, as the open space for the movement out of the self to the self, is crucial for the true self. Infinite openness belongs to the selfless self in its selflessness. It is as if the self were cut open for openness. Indeed, the selfless self is a finding-oneself-in-infinite-openness, just as in Heidegger the self as Dasein is simply a being-in-the-world. In this regard, we ought to consider the infinite openness of nothingness, depicted in the first drawing as an extreme openness, as an openness pure and simple in which the world, in the sense of what Heidegger calls a context of meaning, contains the significance of its own openness. That is, the selfless self in its total structure is "being-in-the-world in infinite openness." The world as a context of meaning is secluded and limited in the character of its context. Only in the seclusion and limitedness of the context of the present moment can the encountering in the inner world be encountered *as* something. At the same time, this means that the world as such, with its essential limitedness, is opened up into an unlimited infinite openness which makes the setting of limits possible even though the limitedness for its part is not aware of it.

The selfless self lives in a double openness: in the “world” and in the infinite openness of nothingness as being-in-the-world. (In the inner world, each and every thing encounters the selfless self as something possessed of a particular meaning at the present moment—for example, as a tree, a pitcher, a mountain, etc.—and at the same time in its immeasurability in infinite openness.) In this way infinite openness belongs to the selfless self in its selflessness, and the self belongs to it ek-statically. This being so, the movement of the selfless self is at the same time immobile, in that the space for openness does not move itself. The selfless self is therefore both a movement and a non-movement.

We have spoken above of the selfless self as freedom *from* the self *for* the self. Freedom is thus comprised essentially of two elements, selfhood and openness. In Western thought, the first of these, selfhood, finds considerable and quite sharp development in a certain interpretation of selfhood as the self-grounding (*causa sui*) of transcendental freedom, or as practical autonomy. In contrast, the second element, openness, aside from a few exceptions such as Heidegger, generally appears to stay in the background. Zen has developed the element of openness in terms of an enhancement of selfhood in a unique way in its characteristic Zen dialogues. This is not unrelated to the fact that the language of freedom in Zen also speaks “the language of nature,” which according to Western thought appears to be a direct contradiction of freedom. I will return to this question later.

We have spoken repeatedly above of the true self. But why do we call it a *true* self? The first and most important reason is that we have fallen into a distortion of the ego that holds us bound to our own ego. Untruth and unfreedom are reality for us in our distorted mode of the original selfless self. It is a distortion in which the self that holds fast to itself loses its self in ignorance of its own distortion. This must first be set straight.

We spoke of the true self above as the movement out of self back to self. A false development of this “out-of-self-back-to-self,” however, can lead to both “selves” holding and clinging to each other, as if it were a question of “self and self.” In that case, the self’s identity with itself clings to itself, producing an ego closed in on itself.<sup>5</sup> For Bud-

<sup>5</sup> That would be akin to what Eckhart sees when he speaks in his middle High German diction of *eigenschaft* (own-ness) as the ground of evil.

dhism, this self-substantializing grasping of self is the root cause of all that is ill both in human beings as well as in all living beings. Blind hatred of others in the struggle for the possession of nature and of things is the distorted movement of the selfish self, that brings ill everywhere.

For the sake of the true self—that is, both for the sake of others and for the sake of the true self—this distortion must be corrected and the closed-in ego released. But how is this possible? It is possible when a way to the other self is opened up and when we actually take it. The way can only be opened up by the true self in its movement as the selfless self. It is the way *of* the true self and the way *to* the true self for us. Buddhism offers a concrete way to the self in the form of a threefold spiritual practice: (1) *Zazen* 坐禪, the practice of sitting in silence, which entails a cutting open of oneself from infinite openness for infinite openness. (2) *Samu* 作務 (service, mostly gardening or farm work) and *Angya* 行脚 (wandering), the practice of Zen in nature, which means becoming familiar with nature and realizing the selflessness of nature. (3) *Sanzen* 參禪, the practice of Zen through encounter with an other, mainly through dialogue and discussion with a master, which includes a dynamic movement of the selfless self in the “between” of the double self. As an exercise, *zazen* lays the foundation for the other two forms of practice: one gets up from *zazen* to enter into nature or the I-Thou; one goes back to *zazen* from nature or from the I-Thou.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of *zazen* is the concrete embodiment of doing-nothing, of thinking-nothing, of willing-nothing, wherein nothingness opens up the infinite openness that this embodiment makes transparent (“the dropping off of body and mind”). Apart from this embodied practice of *zazen*, we might also try to understand *zazen* by approaching it from the “quiet or silent prayer” of mysticism. “God is so far above everything that there is nothing one can say. Therefore, you also pray to him when you are silent” (Angelus Silesius). If one understands by silence not only the physical closing of the mouth, but also the silence

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<sup>6</sup> Concerning the threefold practice of Zen see S. Ueda “Die Bewegung nach Oben und die Bewegung nach Unten,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 51 (1982), pp. 224–230, 243–250. As a report on the experience of Zen see Lies Groening, *Die lautlose Stimme der Einen Hand. Zen-Erfahrungen in einem japanischen Kloster* (Düsseldorf, 1983).



of the inner word as well as of all images, concepts, notions and ideas, then one is close to the realm of Zen. We might then consider *zazen* to be a radicalization of silent prayer in which praying is intensified into objectlessness, in which the non-objective, formless essence of God that Meister Eckhart speaks of becomes manifest.

The three forms of Zen practice mentioned above clearly correspond to the three real modes of the true self, as the threefold “self-portrait” of the self shows. Thus the practice of Zen is a threefold way *to* the true self and is also the way *of* the true self. For it is not our practice that has opened the way. Rather, the true self, which encounters itself as movement, has opened the way by its own movement. Therefore, this way of the true self is at the same time the way to the true self for the practitioner, the way *to* the true self, to be sure, but as the way *of* the true self.<sup>7</sup> Thus practice as being-on-the-way, or walking-the-way is already the movement of the true self. This is the way Zen offers us. But a way is really a way only for one who walks it. This way of the self has meaning only for one who has suffered from the closed ego, who has struggled for freedom and has failed in one’s every effort. The way does not coerce; it is open, but invitingly. Is one really on the way? The question reminds us of the third drawing of the old man and the youth, an encounter that represents for the youth the first step on the way.

### *The Problem of Language*

We may now turn to the theme of the selfless self in the third drawing by placing it in the context of the problem of language. Here Zen Buddhism shows even more clearly and forcefully what its real concern is. The movement of the selfless self, the freedom from itself for itself, also takes place concretely in reality as a freedom from language for language, since language reaches to the core of self-being insofar as self-understanding and understanding the world are grasped through

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<sup>7</sup> Practice as the “way” differs in Zen sharply from the psycho-physical technique of seating-oneself-in-relation to the absolute, a basically impossible technique. Master Sengai made an ink drawing of a frog sitting on a stone and captioned it “If a person could become Buddha through practice.” With that he wanted to show in a drastic way the meaninglessness of Zen when misunderstood as technique. The concept “way” enjoys an importance similar to the concept of “grace” in Christian mysticism.

language. Language directs every experience through its horizon of articulation and its horizon of interpretation, making experience possible.<sup>8</sup> But this power of language to open the world for us also has a reverse side. The horizon of understanding produced by language often makes new experiences difficult and sometimes even impossible for us precisely because it does function as horizon. Conceived through language, the world is first and foremost a kind of net or cage that catches us and locks us up. Language opens up the world for us as a horizon of meaning, but this world is also defined and limited through language, even as its open character blinds us to its limitedness. This power can make language very dangerous. For Zen, the closed ego mentioned earlier and language as net and cage are completely co-conditioning. This means that in realizing the selfless self we are at the same time dealing with the freedom of language to be language. Zen is concerned with the dynamic of language, but not only in the sense of the movement from language to the object itself that enables talk about the object, or of the movement from language to thinking that enables talk about thought, or of the movement from language to spirit that brings about talk about spirit. For Zen, all these processes remain within the restricted world of language. Zen is rather concerned with the radical movement out of the world of language entirely and then creatively back into language again. Zen's interest is in the twofold breakthrough: the breakthrough through language to primordial silence, and from the breakthrough through silence back again to primordial language.

But does such movement really take place? That is a crucial question, and Zen Buddhism answers it with a clear affirmative, citing concrete examples as evidence. For when it is a question of the limits of language, only concrete examples can be of real help. Let us take one example from a Chinese Zen story: In spite of all his diligent practice, a certain monk was unable to break through to his true self. He grew extremely tense, even desperate. One day while working in the garden, he happened to toss aside a stone, which then hit a bamboo tree. At the

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<sup>8</sup> On this subject see especially the following recent literature: O. Fr. Bollnow, *Philosophie der Erkenntnis* (Stuttgart, 1970), p. 58 ff; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 308f.

sound of stone hitting tree, it came to him. He awakened, and became the great master known as Kyōgen.

*What* came to him? What kind of an event can it really be? The moment when the sound struck him, the net of the linguistic world, the closed ego, was broken through. At the same time, the sound is nothing other than the primordial sound, the first primordial word to “break through” the net of language. Such a primordial word does not of course really belong to language; it is a non-verbal pre-word of language that opens the way to language.

Another example, not from Zen, can help shed further light on the event in question. The common exclamation “Oh!”—what grammatically is classified as an interjection—is used mainly by force of habit. But in a poem it means something more. “Rose, oh pure contradiction . . .” begins the famous epitaph of Reiner Maria Rilke. With this “Rose, oh!” something happens in the poet, something that causes him to exclaim “oh” and which searches for a word to express itself. The verse reads further: “oh, pure contradiction . . .” Our question is this: What happens when someone exclaims “oh!”? What event does this “oh” represent at the moment it is exclaimed? Simply put, we may speak of the “Oh!-event.” A certain presence robs a person of speech by its power. By means of this “Oh,” the linguistic cognitive world is broken through and torn apart. Speechless, one has oneself *become* the “Oh!”

At the same time, this “Oh!” is the very first primordial sound of the ineffable. In this “Oh!” the speech-robbing and ineffable presence has become a word.<sup>9</sup> Although it does not yet belong to language, it is, I repeat, a non-verbal pre-word of language through which the way to language is first opened up. In brief, when the “Oh!” is exclaimed in truth and in reality, a twofold event takes place. On the one hand, it deprives one of speech; and on the other, it is itself a first primordial word. Understood in this way, the radical movement out of language

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<sup>9</sup> In this connection it should be pointed out that Rudolf Otto speaks of the “numinose Urlaut.” See R. Otto, *Das Gefühl des Überweltlichen* (Munich, 1932), p. 203ff. Otto sees in religious primitive sounds the first immediate reaction to the impression of the Holy. The syllable “OM” also counts as such for him: “. . . a kind of whisper, which like a reflex in certain circumstances of numinous profound emotion booms out of the interior as a self-discharge of feeling. . .” (p. 208).

back to language takes place in the "Oh!" This movement is nothing other than the "death and resurrection" of the human individual as the being gifted with language.<sup>10</sup>

The language of Zen, in various forms and at various levels, is regarded as the self-articulation of this event.<sup>11</sup> The total context of the selfless self can be outlined completely and in detail from the aspect of language. Each drawing of the threefold "self-portrait" points to a corresponding form of linguistic activity. The first drawing—nothingness—shows an absolute (and therefore, not merely human) silence. The second drawing—nature—shows a kind of "language of nature,"<sup>12</sup> as the verses in the accompanying text read: "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom." The third drawing—the double self—depicts dialogue as a question-and-answer-event, of which classical Zen texts offer an abundance of examples. Each of these three forms of linguistic activity is necessary. One way or another, the three are bound together in a dynamic and vital manner; for example, from out of silence the language of nature is spoken in dialogue. Keeping this total context in mind, let us now consider each of these three forms separately.

To begin with, it is impossible to talk about an absolute silence. Simply being silent does not amount to absolute silence. Only absolute silence can speak about absolute silence, and it does so in the simple way of a silence that does not allow speech to speak. In a sense, Meister Eckhart, too, is aware of absolute silence, when he speaks not only of the silence of the soul ("But if Jesus is to speak in the soul, she must be all alone, and she has to be quiet herself to hear what he says"—Q. 157; W. 1:59) but also of the ground of God, where God unbecomes, that is, where God is silent.

Since I would like to discuss the "language of nature" somewhat more in detail, let me merely make a brief remark here on the theme of

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<sup>10</sup> On the topic of "Word-event in Zen" see S. Ueda, "Das Erwachen im Zen-Buddhismus als Wort-Ereignis," in *Offenbarung als Heilserfahrung im Christentum, Hinduismus und Buddhismus*, ed. W. Strolz and S. Ueda (Freiburg, 1982), pp. 209-233.

<sup>11</sup> On "the language of Zen" see "Philosophie des Zen-Buddhismus," by Izutsu Toshihiko, *Rowohlt's Deutsche Enzyklopedie*, 1979, especially "II: Sinn und Unsinn im Zen-Buddhismus" and "III: Das philosophische Problem der Artikulation."

<sup>12</sup> In our context I do not consider such expressions as "speaking about (or of) nature" correct.

“dialogue as question-and-answer-event.”<sup>13</sup> In order to show what Zen dialogue is all about, let me bring Meister Eckhart directly into the dialogue. (1) When Eckhart says, “I am neither God nor creature,” a Zen master would be in complete agreement. He would reply: “Good. Who are you then?” What would Eckhart say in reply in this encounter with the Zen master? (2) In the context of the present encounter of Christianity and Buddhism, Daisetz T. Suzuki asks: “It says in the Bible, ‘God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.’ Who saw that? Who is the eyewitness?” What would the answer be from the Christian viewpoint? Would Eckhart not reply “I see it now”?

### *The Language of Nature*

The “language of nature” is something which Zen likes to discuss, but which is generally missing in Zen and almost completely missing in Meister Eckhart. Since what is characteristic in Zen comes clearly to the fore in the language of nature, let us consider it in closer detail.

As a model for our discussion, let us take the lines of the verse, “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” This is the accompanying text of the second drawing of the self mentioned above. It refers to the *simple*, indeed in the infinite openness of nothingness in the first drawing, the *most simple*. The *simple* is articulated in the words “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” Such expressions have to do to some extent with an objective word, not with an ego-related word, nor with a word estranged from existence, but rather with an existential word in selflessness. It is “the language of nature” and as such nothing other than the language of the self in which the self comes to expression in total selflessness. This relationship, however, requires an explanation, because, as it is often the case in the Western conception, the self and nature tend to be seen as distinct categories. What is Zen really concerned with when it speaks the language of nature, such as “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom”? We need to consider the mode of

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<sup>13</sup> Two classical collections of examples of Zen-dialogue are available in translation: *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, translated with commentaries by Sekida Katsuki, edited and introduced by A.V. Grimstone (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1977); *Bi-yän-lu, Niederschrift von der Smaragdenen Felswand*, translation and commentary by Wilhelm Gundert, 3 vols. (Munich, 1960–1973) and *Mumonkan, Die Schranke ohne Tor*, trans. H. Dumoulin (Mainz, 1975).

being of the blooming of the flowers just as they bloom, and at the same time the mode of existence of the one who speaks the phrase and in so doing brings the self to expression in its totality.

In order better to locate this Zen saying and reply to this double question, let us cite for comparison a well known verse of Johannes Scheffler (1624–1677), who wrote under the pen name of Angelus Silesius:

The rose is without why or wherefore: it blooms because it blooms. It takes no notice of itself/asks not if it is seen.<sup>14</sup>

“The rose is without why or wherefore.” The expression *without why or wherefore* reminds us immediately that Angelus Silesius is the spiritual heir of Meister Eckhart, who put great emphasis on the being-without-why-or-wherefore of God. God is the absolute being that has its own ground with us in and as itself, and as such is the ground of being for all other beings. God is the fullness of being. From out of this fullness of being “flows” the divine act *without why or wherefore*. “God acts without why or wherefore” (Q. 371; W. 2:2). The *without why or wherefore* is a sign of God’s being indeed, a distinguishing mark of the divine being. To be sure, this kind of onto-theological consideration appears with some consistency in Eckhart, but it also belongs to the general groundwork of the theology and metaphysics of his time. Characteristic of Meister Eckhart is the immediate transference of the divine *without why or wherefore* to human existence through the *Being-One* of the soul with God. This transference provides being-without-why-or-wherefore with its highest sense of life.

For example, just as God acts without why or wherefore and knows no why or wherefore, in the exact same way the just man acts without why or wherefore.

. . . he is life itself. If a man asked life . . . “*Why* do you live?”, if it could answer it would only say, “I live because I live.” That is because life lives from its own ground, and gushes forth from its own. Therefore it lives without *Why*, because it lives for itself (Q. 180; W. 1:118).

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<sup>14</sup> Angelus Silesius, *Sämtliche poetische Werke und eine Auswahl aus seinen Streitschriften*, ed. G. Ellinger, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1923), 1:61. This is *Der cherubinische Wandersmann*, Buch 1.289.

This is a striking illustration of how Meister Eckhart transfers the divine *without why or wherefore* to human existence through lived unity with God. God as life itself, *without why or wherefore*, flows into detachment, into the nothingness of the human and brings a person to this life-without-why-or-wherefore. Such a one now lives *without why or wherefore* as the life that lives out of its own ground and flows forth from its own. "Here I live from my own as God lives from His own" (Q. 180; W. 1:117). For Eckhart life-without-why-or-wherefore is the lived freedom of the human being.

The *without why or wherefore* is also a basic term of Zen. For Zen life-without-why-or-wherefore is freedom as lived nothingness. With their common idea of *without why or wherefore* Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism point to a possible way to overcome modern radical nihilism, in which, according to the well-known passage of Nietzsche, there is no answer to the "why."<sup>15</sup> The fundamental lack of the answer to the "why" cannot be overcome by a new answer—since radical nihilism from the outset invalidates every possible answer to the "why"—but might be overcome in a single leap by a simple without-why. The turnabout from the nihilistic lack of the reason "why" to the fulfilled *without why or wherefore* can of course occur in Eckhart only through "fundamental death," through what Zen calls the "Great Death," and this might also be the death of nihilism.

In this way Meister Eckhart strikingly transfers the *without why or wherefore* of God to human existence, but not immediately to nature, as for example, to the rose. Here we see a difference between Eckhart and Zen. Eckhart's sole real intention is the immediacy of soul and God. Nature as such for him lies somewhat off to the side and is not a real locus for the truth of salvation. Of course, the unique analogy he sets up between the divine being and the creaturely being is a main theme in Eckhart's theological-philosophical speculation. Because of this existential intention, Eckhart from time to time can say things in his sermons like: "In fact, seen in that light [that is, the pure light of God, the first purity] any bit of wood would become an angel . . ." (Q. 258; W. 2:64). Eckhart's main intention, however, is always the immediacy of God and soul, as the first clause of the citation, a conditional clause, shows: "Seen in that light . . ." (*Wer in diesem*

<sup>15</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht* (Stuttgart, 1952), p. 10.

*Lichte . . . ansähe . . .*”). In baroque mysticism nature as such gradually acquires its own reality. This is found quite explicitly in the philosopher and physician Angelus Silesius, whose experience of union with God in the spirit of Meister Eckhart allows him to transfer the being-without-why-or-wherefore of God immediately to nature as well. Thus the verse reads: “The rose is without why or wherefore: it blooms, because it blooms.” With these words Angelus Silesius comes quite close to the world of Zen. Zen itself, however, uses the following expression: “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” There is a fine, but unmistakable difference of tone here which needs attention.

Another poem of Silesius reads as follows:

The rose, which here your outer eye sees, has bloomed in God  
thus from eternity.<sup>16</sup>

Angelus Silesius says, with Eckhart: “What is in God, is God. In God everything is God.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the rose is transparent in its being all the way up to God. But this rose, which now blooms *without why or wherefore* in God as God, is exactly the same rose that “your outer eye” sees. The visible reality of the rose is a concretization, an incarnation of the life of God, as it blooms in itself without why or wherefore. But this is not the same as objective fact. In order to be able to see the rose blooming here in God as God, one must oneself die completely, “become nothing,” as Angelus Silesius says,<sup>18</sup> and be born out of God into God: “When you are born from God, then God blooms in you.”<sup>19</sup>

“The rose is without why or wherefore: it blooms, because it blooms.” In comparison the Zen expression is simpler: “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” The flowers in bloom are here immediately transparent all the way to nothingness, as this is depicted in the first drawing. There is no need for a *without why or wherefore* as a sign of absolute being. Along with this, nothingness has become reality as the flower also without any “because.” It is a question here of the concretization of nothingness. Angelus Silesius sees transparently through

<sup>16</sup> Silesius, *Sämtliche Werke*, 1:36, Bk. 1.109.

<sup>17</sup> Q. 167; W. 1:199. Silesius, *Sämtliche Werke*, 1:82, Bk. 2.143: “In God everything is God: a single little worm/is in God as much as a thousand Gods.”

<sup>18</sup> Silesius, *Sämtliche Werke*, 1:245, Bk. 6.130: “To become nothing is to become God.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:32, Bk. 1.81.



the rose all the way to God, so that God is concretized in the rose. Zen sees transparently through the flowers all the way to nothingness and nothingness is concretized in the flowers, so that the “death-resurrection” of the self takes place in the moment of looking at the flowers blooming. In looking at the flowers one’s entire existence is decided, whether one is aware of it or not.

For something in the West that would correspond to the Zen saying “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom,” one might apply Eckhart’s breakthrough to the nothingness of the godhead in concrete nature. However, such an application seems not to have taken place in Western intellectual history. For Eckhart, nature as such was not a primary locus for the truth of salvation, while in Angelus Silesius, the power for the breakthrough has weakened. (This remark is meant only in a typological sense and serves to define the locus in which the “language of nature” in Zen stands.)

Now as for “nature” in the language of Zen, we should keep in mind that we are dealing here with the Sino-Japanese term *shizen* 自然, or in the Buddhist reading *jinen*, a term which does not entirely correspond to the Western concept of nature. The word *shizen* (*jinen*) is composed of two Chinese characters. The first character means, in the context of the second, “by itself.” The second means “to be so,” whereby it has overtones of a certain affirmation. Thus, translated almost literally, the word *shizen* (*jinen*) means something like: “to be as it is by itself.” Here “nature” does not mean nature as the world of objects, in the sense of the things of nature. Nor does it point to a certain realm of being in its totality, which differs from God or man. Rather, nature is the truth of the being of all being, as this being exists by itself. In Zen sayings such as “the flowers bloom, just as they bloom,” or “the birds fly, just as they fly,” there is indeed mention of natural phenomenon, but the real point of the statement lies in the *as*, which immediately brings the person speaking into the picture. At the same time, the *as* means that when, in one’s nothingness and thus not from the standpoint of the ego, one experiences flowers as they bloom by themselves, this is completely different from the theory of images in an epistemological framework. In other words, when in the nothingness of the human being flowers bloom just as they bloom by themselves, the human being also exists in his or her truth. As a result, a direct, specific connection is

made between the subjective existential and the objective material on the basis of the selflessness of the human person.

The concept of nature in the sense of being-as-it-is-by-itself in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism is equivalent to the concept of truth in the Mahāyāna Buddhist conception *tathatā* in Sanskrit. Literally translated, *tathatā* means “such-as-this-ness,” or according to the translation of the Vienna Buddhist scholar Frauwallner, simply *So-heit* (suchness), in the case of the German phrase, “So ist es!” (“That’s the way it is!”). As the Buddhist concept of truth, the *such* in the *suchness* means both the unhidden character of the presence (“So ist es!”) and the original comprehension of the presence (“So ist es!”). It is a question of an original concept of truth prior to a differentiation between the truth of being on the one hand and the truth of a proposition or the truth of a perception on the other. Zen Buddhism puts strong emphasis on the double meaning embodied in this word *suchness* in that it renders the word *truth*, (in Buddhist Chinese *shin* 真 (true)-*nyo* 如 (such)) as *nyo* 如 (such)-*ze* 是 (this), corresponding to the original *tathatā* (but without the abstract suffix) and completely in line with the Chinese sense of reality. If “nature” has acquired the meaning of “truth” in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, it has done so on the basis of an interpenetration of nature and nothingness which is expressed simply as *as*. The “suchness” appears in the *as* in “the flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” Here we are concerned with the *as* and not the blooming of the flowers as such. Thus it would be no less beautiful, nor less true, if the verse were to read: “The flowers wither, just as they wither.”

And so in Zen one says: “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom,” while Angelus Silesius says: “The rose is without why or wherefore: it blooms because it blooms.” Everything here comes down to the *as* on the one hand and the *because* on the other hand. In his work, *Der Satz vom Grund* (1957), Martin Heidegger discusses this verse of Angelus Silesius in detail. We can summarize the basic sense of his interpretation of the saying as follows:

The why seeks a reason. The because provides the reason: the rose—without why, that is, the rose without the questioning after the reason, a questioning which explicitly evokes the reason. The blooming happens to the rose, in that it opens up

in it. Its blooming is simply opening-up-out-of-itself. But Angelus Silesius does not want to deny that the blooming of the rose has a reason. It blooms because—it blooms. This *because* names the reason, a peculiar and presumably very good reason. The *because* of the saying simply turns the blooming back to itself. The blooming is grounded in itself, has its reason with and in itself. The blooming is pure opening up out of itself.<sup>20</sup>

Commenting on this verse of Angelus Silesius Heidegger says:

The entire verse is so astonishingly clear and tersely composed that one might conclude that the utmost keenness and depth of thinking belong to pure and great mysticism. And this is the truth. Meister Eckhart testifies to it.<sup>21</sup>

If, according to Heidegger's interpretation, Angelus Silesius is concerned with "simple, pure opening-up-out-of-itself,"<sup>22</sup> this finds its immediate expression in the Zen saying "[they] bloom, just as they bloom." In the saying, "[they] bloom, because they bloom," the blooming is from the outset intertwined with thinking, namely through "the reply indicating the reason sought after by the why." At bottom, it is a question of something thought, as though the blooming were only possible in thought. In the Zen saying, however, the flowers bloom without being broken through by the thinking *because*.

Zen is not concerned with eliminating all thinking whatsoever. It is,

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen, 1957), pp. 70–73, 78–80, 101f.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> Heidegger's own reading of the above cited interpretation of the verse of Angelus Silesius is all the more original when he appeals to the "without why—because." Proceeding from the assumption of the "therefore—because" (*darum—weil*), Heidegger takes the word "because" and thinks back to the more original *dieweilen* (because), whereby *weilen* (to stay, to sojourn) suggests the old sense of the word *sein* (to be). *Weil* (because) means two things for Heidegger: *das Sein* (being) and *der Grund* (ground). "Sein und Grund—im Weil—: das Selbe. Beide gehören zusammen" (Being and ground in because—they are the same thing, they belong together (*ibid.*, p. 207f)). In this unity of being and ground can be seen the characteristic mark of Western thought in contrast to the unity of nothingness and the simple, which expresses itself in "as" (*wie*).

however, very interested in where thinking is established. Above all, it is concerned with how that which is to be thought about is given to thinking. Without the event of being given, there is no given. As the received, the given is always constituted by the individual and by thinking. But how is it with the event of becoming given? Is there no longer a return from the given to the original event of becoming given? Perhaps there is no longer a return back from the given, but the event does occur anew from time to time. To borrow a memorable expression of Heidegger's,<sup>23</sup> this event belongs "indeed not *in* the thinking but perhaps *before* the thinking." When thinking is established without any inkling of this "before," without knowing that the *simple* is primordially given to one as the unthinkable, that is, as that which is to be primarily and really thought, then everything opens up in thinking. As a result, thinking believes itself to be almighty, that everything is thinkable and can be made to open up in thought, instead of, for example, simply letting the rose open up in its blooming. This leads to modern nihilism. Things are different when one is touched by simple things. Then, as the saying goes, "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom."

Where is the human individual in all of this? Is the human being a thinking creature? Is not this saying itself spoken in human language where thinking always collaborates?

The human being has become nothingness (the first drawing), and this is decisive. But it is not as though one were no longer there. Quite the opposite, one is really there anew and able to say, "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom" (the second drawing). The human subject *is* the act of speaking itself. It is not as though one were the subject of the act of speaking; rather, one *is* the act of speaking as such. One is there, and at the same time one is the "there," the disclosure, the openness infinitely opened up through nothingness in which "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom" is articulated. In the open space of nothingness, the reality of "flowers-blooming" has become the phrase "the flowers bloom," a human phrase, to be sure, but one without any human interference. The reality itself has, by itself, become word. Nothing has yet come between reality and word. Hence the saying:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 69: ". . . this source may be mysticism and poetry. The one as the other belongs just as little in thinking. Certainly not *in* thinking, but *before* thinking."

“The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” Here the doubling of “the flowers bloom” means that reality is reflected in nothingness just as it is.

The human subject is there as the act of speaking, as the “there,” the infinite openness in which the speaking occurs. As we have seen above, the dual mode of Dasein (disclosure-doing) is nothing other than the selfless self qua movement, the movement to which openness belongs as maneuvering space and which in turn belongs itself to openness. In this sense Nishida speaks of the “self as place (locus) (*bashotekijiko* 場所の自己).” Nishitani has the same thing in mind when he carries Nishida’s idea further to claim:

We said that emptiness is the field of possibility of the world and also the field of the possibility of the existence of things. “Emptiness is self” means that at bottom and in its own home-ground, the self has its being as such a field.<sup>24</sup>

The human subject is there in that he says, “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” But as speaker, one does not insert himself into the spoken, into the articulated. One *is* simply the speaking itself. There is no trace of the subject who speaks in that which is spoken. This is what is meant by the selflessness of the human person. And this selflessness lets the flowers bloom, just as they bloom. And yet, as speaking itself, the person is really and truly there. One does not put one’s own autonomy of one’s self to a test by speaking of oneself, but in speaking of oneself one is making a new articulation, that is, one developed only by oneself. This is why the Zen master challenges the disciple in a particular situation with the words, “Quick! Say something about that!” Both the *simple* and nothingness are capable of inexhaustible articulation precisely because of the *simple*, precisely because of nothingness. Moreover, it is precisely in the unity and interpenetration of nothingness and the *simple* that the inexhaustible possibility of articulation, whose extreme range can be marked off by means of two basic articulations, lies. The *simple* articulates itself in the infinite openness of nothingness, as we have repeatedly heard in the saying, “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” This is one basic articulation, in which nothingness can be reflected on the now opened plane of articulation.

<sup>24</sup> Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 151.

As is often the case in Zen, this leads to the rather paradoxical statement: "The blooming flowers do not bloom." This is the other basic articulation. It is a statement charged with the elementary power of the negation of the infinite nothingness, and quite concretely, in that the negation refers to the very blooming flowers that "your outer eye" sees blooming. This concreteness makes the negation even more powerful than it is in the so-called negative theology.

"The flowers bloom, just as they bloom." These words of the *via eminentiae* are expressed in their own way in exactly the same place that the words of the *via negativa* are expressed in their own way: "The blooming flowers do not bloom." The two statements, whose juxtaposition is logically impossible, are interchangeable as a self-articulation of the locus in question. Each half of the double articulation is an expression complete in itself. In other words, the locus in question, or the basic relationship of the unity of nothingness and the *simple*, requires such a double articulation in order to bring itself to expression, whereby the bringing-oneself-to-expression (for the sake of being) and the taking-oneself-back-into-oneself of that which is brought to expression (for the sake of nothingness) belong to the dynamic of this unity. (This total context forms for Zen the truth situation for every statement—or in a more basic and real sense—for every one who speaks.)<sup>25</sup>

Between these two extremes, an inexhaustible variety of articulations is possible, so that everyone can find one's own articulation. The question is only whether a selfless person is "self" enough to really come to such an articulation.

We find a negative example of this in the following Chinese Zen story. One day Bei-chang received three jars of soy sauce for his monastery as a present from his master, Ma-tsu—what a precious gift for a poor monastery! Bei-chang assembled the monks before the Dhar-

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<sup>25</sup> As a formula, the saying "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom" can be used arbitrarily, but the formula makes no truth in the context of Zen. This is where the sayings of Zen differ from those of logic. In Zen the first criterion of whether one is speaking the truth or not is whether one can make a paradoxical statement on one and the same theme. But since the statement can be mimicked as a mere formula, Zen introduces a second criterion, namely, whether the thing in question really dwells in the locus of the double articulation, that is, the locus of death-resurrection and whether, accordingly, one can really say: "I die, just as I die," and at the same time, "In dying, I do not die."

ma-hall, pointed to the jars with his staff and said: "Who can say something about this? Speak! Speak!" There was no answer from the monks. Then the master broke the precious jars and went back to his room. That was surely a harsh measure; but we must not forget that it is in such a milieu that we hear the saying, "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom."

By way of positive example, we may recall that every great Zen master in history is distinguished by a saying uniquely his own. For example, one master says, "Distant mountains, without limit, green upon green." Another master says, "Every day is a good day." A third master, in a paradoxical statement, declares, "When a person goes over the bridge, the stream stands still and the bridge flows." It has gotten to the point in Zen circles that one thinks immediately of a certain Zen master when one of these sayings is cited. Such sayings are described in Zen as "the warmth of the skin and flesh of the deceased master."

Let us make one more point concerning the articulation of the event in a Zen saying. The Zen sayings cited above all belong to the first, immediate field of articulation, or to use an image, what is first articulated in the realm of Zen's homeground. The articulation of Zen goes further, when, for example, Zen finds itself in an encounter with a foreign spiritual and cultural world. As an example of articulation in the second, or mediate field of articulation, we may mention the philosophical work of Nishitani Keiji cited above, *Religion and Nothingness*.<sup>26</sup> This work presents a kind of résumé of the efforts of the Buddhist spirit to assimilate and dialogue with Western philosophy in the hundred years that have elapsed since Japan opened its doors to the West.

In discussing the double articulation, we singled out two radical statements, "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom," and "The

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<sup>26</sup> See footnote 24 above. As a student of Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, (1900–1990), professor of Kyoto University, was a leading philosopher in present day Japan. He belonged to the second generation in the encounter of the spirit of Zen with Western philosophy and religion. The publication of Nishitani's collected writings, includes works on Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, German idealism, Nietzsche, and others. English and German translations of the work *Religion and Nothingness* have given the Western world a permanent foundation for the dialogue with the spirit of Zen and with modern Japanese philosophy.

blooming flowers do not bloom.” When each half of the double articulation is made by a different person in an I-thou opposition, so that each declares one’s own articulation in the space of one’s opposite, resulting in a harmony of what has been articulated so differently (a concrete, social, interpersonal asymmetrical harmony that recalls the voice of infinite nothingness), then we find ourselves in the realm of the Zen dialogue (the third drawing). In our example of the Zen saying, this double articulation is described as follows: The *one* says, for example, as a heartfelt greeting to the *other*: “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom.” The latter greets the first person in reply: “The blooming flowers do not bloom.” A remarkable interpersonal harmony arises, as if in chorus, asymmetrically and yet for that very reason, in perfect correspondence. This kind of dynamic of dialogue laid the ground for the development of a distinctive poetry, *renku* or a linked verse, in later Japanese history.<sup>27</sup>

*The Dialogue of the I-Thou as Double Self*

Now that we have investigated the “language of nature,” we find ourselves in the realm of “dialogue,” in the realm of the I-thou as the developed double self, as we find depicted in the third drawing. However, as we saw above, what the third drawing immediately and explicitly describes is the encounter between an old man and a youth in which, at least from the viewpoint of the one partner, the youth, a dialogue is carried on in a different quality and on a different level than the dialogue as envisioned above on the model of the double articulation. The youth is not yet ready, not yet mature enough to carry on a dialogue of the developed double self. He is neither selfless enough yet nor self enough. He must first learn to carry on a dialogue *in* the dialogue and *through* the dialogue. But first he must become the selfless self; his closed ego must be broken through. That is the dialogue situation for the old man. What can the language of nature mean, then, when the old man answers the youth’s question about truth with: “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom”?

The statement “The flowers bloom, just as they bloom” articulates

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<sup>27</sup> On *renku* see S. Ueda, “Die Zen-Buddhistische Erfahrung des Wahr-Schönen, Part 2,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 53 (1984), pp. 225-40.



the *simple* in the infinite openness of the nothingness that the subject has become. As a result, the person reappears as the act of speaking, but *not* the articulated, where no trace of the person is to be found. For Zen Buddhism, the essential selflessness of the human is realized in this line of speaking. One has learned this manner of speaking, i.e., this mode of being, from the flowers which bloom, just as they bloom. Thus the saying has a further relation to human existence, not as an instruction or lesson but a more immediate relation. For the purposes of comparison, we may turn again to the verse of Angelus Silesius. As the second line makes unmistakably clear, the verse is an instruction for human existence: "It takes no notice of itself/asks not if it is seen." Only the human subject can take notice of itself and ask if it is seen. Thus the verse sounds like a lesson for living: one should take no notice of oneself, in order to live truly and essentially. But that is only possible when, like the rose, one is at bottom without why or wherefore. In this context, the first verse also takes on the character of an instruction: "Be without why or wherefore!" With Heidegger we can say that "man in the most hidden ground of his essence truly exists when in his own way he exists just like the rose—without why or wherefore."<sup>28</sup>

Such instruction is absent in the Zen saying. But that makes it possible for the relation to human existence to be even more urgent and immediate. In line with the *simple* in the infinite openness of nothingness, Zen is concerned with letting the power of the presence of the blooming produce an immediate effect on human existence. Zen has its eye on an original power of the blooming-as-it-blooms, in order to break through the closed human ego by means of the presence of the blooming, in order to make one open up to the infinite openness of nothingness. On a mountain together with his master, a disciple once asked about truth. The master replied: "Do you hear the brook murmuring down below?" Or again, it is said, the sight of the blooming of peach blossoms once brought a monk suddenly to awakening. In the case of the rose, Zen is not primarily concerned with a lesson for living or how a person should be, but rather with the immediate experience of how one is touched by things. In front of the simple fact, "the flowers bloom," the person is made into nothingness through the power of the presence of the sight and is awakened again to life by blooming

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<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, p. 73.

together with the flowers. In seeing the flowers, the event of death-resurrection takes place in the person, which is what it is all about. That is why the master asks his disciple: "Do you see the flowers bloom, just as they bloom?"

To draw another comparison, what we are dealing with here is different from what Jesus speaks of:

Observe carefully how the lilies of the field grow. They neither toil nor spin, but I tell you that even Solomon in all his splendor was never dressed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field . . . (see Matt. 6,25-34).

For Jesus the lilies provide the occasion to teach two things. First he exhorts: "Do not worry about your life." Second, he teaches about divine providence, how God who clothes the grass watches all the more over people. The language is simple, concrete, and vivid, and the content is crucial for the God-man relationship. A Zen master would proceed somewhat differently. He would simply say to the disciple: "Look at the birds of the air! Observe the lilies of the field!", without adding any instruction. He would not teach what one should learn from the birds and the lilies.

If these words, immediately striking and simple as they are, allow the presence of the flying birds and the blooming lilies to break through our closed ego, this could be a crucial beginning to true life, to conversion. In such a case, language becomes the self-articulation of the event, and at the same time is our own "self-awareness." The statement, "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom" appears as the self-expression of truth. The Zen master, however, prefers from the very beginning the indicative to the imperative mood. To the question about truth, he would reply plainly and simply: "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom," because the power of presence comes more forcefully to the fore in the indicative mood than in the imperative, which draws its power more from the command as such.

But why does one need the power of the presence of nature and the language of nature in order to come to one's self in the first place? Does one not already belong to a higher order than nature by virtue of being human? Indeed, one does. There is something clearly special about human being, as is evident as soon as we discuss the *true* self or its distortion. This is not the place to go into the question in detail.

Suffice it here to define the relationship between human beings and nature in the form of a thesis: In nature as well as in the human subject it is a question of the selfsame unity of nothingness and the *simple*. Whereas this unity is at work immediately in nature by virtue of its being nature, the human subject must effect this unity, for example, by means of dialogue. In its transition from the workings of nature to realization through human being, the unity undergoes an intensification from a simple unity to an enhanced one. The human person is just such an enhanced unity, which discloses at once the ambivalent character of being human.

(a) The human person is able, of itself, to undertake a process of enhancement that goes deeper into nature, so that nature as nature shows itself in the person, as we have seen in the example of the *as* in the Zen saying. One realizes one's own selflessness in nature thus revealed, in order to bring about, in an enhanced way, the open autonomy of the self in interpersonality as a double self. (b) Conversely, as is most often the case, the human person can set itself off, separate itself from nature, through this process of enhancement, distorting the process into the closed ego, so that one understands oneself, at first harmlessly, as the world's subject and nature as object. Even when seen as environment, nature remains an object, which then enters into the human constitution, resulting in a twisting of nature into un-nature. Finally, as the author of this distortion, the human person is drawn into the process and is de-humanized.

In this enhancement of the unity of nothingness and the *simple*, the original *simple* becomes either more simple—so that the enhancement becomes transparent and attains a higher tension—or is no longer simple at all, so that the enhancement, without the restraining power of nothingness, increasingly distorts and perverts itself. This ambivalence is already contained in the enhancing process and thus entails a decision between the true and the untrue or the real and the unreal. True enhancement, therefore, involves a correction of the distorted enhancement and a reversal of the perversion through the power of the *simple* which continuously draws its strength anew from nothingness, to which it belongs. The distorted enhancement no longer possesses within itself this power of the *simple*. It can only be corrected by the healing of nature, if at all. For its part, nature, at least as far as people

come to it, is always developed around the human into a distorted enhancement that goes all the way to the point of un-nature. In the encounter with nature *something* must come along to discharge the wholesome power of the *simple*. This *something*, however, cannot be controlled. It occurs when it occurs. The Zen master shows in an immediate way how this *something* can come about when he replies: "The flowers bloom, just as they bloom."

In the Eastern understanding, this way is also the essence of art, which in turn points to the religious meaning of art. As the poet Bashō (1644–1694) said: "The nature of bamboo must be learned from the bamboo, the nature of the pine tree must be learned from the pine tree. That is the way of art." Art is the way that leads us back to the simplicity of nature and from there makes us free for the self, for playing the role of the double self as the enhancing process of unity. It was of course Bashō who perfected the art of the *renku*.

Let us recall here once again that only in the total context of Zen do we find "Nothingness/Nature/I-Thou" as a selfless self that is movement, and at the same time non-movement. Here the language of nature is spoken as the language of freedom.

In closing, I would like to return once again to Meister Eckhart by recounting a legend about him entitled "Meister Eckhart and the Naked Boy."

[Meister Eckhart met a handsome, naked boy.

He asked him where he came from.]

He said, "I come from God."

"Where did you leave him?"

"In virtuous hearts."

"Where are you going?"

"To God."

"Where will you find Him?"

"Where I abandoned all creatures."

"Who are you?"

"A king."

"Where is your kingdom?"

["In my heart."]

"Mind that no one shares it with you."

"I will."

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Then he took the boy into his cell and said, "Take whichever coat you like."

"Then I would not be a king!" And he vanished.

It was God Himself having fun with him.<sup>29</sup>

That such a legend should have arisen is, in my view, very important for understanding Eckhart. May God sometime, somehow, have such fun with you.

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD F. SZIPPL

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<sup>29</sup> Q. 444, W. 3:138. [The three lines enclosed within brackets in this citation are missing in Walshe's translation but have been supplied from Quint's text.—trans.]