

Freedom and Language in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism

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IN THIS ESSAY I should like to approach the question of freedom, a concern common to both Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism, by way of language. In so doing, I mean to focus on the way freedom is explained and exemplified in Eckhart and Zen. The topic is a tangle of problems that really calls for a book—a book too big for me to write. Let it suffice here to make a modest beginning.

Part One

Who is Meister Eckhart? Let us begin by letting him speak in his own words.¹ In his late thirties, Eckhart wrote:

Therefore start first with yourself, and resign yourself . . . But what should he [a man] do? He should resign *himself* to begin with, and then he has abandoned all things (Q. 55.f.; W. 3:13–14).

A man should not have or, or be satisfied with, an imagined

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¹ Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigte und Traktate*, trans. and ed. by Josef Quint, 5th ed. (Munich, 1978), hereafter abbreviated as Q; Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, trans. and ed. by Josef Quint, Vols. I, II, III, and V (Stuttgart, 1958–1976), hereafter abbreviated as DW. [Citations taken from the writings of Eckhart are taken from the English translation of M. O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, 3 vols. (Longmead, Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1987), hereafter abbreviated as W.—Trans.].

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God, for then, when the idea of God vanishes, God vanishes! Rather, one should have an essential God . . . (Q. 60; W. 3:18).

He must learn to break through things and seize his God in them, and to make His image grow in himself in essential wise (Q. 61; W. 3:19).

. . . if a man were in an ecstasy as St. Paul was, and if he knew of a sick person who needed a bowl of soup from him, I would consider it far better if you were to leave that rapture out of love and help the needy person out of greater love (Q. 67; W. 3:24–25).

And in his middle fifties:

If God wills to give me what I want, then I have it and have the pleasure of it; if God does not will to give it to me, then I get it by doing without, in God's same will, and thus I take by doing without and not taking. So what do I lose? Really and truly, one receives God in a truer sense by doing without than by getting, for when a man gets something, it is the gift itself which is the cause of his being happy and comforted. But if he receives nothing, he has, finds and knows nothing to rejoice at but God, and God's will alone (Q. 111; W. 3:71–72).

Immutable detachment brings man into the greatest equality with God, for the fact that God is God, comes from His immutable detachment. When God made heaven and earth, it affected His detachment so little, that it was as though no creature had ever been made. When He became man, His detachment persisted immutably in itself (DW V, 541f.).

Finally, at the age of sixty he wrote:

So we say that a man should be so poor that he neither is nor has any place for God to work in. . . . Therefore I pray to God to make me free of God, for my essential being is above God, taking God as the origin of creatures. . . . Therefore I am unborn, and according to my unborn mode I can never die (Q. 308; W. 2:274–275).

What kind of man was it who could write such things?

Like his teacher, Albert the Great, and his confrere, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) was a Dominican, a professor of theology, and a lecturer at the University of Paris. Like Albert, Eckhart was provincial superior of the Order of Preachers. What distinguishes Eckhart from Albert and Thomas, however, is his committed preaching activity in the vernacular. Since the time of Dominic, its founder, the Order of Preachers has had as its primary task preaching in the vernacular and living a life of evangelical poverty, with the aims of protecting the faithful from heresy and converting heretics. Thus, as preacher, professor of theology, and provincial superior, Eckhart combined in his person the various dimensions of the order to which he belonged. In this respect, he is more representative of the Dominicans than Thomas or Albert—with one qualification. Although a high ranking member of the Order of Preachers, he was condemned for heretical statements in his Scriptural commentaries and sermons. Eckhart is said to represent the only case in the Middle Ages of a high ranking member of a religious order being condemned by the official proceedings of the Inquisition.²

The condemnation of theological ideas or religious movements should be seen as part of the effort of the Christian church (or of monotheistic religions in general) to maintain its identity in given critical situations and to renew itself concretely and effectively in history. So long as the Christian faith understands itself as belonging to history, this is not a matter to be taken lightly. The nature of the problems that lead to conflicts between heresy and orthodoxy also change in the course of history. In the case of Eckhart, three elements come together here which are crucial to our understanding of him: (1) poverty in the *vita apostolica*, (2) Aristotelian thought, and (3) freedom. Each of these questions had a profound influence on Eckhart's life and thinking, and he pursued them energetically, as we shall see below.

² On the life of Meister Eckhart see J. Koch, "Kritische Studien zum Leben Meister Eckharts," in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 29 (1959), pp. 5–51 (I), 30 (1960), pp. 5–52 (II), now in: J. Koch, *Kleine Schriften*, Vol. I (Rome, 1973), pp. 247–347; T. Beckmann, *Daten und Anmerkungen zur Biographie Meister Eckharts und zum Verlauf des gegen ihn angestregten Inquisitionsprozesses* (Frankfurt a.M., 1978); K. Ruh, *Meister Eckhart. Theologe-Prediger-Mystiker* (Munich, 1985).

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Church finally came to accept Francis of Assisi, the saint of poverty, after a century of combatting the poverty movement in the *vita apostolica* as heresy. This marked the start of a great renewal in the Church. Since the middle of the thirteenth century, Aristotelianism, with its idea of the autonomous intellect, had become an acute problem for the Church. In 1277 Siger of Brabant, a representative of a radical form of Aristotelianism known as Latin Averroism, was condemned. The adoption of the teaching of Thomas Aquinas as a standard, after it had been almost considered heresy in 1277, gave the Church a solid and lasting basis for the further development of theology and philosophy. These historical circumstances are so well known that they hardly deserve mention. We do, however, need to keep them in mind in connection with the events surrounding Eckhart. The Church, which accepted Francis of Assisi despite his "poverty" and Thomas Aquinas despite his "intellect," thus ushering in an age of renewal for the Church, the Christian faith, and theology, could not bring itself to accept Eckhart. In his Bull *In agro dominico* of 27 March 1329, Pope John XXII, who had canonized Thomas Aquinas in 1323, condemned Eckhart and twenty-eight of his tenets posthumously.³ That may have been the only possible decision for the Church at that time. But we must ask whether it is possible for us to understand Eckhart today.

The Problem of Freedom

Characteristic of the problems facing the Church in Eckhart's time was the spirituality of the "Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit" which came to be known as the "Heresy of the Free Spirit." The Church considered this movement extremely dangerous, although historically it remains rather unclear whether we are dealing with individual deviations or radical reactions of the Beguines or Beghards

³ Cf. Q. 449-455. The translation of the bull reads as follows: ". . . that Eckhart wished to know more than was necessary, and not . . . according to the guiding rule of the faith, because he turned his ear from the truth . . . tempted by the Father of Lies . . . this mistaken man, in opposition to the enlightening truth of the Faith . . . espoused numerous doctrines which obscure the true faith in many hearts . . ." The Latin text of the Bull of John XXII *In agro dominico* is found in *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. by H. Denzinger and A. Schonmetzer (Freiburg, 1976), Nos. 950-980.

or even of independent "foreign" groups or individual radicals.⁴ The lines dividing the Beguines from the Sisters of the Free Spirit seem to have been rather fluid. Strasbourg and Cologne, the two centers of Eckhart's preaching, were two great areas of tension. There the Dominicans, with the ecclesiastical assignment of tending to the Beguines on the one hand and the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit on the other hand, competed among themselves to win over both the Beguines and the "Simple Ones" (as the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit are called in the Bull) through their preaching. This was the milieu in which Meister Eckhart preached.

The "freedom of the spirit," or the *vrie geist* had become a kind of generic catchphrase at the time for things like the free spirit of the cities, the freedom of the religious movement of the common people, and the philosophical freedom of the autonomous intellect. Eckhart clearly recognized the necessity and significance of this movement and appreciated its understanding of freedom. For himself, the problem of freedom was a matter of harmonizing the freedom of the faith on different levels to bring about a free integration of social, philosophical and religious freedom based on the truth of God which "makes us free." The problem of the integration of freedom is no less difficult than the problem of the synthesis of faith and reason attempted by Thomas Aquinas. It is also far more dangerous, because freedom as freedom *from* and freedom *for*, eventually raises the question of freedom from God. Furthermore, the free integration of freedom cannot be set down in a system, but can only be tested by each individual through one's own realization of freedom. Eckhart boldly took up the spiritual task of dealing with the problem of freedom, as Francis of Assisi had done with the problem of poverty and Thomas Aquinas with the problem of the intellect in Aristotelianism.

"Freedom through detachment, detachment as freedom" was Eckhart's daring solution, where detachment meant "being one with God" rather than "union with God" (*unum et non unitum*). *Ledic und vrf* (unattached and free) is a basic phrase of Eckhart's, repeated in

⁴ Cf. H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (Hildesheim, 1961); R.E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1972); F.J. Schweitzer, *Der Freiheitsbegriff der deutschen Mystik: seine Beziehung zur Ketzerei der "Bruder und Schwestern vom Freien Geist"* (Frankfurt a.M., 1981).

almost all of his sermons in the formula of "entirely exempt and free, as God is exempt and free in Himself" (Q. 163; W. 1:76). For Eckhart, ultimate detachment means being free from God. It means a life without God (*āne got*), wherein God himself is present as a nothingness in himself.

It is not that God is nothing at all, but that God exists in himself as a nothingness. God exists, and exists as a nothingness. This is entirely different from simply saying there is no God—for the most part we neither know nor need to know what it might mean to say there is no God.

In the freedom of detachment, radical freedom from God was able to be re-integrated into freedom *for* God. This allowed Eckhart to say: "Man's highest and dearest leave-taking is if he takes leave of God for God" (Q. 214; W. 2:85), and again, "Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God" (Q. 305; W. 2:271). In his idea of freedom through detachment, Eckhart's aim was to revitalize the rigid formality of orthodoxy while at the same time to balance the one-sided radicalness of the heresy of the Free Spirit. The Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit thereby claimed to find confirmation and approval in Eckhart's words, even though Eckhart's goal was to refute them. "Some people say, 'If I have God and the love of God, then I can do what I like.' They have not grasped this aright" (Q. 291; W. 1:136). *Some people* here certainly refers to the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit, who were the target of Eckhart's refutation. But how did he propose to refute them?

"Whenever the free spirit stands in true detachment, it forces God to its being; and if it can exist without any form and without any accidents, then it assumes God's own being" (DW V, p. 541). This is a statement not from the heresy of the Free Spirit, but from Meister Eckhart, as is the following, which typifies Eckhart's realization of the truest and most individual freedom: "The just man serves neither God nor creatures, for he is free" (Q. 300; W. 1:143), "... I ... am neither God nor creature" (Q. 308; W. 2:275). How much significance Eckhart attributes to freedom can be understood from his statement that "God alone is free and uncreated, and thus He alone is like the soul in freedom, though not in uncreatedness, for she is created" (Q. 156; W. 1:59). With the clear-cut qualification of the distinction between uncreated and created, Eckhart thus says that God alone is like

the soul in freedom—an idea that is far from self-evident to the normal self-understanding of the Christian faith. Eckhart is concerned with a radical freedom based on the highest order of detachment, one in which the soul is free not only of creatures but also of God, in the sense of God as an object of understanding. In other words, it is a detachment in which the soul dies to its own ground (*grundtot*) so that everything that belongs to it as its “own,” including its attachment to God as “my” God is let go.

Ledic und vri are the words Eckhart uses. Actually Zen could take this expression over just as it is without adding to or subtracting from it. Indeed, Zen might even find that these three simple words *ledic und vri* say everything that it has to say.

But let us return to Eckhart and consider how being completely *ledic und vri* is realized in the human being. How can it be realized in the human being at all? Eckhart’s answer is unequivocal: only through “Being-One” with God. Again and again the point is made in the phrase, “entirely exempt and free, as God is exempt and free in Himself” (Q. 163; W. 1:76).

That “God and I are one . . .” (Q. 187; W. 2:137) or “. . . I and God are one.” (Q. 309; W. 2:275) is the basic tenet for Eckhart. But what does *Being-One* mean for him? This is the question we need to ask in order to understand Meister Eckhart. A clue to the answer is provided by his basic idea of “one and not united” (*ein und niht vereinet; unum et non unitum*), as for example in the following quotation:

As I have said before, there is something in the soul that is so near akin to God that it is one and not united. It is one, it has nothing in common with anything, and nothing created has anything in common with it” (Q. 215; W. 2:85).

The soul is one (not united) with God in that it is in itself “completely one and simple as God is one and simple” (Q. 163; W. 1:76). It is one with God, as he is in himself, “one and indivisible, without mode or property, . . . neither Father, Son or Holy Ghost . . .” (Q. 164; W. 1:77), and therefore correspondingly one with God. Hence to speak of being “with-God” is already to obscure the purity of “Being-One.”

What matters for Eckhart is to return to the point where “I and God” are *one*, not united, and to live there always renewed, always present. He speaks of “returning” because this is where “I was and shall re-

main for evermore" (cf. Q. 308; W. 2:275). Where is the locus of this *Being-One* for Eckhart? It is the "ground" of God, the God-ground, which is also the "ground" of the soul, the soul-ground. Only in this ground is the soul able to say: "I am." When Eckhart proclaims from this ground "I am" (cf. Q. 301; W. 1:143), he at once manifests the highest, ultimate freedom, the freedom to be from one's own ground. "I am," says Eckhart, without adding any predicate, without attribution. He does not say, "I am a creature," nor even "I am the only-begotten son" (cf. Q. 258; W. 2:63-64) "... since I am an only son whom the heavenly Father has eternally begotten . . .").

"I am!" The one who says "I" has nothing to call its own; it is even free of the properties of the *homo divinus*. Such a one is in complete detachment, in which all *eigenschaft* (a peculiar Middle High German term of Eckhart's meaning "ownness" or "possession-subjectivity," or in Quint's translation, "Ich-Bindung," (attachment), cf. Q. 159; W. 1:71) dies away. "I am" is spoken as the first word of the purely free life that has reached this state of supreme detachment. This is what Eckhart means by *Being-One* with the One. Freed through the "fundamental death of property" from everything that belongs to it as its own, freedom itself can speak. Thus Eckhart can say, "I am neither God nor creature (see Q. 305, 308; W. 2:271, 2:275). The negation of properties, at work as a supreme detachment in the phrase *neither-God-nor-creature*, goes the step further to let go of the negative predication: *neither-God-nor-creature*. Thus Eckhart can only say: I am. (This raises the question, Who is it that is saying "I am"?)

The words *ledic* and *vri* are found together repeatedly in the most diverse variations in Eckhart's sermons. Here is an example:

You must give up yourself, altogether give up self, and then you have really given up. . . . But if you have given up self, then you have really given up.

The man who has resigned himself is so purified that the world will have none of him. . . . The just man serves neither God nor creatures, for he is free, and the closer he is to justice, the closer he is to freedom, and the more he is freedom itself (Q. 300; W. 1:142-143).

The passage continues as follows:

I once thought—it was not long ago: That I am a man is something other men share with me; that I see and hear and eat and drink, this is the same as with cattle; but that *I am*, that belongs to no man but myself, not to a man, not to an angel, not even to God except in so far as I am one with Him. It is one purity and one unity. (Q. 301; W. 1:143)

The fact "*I am*"—it is Eckhart who is here saying, "I am"—belongs to no one but the one saying, "I am." It does not even belong to God—this is the freedom of the I am, except, as Eckhart says, "in so far as *I am one with God*; it [the *I am*] is *one purity and one unity*" (emphasis added).

In the same sermon Eckhart reminds us that the word *ego* (I) "is proper to none but God in His oneness" (Q. 302; W. 1:145). In saying "I am" for the standpoint of *Being-One* with God, who can alone say "I am," Eckhart is showing his concern with a language of freedom in detachment that entails letting go of oneself completely. The *I-am*, which is proper to God alone, is transferred to the soul, and transferred in such a way that the soul can now utter originally and from its own ground, and not in dependence on God, "I am." God and the soul are "one, not united" as this *I-am*. In a similar sense, Eckhart seems to see something in "freedom" that breaks through the framework of "created-uncreated" (see Q. 156; W. 1:59, cited above).

God-and-I or I-and-God as "one, not united." This is true *Being-One* for Eckhart. Now how can this *Being-One* be actually realized in the human person? *Being-One* for Eckhart is always a "unity in the process of realization" (*Welte*), a "unity with the character of an event" (*Haas*). According to Haas, among the various conceptions of event for this process, the most important are the metaphors of breakthrough and birth of the Son. Both lead to the desired unity with God.³ Why does Eckhart speak of the birth of the Son in the soul and

³ A.M. Haas, "Meister Eckhart," in *Große Mystiker, Leben und Wirken*, ed. by G. Ruhback and J. Sudbrack (Munich, 1984), pp. 156–170; cf. p. 165. On the teachings of Meister Eckhart see also: B. Welte, *Meister Eckhart. Gedanken zu seinen Gedanken* (Freiburg i. Br., 1979); A. M. Haas, *Meister Eckhart als normative Gestalt geistlichen Lebens* (Einsiedeln, 1979); D. Mieth, *Christus—das Soziale im Menschen. Texterschließungen zu Meister Eckhart* (Düsseldorf, 1972); idem, *Gotteserfahrung und Weltverantwortung* (Munich, 1982), especially III. *Ein Paradigma: Meister Eckharts*

of the break-through in the unity event? What kind of relationship can exist between Eckhart's two expressions, *birth of the Son* and *breakthrough*? What is there by way of interpretation in the texts themselves to help us relate these varied and often quite distinct statements of Eckhart?

At first glance the text suggests that there are actually two different paradigms at work. We see this in two entirely different expressions already cited: "God and I are one" and "I and God are one" (emphasis added). (1) "God and I are one. . . . The work and coming to be are one. If the carpenter does not work, the house does not come into existence. . . . God and I are one in this operation: He works and I come into being" (Q. 186-187; W. 2:136-137). (2) ". . . this breaking-through guarantees to me that I and God are one. . . . I am an unmoved cause that moves all things" (Q. 309; W. 2:275). ". . . so wholly one that when I work with Him it is not that I work and He incites me, but that I work wholly with what is mine. I work . . . truly with Him . . ." (Q. 402; W. 1:289). "Here I live from my own as God lives from His own" (Q. 180; W. 1:117).

Hence, the statements (1) "God and I are one," and (2) "I and God are one" each appear to belong to different paradigms. The first statement certainly belongs to the birth paradigm, while the statements in the second group, (2) "I work wholly with what is mine," and "I live from my own" come immediately from the freedom of the *I am*. Can the statements in the second group be integrated smoothly into the birth paradigm without modifying it significantly? With the aid of the excellent explanations given in his sermons, let us first investigate what Eckhart himself is trying to say with each of these two paradigms.

Lebenslehre; idem, "Meister Eckhart," in *Gestalten der Kirchengeschichte*, ed. by M. Greschat (Stuttgart, 1984), Vol. 2,2, pp. 124-154; W. Beierwaltes, "Deus Est Esse—Esse Est Deus. Die onto-theologische Grundfrage als aristotelische-neuplatonische Denkstruktur," chap. in *Platonismus und Idealismus* (Frankfurt a.M., 1972), esp. pp. 37-66; idem, "Unterschied durch Ununterschiedenheit (Meister Eckhart)," chap. in *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt a.M., 1978); B. Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart. Analogie, Univozität und Einheit* (Hamburg, 1983).

The Birth of the Son in the Soul

Haas writes:

In going back to the Christian tradition Eckhart was able to use the old theologoumenon of the birth of God in the soul of the believer in order to describe in a comprehensible way the same process of the union of man with God. He has worked this dynamic image and this reality of faith into his central doctrine."⁶

The question that concerns us here is how and to what end Eckhart has elaborated on the Christian motif of the birth of God.

In his German sermons, Eckhart repeatedly emphasizes that God begets his only begotten Son in the detached soul. For Eckhart the soul is thereby awakened to divine life. "The birth of the Son in the soul," speculative insight into which is entirely dependent on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, is experienced existentially by Eckhart as the sudden fulfillment of a pure and original life that is given to us as a grace when everything our own has been let go of in detachment.

The following quotation contains an excellent description of the event of the birth of the Son in the soul:

A. The Father bears his Son in eternity like Himself. . . . I say more: He has borne him in my soul. . . . the Father gives birth to His Son in the soul in the very same way as He gives birth to him in eternity, and no differently. He must do it whether He likes it or not. The Father begets His Son unceasingly, and furthermore, I say, He begets me as His Son and the same Son. I say even more: not only does He beget me as His Son, but He begets me as Himself and Himself as me, and me as His being and His nature. In the inmost spring I well up in the Holy Ghost, where there is one life, one being and one work. All that God works is one: therefore He begets me as His Son without any difference. (Q. 185; DW 1, 109f.; W. 2:134-135).

Everything Eckhart had to say on the idea of the birth of the Son in

⁶ A. M. Haas, "*Meister Eckhart*," p. 166.

the soul is squeezed into a highly condensed style here (note the progressive intensification of meaning given to the word *I*). The inner-trinitarian dynamic, which we see reflected in the first sentence applies directly to the relationship between God and soul for Eckhart. This allows him to make claims like, “Nowhere is God so really God as in the soul” (Q. 312; W. 2:196) and “God has no place more His own than a pure heart and a pure soul. *There* the Father begets His Son, just as He begets him in eternity—neither more nor less” (Q. 175; W. 1:111). In quotation A above, it is unmistakably clear: “The Father gives birth to His Son *in the very same way* [emphasis added] as He gives birth to him in eternity and no differently. He must do it whether He likes it or not.” This strong emphasis on the nondifferentiation between the Son whom God begets in the soul, and the Son whom God begets in himself unceasingly—Eckhart is concerned with the one and the same only-begotten Son—recurs so frequently and in so many different ways in Eckhart that there is no room for an interpretation that minimizes the nondifferentiation. The progressive intensification of the word *I* which takes the *Being-One* of the Father and *me* to its ultimate conclusion occurs solely as the initiative of the Father: “The Father begets *me as the same son; . . . myself as Himself; . . . me as His being and His nature*” (emphasis added). Eckhart then establishes what has been achieved in this *Being-One* of the Father and me: “*one life and one being and one work*” (emphasis added). Finally, Eckhart presents the basis for the total *Being-One* of the Father and myself, and again it comes from God: “All that God works is one: therefore . . . without any difference.”

Here is another example with a similar structure:

The Father begets His Son in the eternal intellect, and thus the Father begets His Son in the soul just as He does in His own nature, and begets him in the soul as her own, and His being depends on His bringing His Son to birth in the soul, whether He would or no. . . . When the Father bears His Son in me, I am the same Son and not another” (Q. 172; W. 1:285).

How was Eckhart able to speak with such confidence of the birth of the Son in the soul? For Eckhart, the only possible ground for the perfect *Being-One* of God and the soul that takes place in the event of

the birth of the Son is twofold: on the one hand, there is the boundless divine grace that bestows being and, on the other hand, the limitless receptivity of the soul in the nothingness which it has become in detachment.

This corresponds to the peculiar analogy Eckhart makes on the metaphysical level that has drawn the attention of scholars time and again.⁷ The absolute activity of God-as-giver and the corresponding absolute passivity of the soul-as-recipient lead to a perfect union, of which Eckhart writes:

For just as God is boundless in giving, so too the soul is boundless in receiving or conceiving. And just as God is omnipotent to act, so too the soul is no less profound to suffer, and thus she is transformed with God and in God (Q. 431: W. 1:22).

Now in order to receive, the soul must be entirely "empty" (Q. 114: W. 3:75); the individual "... must be free of whatever is to come in to him" (Q. 216; W. 2:87). It is worth noting that in this passage the first meaning of being-free—namely, receptiveness—is used, while in the phrase referred to earlier, "as exempt and free as God is exempt and free in Himself," a further meaning of *being-free* is suggested, in that God's being-free signifies no receptiveness. Accordingly, the challenge Eckhart makes to being-free in all its variations is extremely sharply worded: "... become pure nothing and go out of oneself altogether" (Q. 433; W. 1:40). "We must be dead thoroughly ..." (Q. 193; W. 2:246), we must die, surrender ourselves completely, take leave of ourselves entirely, hate ourselves, etc. But is this really possible for the human being?

Often I feel afraid, when I come to speak of God, at how utterly detached the soul must be to attain to union with Him.

⁷ See among others: J. Koch, *Zur Analogielehre Meister Eckharts* (Paris, 1960), now in idem, *Kleine Schriften*, Vol. 1, pp. 367–397; V. Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris, 1960), p. 312ff. and p. 169ff.; D. Mieth, *Die Einheit von vita activa und vita contemplativa in den deutschen Predigten und Traktaten Meister Eckharts und bei Johannes Tauler* (Regensburg, 1969), p.134ff.; F. Brunner, "L'analogie chez Maître Eckhart," *Freiburger Zeitschrift f. Philosophie und Theologie* 16 (1969), pp. 333–349; Alain de Libera, *Le Problème de l'être chez Maître Eckhart. Logique et métaphysique de l'analogie* (Geneva, 1980).

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But no one should think this impossible: nothing is impossible for the soul that possesses God's grace. Nothing was ever easier for a man than it is for the soul that has God's grace to leave all things (Q. 312; W. 2:196).

. . . the more a man gives up the easier it is to give up. A man who loves God could give up the whole world as easily as an egg. The more he gives up, the easier it is to give up . . . (Q. 359; W. 1:151).

Speaking of the incarnation, Eckhart describes the nondifferentiation between the Son in God and the Son in the soul as follows:

Why did God become man? That I might be born God Himself. God died that I might die to the whole world and all created things (Q. 292; W. 1:138).

People think God only became man *there* [in his historical incarnation], but that is not true, for God became man here [in this place, i.e. the soul] as well as there, and the reason why He became man was that He might bear *you* as His only-begotten Son, no less (Q. 357; W. 1:148).

It is of more worth to God to be born spiritually of the individual virgin or good soul, than that he was physically born of Mary (Q. 256; W. 2:61).

Thus for Meister Eckhart the absolute salvation-event touches every individual in a direct and completely original way, not first through the mediation of a savior. In recognizing the immediacy and originality of the salvation-event for every individual who is detached, irrespective of the form the event the "birth of the Son" is given by the specifically Christian concept of Trinity, Eckhart is close to the core of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the religio-philosophical foundation of Zen, which teaches the originality of the awakening of the individual. The same awakening to the same truth makes each individual the same Buddha, or an "awakened one," as the historical Gautama.

This similarity is still quite general in nature and risks becoming trivial if one specifically thinks of God as Father and stresses the specifically Christian nature of the event Eckhart is speaking of when he says, "God, the Father, bears his only-begotten Son in the soul."

(Actually, a similar idea, being born as a child of the Buddha, is common in Mahāyāna Buddhism.)

But the similarity becomes significant, if we keep our attention fixed on what actually takes place through the birth of the Son, what is going on at the level of human existence. Not that we are to reduce events on the divine plane to matters of human existence. Rather seen in the light of our existential reality, otherwise incommensurable events can be brought to light within our horizon of understanding and given a meaning more accessible to us—in this case, a rebirth into pure life through being oneself a nothingness. If we then ask, how is a rebirth possible without God the Father and begetter, we cannot avoid the further question: what—or who—is God? This way of putting a question about God, from outside as it were, is of course foreign to the Christian faith. Any comparison that makes use of categories like “similarity” or “difference” might sound meaningless in light of the ultimate, unconditional concern which religions deal with. But might it not also be possible for a religion to go into itself and open up a locus for unexpected contact with another religion?

Meister Eckhart, in the midst of union with God, asks the further question regarding self-awareness:⁸ “What is God?” He “quests on to find out what it is that God is in His Godhead . . .” (cf. Q. 206; W. 2:145) and “wants nothing but God, naked, just as He is” (cf. Q. 316; W. 2:105).⁹ Let us follow Eckhart on his quest by examining the text of his sermons.

We often come across statements in Eckhart about the *Being-One* of God and the soul that have a different ring to them and do not seem to blend smoothly into his doctrine of the birth of the Son. Consider for example:

B. . . . the masters say that the Son is God’s image, and the soul is created after the image of the image. But I say further: the

⁸ Self-awareness renders the Japanese word 自覚 *jikaku*, which means something like “to become clear about oneself in light of a space opened for the self.” Terms like self-consciousness or self-knowledge cannot convey the etymology of the Japanese *ji* (self) and *kaku* (awake). It is a question of awakening to the truth of the self, whereby the true self-less self is realized.

⁹ In Eckhart this is not the same as the “ascent of the soul to God,” which he prefers to render his own way as “birth of the Son in the soul.”

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Son is an image of God above all images, he is an image of His concealed Godhead. And from there, where the Son is an image of God, from the imprint of the Son's image, the soul receives her image. The soul draws from where the Son draws. But the soul is not suspended even there, where the Son issues forth from the Father: she is above all images (Q. 412; W. 2:326).

On the whole this passage is little more than an elaboration of Eckhart's developed doctrine of the birth of the Son. But look closely at the final sentence, where he says that "the soul is not suspended even there, where the Son issues forth from the Father." The quotation as a whole shows that Eckhart is well aware of the theological distinction between *imago dei* and *ad imaginem dei*, also that he sees this distinction violated in the event of the birth of the Son. This is why he can say: "The soul draws from where the Son draws." So far we have simply another variant of his radically developed doctrine of the birth of the Son, as we met it in quotation A. Then comes the line: "But the soul is not suspended even there, where the Son issues forth from the Father." The next phrase seems to imply where it is that the soul moves on to: "She [the soul] is above all images." *Above all images* means also above "the image above all images," as one can conclude from the context. As Eckhart himself further explains, "the soul knows one only: she is above form" (Q. 412; W. 2:327). The soul is concerned simply with the purity of the One, as another text helps clarify:

Where God breaks forth into His Son, the soul is not caught up there. If we catch something of God when He is outflowing, the soul is not detained there: all is higher up, where she outgrows all light and all knowledge (Q. 414; W. 2:329).

From these statements we can infer that Eckhart, while presupposing the "birth of the Son in the soul" ("where God breaks forth into His Son . . .") to have taken place, does not permit the soul to be satisfied with being the Son of God: "But the soul is not suspended even there, where the Son issues forth from the Father." Here Eckhart is implying that the soul has to press ahead to somewhere else. The *somewhere* is indicated by "the One," since in the first quotation the soul is above all images and in the second quotation it "outgrows all light and all

knowledge." When the soul has actually pressed on further, Eckhart explains:

C. . . . she [a power in the soul] does not lay hold of God in as far as He is good, she does not lay hold of God in as far as He is truth: delving deeper and ever seeking, she grasps God in His oneness and in His solitude, she seizes Him in His desert and in His proper ground. Therefore she does not rest content but quests on to find out what it is that God is in His Godhead and in the ownness of His own nature. (Q. 206; W. 2:145).

D. This spark [*fünkel in der sēle*] . . . wants nothing but God, naked, just as He is. It is not satisfied with the Father or Son or Holy Ghost, or all three Persons [together] so far as they preserve their several properties. . . . it wants to get into . . . its simple ground, into the silent desert into which no distinction ever peeped, of Father, Son or Holy Ghost (Q. 316; W. 2:105).

As we have seen above in quotation A, in the event of the birth of the Son, the perfect *Being-One* of God and the soul is attained through a gradual process of intensification taking place in God. How could Eckhart then further say: "But the soul is not suspended even there, where the Son issues forth from the Father," "delving deeper and ever seeking . . ."? This is too noticeably different to permit such statements to be integrated smoothly just as they are in to the birth paradigm, not even in the radical form Eckhart has given it, namely as going all the way to the ultimate *Being-One*.

Here in quotations B, C, and D, Eckhart is also concerned with a kind of intensification, but not as mere paraphrase of the first process of intensification from another perspective, like that of the soul. The crucial difference is that the process does go on here in the soul, while in quotation A it takes place in God. In comparison to the absolute passivity of the soul in the birth of the Son, the activity of the soul here is most striking. The soul seeks to penetrate to the ground of God. Are there then two different models in Eckhart illustrating one and the same event? Or can the event in its entire dynamic be somehow integrated into the birth paradigm? Or is it here a question of a further continuation of the birth motif? If so, then one would have to ask what

kind of continuation would be possible, since “one life, one being and one work” (see quotation A above) are attained through the initiative of the Father? Or is it a question of an extreme, albeit conceivable and perceptible reworking of the birth paradigm? Or conversely, is the birth paradigm enveloped by the wider breakthrough paradigm? Or is it a question of two events which are combined by the dynamic movement of the soul? But what kind of movement does the soul have then? What moves the soul? What help do the texts offer us for discovering Eckhart’s intent in this rather ambiguous context?

The Breakthrough

The shift of tone we have just observed in Eckhart is given a certain stridency when he speaks explicitly of “breaking through.” We must now see what kind of event this “breaking through” is for Eckhart. The following passages serve as good examples of his statements on the theme:

E. When I return to God, if I do not remain there, my breakthrough will be far nobler than my outflowing. . . . When I enter the ground, the bottom, the river and fount of the Godhead, none will ask me whence I came or where I have been. No one missed me, for there God *unbecomes* (Q. 273; W. 2:82).

F. When I flowed forth from God all creatures declared: “There is a God”; but *this* cannot make me blessed, for with this I acknowledge myself as a creature. But in my breakthrough, where I stand free of my own will, of God’s will, of all His works, and of God himself, *then* I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature, but I am that which I was and shall remain for evermore. . . . for this breaking-through guarantees to me that I and God are one (Q. 308–309; W. 2:275).

It is clear from the above that Eckhart is concerned here with a return in which the *I* does not remain with God to whom it has returned. (“But the soul is not suspended even there, where the Son issues forth from the Father”), but rather the *I* returns to the ground of the

godhead (cf. "delving deeper [to the ground]"). The "breakthrough" is the further return of the soul, from God all the way back to the ground of God. The destination of this further return is suggested by Eckhart as the "ground" of God, or as the "godhead." "God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth. . . . God becomes and unbecomes" (Q. 272; W. 2:80). With the return of the soul through God into the ground of God, "God unbecomes." The "godhead" which Eckhart expressly distinguishes from God is the "ground" of God *from* which God becomes *to* which God unbecomes, unbecomes, when the soul returns to break through to the ground of God. Although the distinction between God and godhead may occur only seldom, Eckhart himself gives it a critical importance in the breakthrough paradigm, both in a speculative sense for the idea of God as well as in a soteriological sense for the idea of the soul.

Speculatively, the distinction is connected with the introduction of the concept of the "ground" of God. Godhead is the "ground" of God, the ground in which God is not God (cf. Q. 305; W. 2:271). What kind of relationship can exist for Eckhart between the concept "ground of God," which he introduces in the sense mentioned above, and the concept of the Trinity, both in general and then as a determining element in the development of Eckhart's doctrine of the birth of the Son in the soul?

Soteriologically, the distinction makes it clear that the soul is concerned not only with the return to God but also with the return to the ground of God. But what does this actually mean for the soul? Drawing on citations from Eckhart's sermons, we have established above what the godhead, or ground of God is—what God in his ground is. Namely, the ground of God is simply "the One," into which "no distinction ever peeped, *of Father, Son or Holy Ghost*" (emphasis added). It is worth noting that Eckhart directs here the negative theology immediately to the Trinitarian concept. He uses metaphors like "desert" and "solitude" to paraphrase "the ground," which is simply "One"—"*of that* there is nothing to be said" (Q.273; W. 2:81, emphasis added). At this point another question arises: Can "the One" in its "purity" and "simplicity," the "One," which plays the crucial leading role in the breakthrough motif, be integrated into the concept of Trinity without either compromising Eckhart's statements concerning the Trinity or distorting the concept altogether? In brief,

can “the One,” which Eckhart uses for the breakthrough motif, be understood on the same level as the unity that obtains in the Trinity—*unitas in trinitate, trinitas in unitate in una natura et tres personae*? Does Eckhart’s notion of the “ground” of God still fall within the horizons of the notion of God according to which “God is simultaneously three persons and one”? If the answer is in the affirmative, then why does Eckhart speak in the above citations of the breakthrough to the ground of God, especially since the *Being-One* of God and the soul, as in quotation A, has already been reached by a direct application of the idea of Trinity and would seem to be radical enough? But if the answer is in the negative, then what is it that prompts Eckhart to go beyond the concept of Trinity?

“A pure One (*ein luter ein*)” is the driving force behind this further step. The importance of “a pure One” for Eckhart is clear from the way he refers to God:

“One God.” By God’s being one, God’s Godhead is perfected (Q. 254; W. 2:341).

“One God.” *One* is something purer than goodness or truth. Goodness and truth do not add anything, but they add in *thought* and when it is thought, something is added. The One adds nothing, where He [God] is in Himself before flowing forth into the Son and the Holy Ghost. . . . What does *one* mean? One means that to which nothing is added (Q. 252–253; W. 2:339).

If He [God] is neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one, what is he then? He is absolutely nothing. He is neither this nor that. If you think that he is something else, he is not that (DW I,522).

This is an unmistakable demonstration of what the One means for Eckhart in the breakthrough motif: The One is that which adds nothing and to which nothing is added.

The third quotation is especially noteworthy, since in this context “neither this nor that” is directly shown to mean “neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one.” The neither-this-nor-that negates not only the *esse hoc et hoc*, but also the *transcendentalia* (*Ens unum, bonum, verum transcendentalia sunt*). Given its purity, the One is no

longer like the “one” in the framework of the *transcendentalia* and can only be rendered as “nothingness.” According to Eckhart’s conception of the One, “by God’s being one, God’s Godhead is perfected” (Q. 254; W. 2:341), and he is able to see God there, “where He [God] is in Himself, *before flowing forth into the Son and the Holy Ghost*” (emphasis added). When Eckhart adds, “It is the soul’s blessedness that God is one” (Q. 254; W. 2:341; cf. Q. 123; W. 3:85), it would appear that for the sake of the One, the dynamic of God and the soul oversteps the framework of the birth paradigm, in which it is a matter of an inner-trinitarian dynamic between the begetting and the begotten. In the breakthrough to the godhead, however, what concerns the soul is how God is in himself, “before flowing forth into the Son.”

As we have shown, when Eckhart makes explicit mention of a breakthrough, he is concerned with the return of the soul to the ground of God. How can he speak of a real “return” here? Only because in the breakthrough the soul comes back to where it originally was. For the soul the ground of God is nothing other than its own ground. Thus, a return to the ground of God is for the soul the same as a return to itself. In quotation F we read: “But in my breaking-through, where I stand free of my own will, . . . and of God himself, *then I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature . . .*” (emphasis added). In the same sermon Eckhart proclaims: “*While I yet stood in my first cause I had no God and was my own cause. . . . I was a bare being . . . and thus I was free of God and all things*” (Q. 304), 305; W. 2:271, emphasis added). The context leaves no doubt that, as Eckhart would say, “the return to my first cause” is realized “in the breakthrough, since I am free of God and all things.”

When Eckhart makes specific mention of a breakthrough, he is concerned, first of all, with the further return of the soul through God to the ground of God, where God is simply “one” in purity and simplicity. Second, the soul’s return to the ground of God is nothing else but a return to its own ground, where the soul is in itself. It is a return, again in Eckhart’s language, to “my first cause, where I *had* no God and was my own cause.” The ground of the soul is truly ground only when it is the ground of God, but at the same time it is its own ground in so far as God unbecomes in his ground. In this way Eckhart thus sees true freedom realized in the breakthrough. Freedom, which has broken through the God-creature horizon and returned to its own ground, is

manifested in the expression "I am neither God nor creature" (quotation F). Third, the breakthrough is concerned with "a One," and no longer with the union of God and the soul. The ground of God as such is the ground of the soul, and the ground of the soul as such is the ground of God.

Fourth, as the language itself already suggests, in the breakthrough it requires a most vigorous and concerted activity on the part of the soul to break through something and to break through *to* something. This use of the term *breakthrough* as a "powerful" activity occurs in Eckhart's earlier writings:

[A man] must learn to break through things and seize his God in them, and to make His image grow in himself in essential wise ("Talks of Instruction," DW V, p. 510; W. 3:19).

The language in this quotation clearly shows the quality of the action of the breakthrough. For example, Eckhart says, "I break through in turn into Him [God]" (cf. Q. 290; W. 1:136). Or as he expresses it repeatedly in the quotation cited above, the power in the soul is ever "delving deeper and ever seeking . . ." The spark in the soul" is not satisfied with the Father or Son or Holy Ghost. . . . it wants to get into . . . [the] simple ground, . . ." In connection with this kind of action in the breakthrough, Eckhart speaks of "a power in the soul" or, metaphorically, of the "spark in the soul." He often refers to this "power in the soul" as reason or intellect.

Intellect forces its way in, dissatisfied with goodness or wisdom or truth or God Himself. In very truth, it is as little satisfied with God as with a stone or a tree. It never rests, it bursts into the ground whence goodness and truth proceed, and seizes it [the divine being] *in principio*, in the beginning where goodness and truth are just coming out, before it has any name, before it burgeons forth, in a much higher ground than goodness and wisdom (Q. 348; W. 1:298-299).

Due to the frequency with which it occurs, we may assume that Eckhart has a certain preference for the expression "a power in the soul" precisely because it suggests an unspeakable, inexpressible power that is not one of the powers *of* the soul but a pure activity of the soul as it gathers itself to *Being-One* in its own ground in order to ground

the One completely. This raises another question: How can Eckhart speak of a penetrating power in the soul, when the notion of the birth of the Son has to do essentially with the passivity of the soul? Given that Eckhart himself occasionally alludes to this power as uncreated, what kind of power can it be that he has in mind (cf. Q. 294, 302; W. 1:139, 144 etc.)?

The Relationship between the Breakthrough and Birth Paradigms

Having considered the birth and breakthrough paradigms by examining some of Eckhart's own statements, the question of the relationship between the two paradigms urges itself on us. To help make the problem more concrete, let us go back to the notorious critical problem of Eckhart's distinction between God and godhead.

Although Eckhart does not always distinguish between God and godhead, when he does, he gives it a critical importance. This is always the case in the context of the breakthrough motif. In the birth motif, in contrast, Eckhart speaks of God without calling on this distinction. The distinction we find in the birth motif also represents a unity—the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. This allows us to conclude (1) that God in the birth motif is not identical with God as distinguished from the godhead in the breakthrough motif, and (2) that in the birth motif, God requires the distinction in so far as the godhead in the breakthrough is characterized by the negation of the Trinitarian formula “neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost.” Keeping strictly to Eckhart's text, the godhead contrasted to God in the breakthrough motif cannot simply be reduced to the unitive element of “the three-person and one God.” Or to put it another way, even when Eckhart focuses his attention on the unitive aspect of the “three-person and one God,” he finds more than just one aspect of the Trinity. Eckhart's concern is not with any conceptual distinction between *una essentia* and *tres personae* in the framework of the doctrine of the Trinity, a distinction dominant in the theology of his time. Nor is he concerned with a real distinction in the framework of the doctrine of the Trinity, a distinction that was clearly considered heretical.

Eckhart's focus is elsewhere, and to follow him we need to inquire not into the relationship between God and godhead in Eckhart, but rather into the relationship between those cases where he does not

distinguish between God and godhead and those cases where he does. Eckhart's idea of God, which is closely bound up with his idea of the soul, functions within this wider relationship. When Eckhart makes the distinction, his concern is not only conceptual, but also has a soteriological significance that affects the soul in its relationship to God in a real way (though not in the sense of a real distinction in the Trinitarian conception of God). The sharp distinction between God and godhead in the breakthrough motif is not so much a separation as a kind of correlation. Eckhart states this in clear and concrete fashion when he says that godhead is the ground of God, all the while focusing on the movement of the soul to the ground of God, that is, to its own ground. "When I return to God and . . . do not remain there, . . . when I enter the ground . . . there God *unbecomes* (scil. into the ground of God)" (Q. 273; W. 2:82). Since Eckhart's notion of God cannot be explained apart from the dynamic of the soul, it is all the more important to inquire into the relationship of the birth motif and breakthrough motif, as well as how this relationship pervades the dynamic of the soul. Each in its own way, the birth and breakthrough paradigms include the notions of God and soul. We might even say that for Eckhart the two notions of God and soul belong to the self-expression of the two events of the birth of the Son and the breakthrough. Thus Eckhart's notions of God and soul can be approached as part of an "event." How can we best describe this relationship as Eckhart understood it?

Our formulation of the question is based on the assumption that, as the text shows, there are important statements in Eckhart that do not fit smoothly and easily into his doctrine of the birth of God in the soul, which is determined by his notion of the Trinity. These statements share a certain basic motif. For example, Eckhart says, "It is as little satisfied with God as with a stone or a tree." We want to know how faith can speak of God in this way within the sphere of activity of the Trinity.

Eckhart often elaborated on Neoplatonic ideas. Again and again the question arises: how do Trinitarian and Neoplatonic ideas work together? (This does not imply that the birth motif is Neoplatonic.) Actually, any connection between the two is tenuous and tends to dissolve quickly, so that it needs to be reestablished each time, sustained by the dynamic of the soul. How did Eckhart do this?

First we need to ask how to define the relationship between the birth

paradigm and the breakthrough paradigm in Eckhart. Second, since it is not a static but a dynamic relationship that gives the two paradigms a common orientation, we must clarify the subject of the dynamic. In the statement "God bears his only-begotten Son in the soul," *God* seems to be the subject of a process that also includes the soul. In the statement, "the spark of the soul penetrates to the ground of God," *the soul* seems to be the subject of a process that also includes God. Do we have a kind of transposition of subjects at work here? Or does the process as a whole, which includes both God and the soul in different ways, have another subject of its own? Do Eckhart's I-statements in the sermons—"the Father bears *me* as His Son," "When I return to the ground of God, there *I* am neither God nor creature"—give us a clue to this problem?

To clarify the relationship between the two paradigms, let us now turn to some statements of Eckhart in which we can see different forms and degrees of correlation between the two along the lines suggested above.

In the birth of the Son in the soul, Eckhart is concerned above all with the *Being-One* of the Father and the Son ("one life and one being and one work"), and not with the personal relationship between God as Father and the soul as Son of God. When Eckhart speaks in this way of the *Being-One* of the Father and Son, he is moving in the direction of pure *Being-One*, which motivates the breakthrough.

Similarly, in the birth paradigm, Eckhart is concerned from the outset with the return of the soul into God. The Father bears his only-begotten Son in the soul and "in that same birth the soul is born back into God" (Q. 206; W. 2:144-145, cf. Q. 397; W. 2:230, which speak of birth of the Son so "that the soul may return to God"). When Eckhart speaks in this way of the return of the soul to God, he is moving in the direction of a further return. He indicates this by speaking of the withdrawal of the Father "into the first source, to the innermost, to the ground . . . where He rejoices in Himself there . . . in unique oneness" (Q. 264; W. 2:251). The breakthrough motif is at work when the Father gives birth and withdraws at the same time into the hidden ground of fatherhood, and when the soul, now returned to God as the only-begotten Son, withdraws on the basis of its unity with the Father.

For all his emphasis on the passivity of receiving, Eckhart does at

times see an activity of the soul in the birth of the Son in the soul, whereby the soul gives birth "with the Father to the same only-begotten Son, and to itself as the self-same Son" (cf. Q. 163; W. 1:76). "In the same moment that He [God the Father] bears His only-begotten Son into me, I bear him back into the Father" (Q. 258; W. 2:64).

... the eternal Father is ever begetting His eternal Son without pause, in such wise that this power jointly begets the Father's Son and itself, this self-same Son, in the sole power of the Father (Q. 161; W. 1:74).

The soul brings forth in herself God out of God into God: she bears Him truly outside of herself (Q. 399; W. 2:233).

For Eckhart, being born as Son also means that "I may be a father and beget him of whom I am begotten" (Q. 258; W. 2:64). In this co-begetting Eckhart sees "a power in the soul" in action that comes to its full force in the breakthrough. Furthermore, Eckhart also understood the birth event with the with-one-another and the in-one-another of God and the soul as an event that takes place in a similar way in the breakthrough: "and just as He breaks through into me, so I break through in turn into Him" (Q. 290; W. 1:136). When God begets his only-begotten Son in me, he breaks through into me, and I break through into him. (Who is this *I* that is talking?) We have already seen the significance of "my breakthrough" (cf. Q. 273,308; W. 2:82,2:275) through God in the discussion above.

The context allows us to consider the problem of "activity-passivity" in the following way. Since no human, natural power of the soul can act to break through God, perhaps the only way we can understand what Eckhart means here is to regard this "power in the soul" as the power of the only-begotten Son whom the soul has received in absolute passivity. This is nothing other than the absolute activity which the soul has received in absolute passivity. In the absolute passivity of its freedom, the soul receives the begetting Father's absolute activity that is now established in the soul. Eckhart repeatedly uses the analogy of firewood to illustrate this transition from passivity to activity:

Fire changes into itself what is added to it, . . . The wood does not change fire into itself, but the fire changes the wood into itself (Q. 187; W. 2:137).

. . . till the fire gives birth to itself in the wood and gives it its own nature and also its own being, so that all is one fire, of like property, undifferentiated, neither more nor less (Q. 117; W. 3:78).

The birth of the fire (Q. 118; W. 3:79) means that the wood burns by virtue of the passive reception of the fire, so that "all is *one fire*" (emphasis added), in which the relationship of passivity-activity is suspended. "Thus are we also changed into God."

Thus the soul is united and enclosed in God, and there grace slips from her: she works no longer by grace, but divinely in God (Q. 407; W. 2:114).

The Father begets his only begotten Son in the soul. This is none other than the grace-event, according to which the human being is "by grace the same as God is by nature" (Q. 274; W. 2:89). This enables Eckhart to dispense with the breakthrough into a "sameness" in which the distinction between grace and nature is suspended. In his words, "But still the soul is not satisfied with the work of grace, . . . she must come to a place where God works in His own nature . . ." (Q. 406; W. 2:114). For Eckhart, grace is also a necessary presupposition ". . . and whoever does not follow [it] will come to grief" (Q. 406; W. 2:114). But it is also characteristic of Eckhart to keep on going to the point where he speaks of the "slipping of grace." Or again: "When grace had ended and finished its work, Paul remained that which he *was*" (Q. 308; W. 2:274). Here the phrase *divinely in God* is missing. Again we see the breakthrough motif in action.

We have seen various elements at work in the birth event projecting it towards the breakthrough. But it is not a question here of continuous movement in a straight line.

In the breakthrough paradigm Eckhart is concerned with pure *Being-One*, but in the birth paradigm he often uses the phrase "one and simple":

Go right out of yourself for God's sake, and God will go right

out of *Himself* for your sake! When these two have gone out, what is left is one and simple. In this One the Father bears His Son in the inmost source (Q. 181; W. 1:118).

From the theological standpoint, the inclusion of this "one and simple" in the *generatio* appears to be a problem. On the one hand, as Eckhart himself points out (DW II,241), the *essentia* involved in the *generatio* is the *essentia cum relatione*, and not the *essentia absoluta*, which for Eckhart still lies within the framework of the Trinitarian notion of "the simple nature" (Cf. Q. 180; W. 117). On the other hand, the inclusion of this phrase clearly shows that from the very beginning Eckhart intended to provide the birth event with a tendency to return to a pure *Being-One*.

From the outset, then, Eckhart sees something in the event of the birth of the Son in the soul as *event* something substantially more than what the *doctrine* of the birth of the Son can give expression to. In Eckhart, we can distinguish between the birth of the Son as event and the doctrine of the birth of the Son. When Eckhart means to speak explicitly of this "something more" of the event, he uses the breakthrough motif. The breakthrough is *not a doctrinal theme*, but has the definite character of an actual event. His frequent and direct reference to the word *I* in the breakthrough paradigm needs to be seen in this connection. Only in the process of its realization in the present is the breakthrough an event; only there does the event become manifest.

The question we began with, we may recall, is that of the relationship of the birth and breakthrough paradigms in Eckhart. We wanted to ask how to relate these two motifs in line with Eckhart's own intention. To this end, we first described Eckhart's aim in terms of our own interpretation of the two paradigms. In so doing, we found that something foreign to the birth paradigm seemed to be at work in the element of the breakthrough, something clearly guided by the notion of the Trinity. On the basis of the many texts examined, we are now in a position to offer the following conclusion. In the total context, when Eckhart has both motifs pass over back and forth into each other, he is basically concerned with a process of intensification that moves from the birth motif to the breakthrough motif. This process embracing and pervading both motifs may be characteristic of Eckhart's way of thinking, but it is not a clearly arranged, gradual movement according to

a concrete plan imposed from the outset. The intensification runs throughout the recurrent interpenetration of the two motifs and comes to a dramatic climax whenever the breakthrough motif is explicitly discussed. The intensification is twofold. *Speculatively*, it arrives ultimately at the concept of a pure One and a simple *Being-One*, which on account of its purity is described as a nothingness. *Existentially*, it is present in the impulse of the soul to take the ground of God entirely as its own ground, and, in accordance with the nothingness of purity, in its utmost self-purification through detachment.

The doctrine of the Trinity, Neoplatonism, and negative theology have each at different times had a deep and determining influence on Eckhart, and this is reflected in the various aspects and phases of his writings. However, as we have shown above, the whole scheme underlying the relationship between the birth and breakthrough motifs is uniquely and characteristically Eckhart's. Professor Nishitani captures the core of Eckhart's existential thinking:

The originality of Eckhart's thinking strikes us on a number of counts. First, he locates the "essence" of God at a point beyond the personal God who stands over against created beings. Second, this essence of God, or godhead, is seen as an absolute nothingness, and moreover becomes the field of our absolute death-*sive*-life. Third, only in the godhead can man truly be himself, and only in the openness of absolute nothingness can the consummation of the freedom and independence of man in subjectivity be effected.¹⁰

Here we see the same being-free-and-exempt of man of which Eckhart repeatedly says: "as exempt and free as God is exempt and free in Himself." As is so characteristic for Eckhart, the *Being-One* of God and the soul is here realized as the final consequence of the interpenetration of the notions of God and the soul. Indeed, we might say that for Eckhart, God is the soul of the soul, and the soul is the life of God.

This interpenetration of the notions of God and the soul means, first

¹⁰ Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated with an introduction by Jan Van Bragt and with a Foreword by Winston L. King (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 63.

of all and in general, that "wherever God is the soul is, and wherever the soul is, God is" (Q. 207; W. 2:145). As for the mutual life of God and the soul, ". . . there is something in the soul wherein God lives, and something in the soul where the soul lives in God" (Q. 340; W. 2:235). Eckhart describes the mutual breakthrough in a similar way: "and just as He breaks through into me, so I break through in turn into Him" (Q. 290; W. 1:136). Breaking through means breaking through to the *ground*, and here Eckhart's distinctive and all-important idea of the "grounds" of God and the soul, which correspond and belong to each other, comes to the fore. The soul breaks into the ground of God, where God is in himself, one and pure, neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost (see Q. 206, 316; W. 2:145, 2:105, etc.). This means that God himself cannot enter the "ground of the soul" "as long as He has any mode" (Q. 342; W. 2:238). "And therefore, for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties. . . . in that sense He is neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost" (Q. 164; W. 1:77). "There is something in the soul in which God is naked" (DW I, 525). Thus Eckhart uses the same terms virtually without qualification, including the same negative theological terms, to refer to both God in his ground and to the soul in its ground: "as completely one and simple as God is one and simple" (cf. Q. 163; W. 1:76). "Whoever would name the soul according to her simplicity, purity and nakedness, as she is in herself, he can find no name for her. . . . the soul in her ground is also ineffable," just as God is ineffable (Q. 229-230; W. 1:171-172), "free of all names and void of all forms," "neither this nor that" (Q. 163; W. 1:76-77).

"Entirely exempt and free *as* God is exempt and free . . ." (emphasis added), "as completely one and simple *as* God is one and simple . . ." (emphasis added). In accord with his doctrine of analogy, but on a higher level, this *as* in Eckhart characterizes the twofold but single event "birth of the Son" and "breakthrough." The nature of this event goes beyond allegory, but also beyond a mere identity. The *Being-One* of God and the soul is as "one and not united." God is in himself free and exempt; the soul is in itself free and exempt. This means that God and the soul are one and that *Being-One* and "being-exempt" are entirely the same. As for the relationship of the image to the original behind the image, both as this affects the Trinity and the relation between God and the soul, Eckhart sees an imagelessness

beyond all images, so that each image is ultimately the image of an imageless original. The original is given form in the image only in so far as the reality of "being an image" also entails the dynamic of the image's un-forming itself from what is imaged to what is beyond all images.

The interpenetration of the notions of God and the soul, as the quotations above have shown, follows a path of intensification that marks an ongoing grounding of God and the soul concomitant with their coincidence. The grounding of God takes place only in the soul, and the grounding of the soul takes place only in God. What is going on in this twofold grounding is nothing other than the self-grounding of the grounding self, which in turn affects Eckhart's use of the *I*. This latter question merits further attention.

The "I"

"I am," says Meister Eckhart. As God alone can say "I am," (cf. Q. 301, 302; W. 1:143, 144), so Eckhart says, "I am." By attending to his use of *I* as it appears again and again in crucial passages in his German sermons, we get some idea of what it means for him. "He [the Father] begets *me* as His Son and the same Son. I say even more: . . . He begets *me* as Himself and Himself as *me* . . . (Q. 185; W. 2:135, emphasis added); "Here God's ground is my ground and my ground is God's ground. Here *I* live from my own as God lives from His own" (Q. 180; W. 1:117, emphasis added); ". . . for my essential being is above God, taking God as the origin of creatures. . . . Therefore *I* am unborn, and according to my unborn mode *I* can never die" (Q. 308; W. 2:274–275, emphasis added); "While *I* [emphasis added] yet stood in my first cause, *I had* no God, . . . and thus *I* [emphasis added] was free of God and all things" (Q. 304–305; W. 2:271). "But in my breaking-through . . . *I* am neither God nor creature" (Q. 308; W. 2:275, emphasis added).

What kind of man must it have been to say such astonishing things *in the first person*? How was Eckhart able to talk as if all these statements referred to himself? Or, to formulate the question in a different way, just who is it that says "I" here?¹¹

¹¹ On the problem of the *I*-statement form in Meister Eckhart, see S. Ueda, "Meister

(1) The use of the first person in Eckhart indicates, first of all, that he is speaking directly from experience. Eckhart was able speak in the first person because he himself experienced what he was talking about. Eckhart does not speak *about* his own experience but rather immediately *from* experience. The experience itself is speaking, as if in order to become aware of itself and at the same time to invite others to join in. "For the man who has once for an instant looked into this ground, a thousand marks of red minted gold are the same as a brass farthing," as Eckhart says immediately following the quotation cited below from Q. 180 (W. 1:117). Only one who has had such an experience can speak in this way. But the mere fact of experience remains a generality, and of itself does not suffice to understand the form of the first person in Eckhart. The quality of the experience is crucial.

(2) Eckhart develops the relationship of unity between God and the soul both from the standpoint of God and from the standpoint of the soul. When things approach a climax, Eckhart almost invariably uses *I* or *me*, and does so quite spontaneously:

... the Father gives birth to His Son in the soul in the very same way as He gives birth to him in eternity, and no differently. ... The Father begets his Son unceasingly, and furthermore, I say, He begets me as His Son and the same Son (Q. 185; W. 2:135).

As surely as the Father in His simple nature bears the Son naturally, just as surely He bears him in the inmost recesses of the spirit, and *this* is the inner world. Here God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground (Q. 180; W. 1:117).

Why use the first person here? Talk about the unity is not an expression of the unity as such, since this speaking "about" already indicates a standpoint of discrimination that locates the speaker outside of the unity. If unity is really to achieve expression in a certain form of speech, then the speaker himself must be directly included in the unity, so that when the speaker speaks, unity itself speaks. This is not

Eckharts Predigten. Ihre 'Wahrheit' und ihre geschichtliche Situation,' in *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter*, ed. K. Ruh, Germanistische Symposien 7 (Stuttgart, 1986).

something that can be done methodically. When it happens, it happens. Eckhart's *I* is a sign pointing to the totality of the event taking place. Or, rather, Eckhart says "I" *in order that* the event as a whole can take place. Eckhart says "I" directly from that unitive totality of the event. This is what is going on when Eckhart says "I," and goes on in such a way that the unity itself speaks in the *I*. It is a question here of something that only comes to expression in an event when the speaker says "I" in unity with things. Eckhart's act of saying "I" is this unity-event¹² and it draws the listener into the event. But if this is the case, then there is still more to saying "I."

(3) Eckhart says "I" in order that the total unity of the event, which manifests itself in the "I," might take place. He is concerned with unity with God, who alone can say "I." "*Ego*, the word 'I,' is proper to none but God in His oneness" (Q. 302; W. 1:145). That is, Eckhart says "I" not only because of his own experience, not only because of the total unity of the event but rather—and this is crucial—because he is really and truly able to say "I." Eckhart says "I" because, on the basis of *Being-One* with God, he can in truth and in reality say "I." In "saying-I," "I and God are one" (cf. Q. 309; W. 2:275). The totality of the event, then, is already there in the "saying-I."¹³ Here ultimate freedom is realized.

¹² Cf. A. M. Haas: "Eckhart's *I*-statements as preacher are ultimately statements about God and his unity with him granted by grace" ("Meister Eckhart," in *Große Mystiker*, p. 162). In the *I*-statements of Eckhart we would like to draw more attention first of all to the immediacy of the *I*-statement as such, not to the "what" but to the "how" as such. When Eckhart says, for example, "*I* am neither God nor creature," it does not sound like a statement *about* "unity with God." Rather, Eckhart is speaking directly *from unity with God*, so directly that he no longer speaks *about* unity but is even able to deny the relationship of unity. In saying, "I am neither God nor creature," Eckhart, the one who is saying "I," breaks through the framework of God-creature with the sharp point of the "I"-language and finds himself "like nothing" and for that very reason "one" (and not united) with God, who is like nothing. This kind of unity with God, which occurs in Eckhart's saying "I" appears to be unique to him. How could Eckhart say "I . . ." in this way? What kind of person is this who says "I . . ." in this way? Who is actually saying I? Eckhart? Or someone else? Only by asking these questions can we consider what he means "ultimately."

¹³ Cf. B. Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 118f. With the aid of Eckhart's *I*-statements, especially statements like "While I yet stood in my first cause, I *had* no God . . ." (Q. 304; W. 2:271); ". . . I am the cause of God's being God: if I were not, then God would not be God" (Q. 308; W. 2:275), Mojsisch speaks of "the *I* as transcendental be-

Eckhart says "I" because he is able to say "I." This is connected to the fact that he can say, "It is true, and Truth herself declares it" (Q. 276; W. 2:91). It is also connected to the fact that in a variety of contexts he is able to use the formula: "The masters agree in saying. . . but I say. . ." (see. Q. 178; W. 1:115, etc.). "But I say . . ." This phrase is of course reminiscent of Jesus' way of speaking.

(4) Now as we have seen above, *Being-One* with God occurs in two ways, namely, as birth of the Son ("The Father begets *me* as His only-begotten son") and as breakthrough ("*I* am neither God nor creature"). As mentioned above, by virtue of being able to say "I," Eckhart says "I" in *Being-One* with God, who alone can say "I." In this, freedom is realized. The shift from the accusative *me* to the nominative case *I* is all-important in regard to freedom. To say "I" in the nominative case signals the utmost freedom, but this does not take the form "I am God [or the only-begotten Son]." That would be unthinkable arrogance. The change to the nominative case takes place in ultimate detachment, free of all attributes. Thus: "I am *neither* God *nor* creature" (emphasis added). For Eckhart, saying-I is freedom speaking from detachment (*ledic und vri*).

The Unity of God and the Soul

Let us now bring together the various elements at work in Eckhart's

ing." "As I, man and God are one, . . . The *I* as unity is being in which existence is nothing other than being on the basis of the self-sufficiency of being. . . . Eckhart, however, understands the *I* not only as undifferentiated but also as transcendental being . . . If the *I* is this transcendental being itself, then there is for it no God who, as transcendental being, could ground the *I*. . . . since man is an *I*. . . ."

But in his *I*-statement, Eckhart does not say "The *I* is. . . ." but rather says simply and directly, "I am . . ." Mojsisch is engaged in metaphysical, theoretical interpretation when he writes, for example, "since man is an *I*. . ." Eckhart just says "I am . . ." In our context, there is no question of *the I* but rather primarily the act of saying "I," the *I*-statement as such in the present act by the one himself who says "I am . . ." There is no "Eckhart's theory of the I" at work here. The "theory of the I" and the present act of saying "I" function at different levels and from different standpoints. Better to look at particular occurrences of his *I*-statements in context and ask: What kind of event is actually taking place here? Why does Eckhart have to speak here in the form of the *I*-statement? Only then will we be ready to develop a possible "theory of the I" in Eckhart's *I*-statement.

thought. The complex of statements on the topic of the "unity (or union) of God and soul" in Eckhart is permeated by two motifs inextricably entwined with each other: the birth motif and the breakthrough motif. The first means to be born by the Father as the only-begotten Son; the second, to return to the One in itself, to the pure, simple One. Guided primarily by their own internal structure and yet comprising each in their own way the entire thematic of the three-in-one and the entire thematic of the one-unity, the two paradigms of birth and breakthrough represent the totality of the event as it appears in the most diverse contexts. The first paradigm also includes *Being-One* either as the unity of the Father and Son or as the ground from which the Father begets the only-begotten Son. The second paradigm includes the concept of Trinity in order to negate it, and in that way to open up a space for the further return of the soul to its original ground. As a result, one can speak of the *further* return of the soul, since Eckhart leaves the question of the basis of the Father-Son relationship open, but in the Father-Son relationship he sees the Father who begets as the ground of the Son who is begotten.

Looked at in this way, the two paradigms are essentially different, even though they do have certain connections with each other. In regard to the notion of God, for example, the God who is "three persons and one" is determinative for the birth paradigm, while in the breakthrough paradigm the decisive factor is the differentiation between God and godhead. For Eckhart the godhead in the breakthrough paradigm is not the same as the "one nature" of the "two persons" and cannot be integrated smoothly into the notion of the Trinity. From the viewpoint of the soul, the important element in the birth motif is the absolute passivity of receiving present in being-free, while in the breakthrough paradigm it is the activity of penetrating into the ground of God, into that purity where the soul is free also of what it has received, that is central. There is, however, a connection, a necessary connection, both in the notion of God and in the case of the soul. In the notion of God, "the simple One" is attached to the unity of the Trinity, but is actually the direct reverse of the unity of the Trinity. When Eckhart speaks of this unity, he is thinking immediately of a simple One in which neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost exist. The unity of the Trinity is charged from the very beginning with a Neoplatonic sense for Eckhart. In the case of the soul, absolute

passivity experiences its transformation into absolute activity precisely because of the absolute passivity.

The leitmotif of the birth paradigm is birth from the Father, that of the breakthrough paradigm is the return to the One. Does this mean we are dealing here with two different events brought together into one context in somewhat gradual stages? Or are they two different aspects of a single event?

“. . . one and simple. In this One the Father bears His Son in the inmost source” (Q. 181; W. 1:118). “I declare God could never beget His only-begotten Son if He were not one” (Q. 254; W. 2:341). If we focus on these words, Eckhart would seem to be concerned with *one* and the same dynamic for both birth *and* breakthrough. *In this One* the Father begets his Son. If this is so, then the only-begotten Son is endowed from the very beginning with the dynamics of the return *to the One*. Both of these processes—being begotten by God and returning to the One—occur in one dynamic movement, transtemporal but oriented in two opposite directions. One could almost say that to be begotten by the Father means to return to the One. The locus of the birth and the return, however, do not overlap entirely, since in the case of the One it is a question of “a simple One,” as Eckhart says, a One that is “neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost.” Accordingly, a return to the One, in which and from which the Father begets his Son, entails transcending the bounds of the Trinity a second time. This is nothing other than the event that Eckhart speaks of as a “breakthrough” because of the particular way it is carried out. Here it is a matter of coming back *through something* that was blocking the path of the soul, now the only-begotten Son. What does Eckhart intend by this obstruction? Simply this: being-Son, as the Son is *called Son* (not *being-Son* but being-Son). Being-Son is one with being-Father; they are one being (cf. Q. 185; W. 2:135). The *Being-One* of Father and Son, however, is not simply a unity as long as the Father is called Father and the Son is called Son. When the Son is called Son, the soul remains attached to being-Son. Therefore, the return to the One must be realized in a “neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost.” With this negation the ultimate self-negation of the soul as the only-begotten Son the soul breaks through the bounds of the Trinity where Father is called Father and Son is called Son, and breaks through to the One. In this dynamic context the “neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost” is not merely a

negative-theological term, but rather a realization of the self-negation of the Son himself. It is a lived "negative theology," lived through death at the ground. We are really dealing here with *one* dynamic of birth *and* breakthrough, but it is not a smooth circular movement "born from God back to the One." For the breakthrough that is an intrinsic part of this one motion is realized through negation and hence can fail to materialize. Eckhart says, "when I return to God, if I do not remain there . . ." (Q. 273; W. 2:82), because it can happen that the soul "remains there," "is suspended there" (Q. 412; W. 2:326). If the soul remains there, if the soul is suspended there, then the breakthrough appears to the soul as a further, second stage, wherein the soul actually lacks the "power" for the breakthrough, because the soul suspended there is no longer the only-begotten Son. The breakthrough, which represents a returning to the Father-Son relationship and thus entails transcending the bounds of the Trinity, contains a "bit" more, indeed significantly more than the birth, which is a matter of becoming Son and thus a matter of entering into the bounds of the Trinity. Still, either the breakthrough occurs together with the birth or it does not occur at all. What is more, for Eckhart the birth of the Son in the soul also fails to take place if the soul "stops" halfway. For Eckhart all of this is nothing else but a consequence of the *Being-One* of the Father and Son in the birth of the Son in the soul.

"The birth of the Son" and "breakthrough" are not two different aspects of a single event, nor are they two different events. They are a *double event occurring along the same line of intensification*. The gradation of this line, which shows up stylistically both in the birth paradigm and breakthrough paradigm, as well as in the relationship between the two, is originally really the expression of the further self-grounding of the continually grounding self which grounds the ground of God, and at the same time it is the ground of the soul. In the being-in-each-other and interpenetration of the birth and breakthrough, we find a turnabout and an intensification in the line from the birth to the breakthrough. We see this turnabout reflected in the linguistic transposition from "me" to "I," when, in reference to the birth, Eckhart says, "The Father bears *me* as the only-begotten Son," and in reference to the breakthrough, "*I* am neither God nor creature." The linguistic transposition from *me* to *I* here is bound up very closely with the problem of freedom. In this process of intensification, nearly every

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basic term in Eckhart carries a double meaning. To be free means to be empty, as in the receptivity of the birth paradigm; and at the same time it means to be free of God, as in the purity of the breakthrough paradigm.

Thus there is a double event taking place on the same line of intensification. What Eckhart sees in the event of the birth is already *more than* the doctrine of the birth of the Son in the soul and leads to the breakthrough on the same line. When we keep our attention on the essential core permeating the complicated connections between birth and breakthrough, we notice a far-reaching affinity of thought between Eckhart and Zen Buddhism. It is very possible to understand all these connections from the aspect of the "birth of the Son in the soul," which, given the notion of Trinity that guides it, can only be unqualifiedly Christian. But then we would have to accept all of Eckhart's radical statements about the birth of the Son without qualification. In the process, we might get an insight into why Eckhart was condemned in his own day as heretical or for suspicion of heresy, even if we do not join in the condemnation. At the very least, we would not be able to avoid the problem of heresy in Eckhart. If we stress the Christianity in Eckhart without trying to distance him from Zen Buddhism, then we must measure and test Eckhart according to Christianity as it is formally expressed in the articles of faith. Eckhart might then still appear heretical today as long as we do not ignore or water down his radical statements. That, too, would be an interpretation of Meister Eckhart. But is not Eckhart himself concerned precisely with breaking through this certainty from within (and not relativizing it from without) because of the absoluteness of the absolute that God is in himself? One of his basic phrases points to this: "to take leave of God for God's sake," which for him means the ultimate being-free-and-exempt. This brings him to a new level of concreteness, as we shall see below.

Laying out the essentials of Eckhart's thought as we have just done, the affinities with Zen Buddhism stand out more clearly, if only to one who is well versed in Zen. Eckhart's main concern is the "nothingness of the godhead" and the detachment that this entails. To outline only the main points of convergence here without repeating what has already been said: (1) the self-grounding of the self grounding the ground of God as well as the ground of the soul. (In Zen this is called

grounding of the self.) (2) This grounding is set into motion by the return to the original ground, where I am "when I was not yet." (In Zen this is called return to the home where I was "before my parents were born.") (3) The purity of the original ground, which for Eckhart is simple and one and hence termed the "nothingness" into which God unbecomes. (Zen speaks of this as "wide open, nothing holy.") The detachment of the soul corresponding to the purity of the original ground, or the nothingness lived through fundamental death. (In Zen this is called the Great Death, detachment, letting go, the nothingness of the human.) (5) "Living without why and wherefore," which arises in the original ground. (In Zen this is called entering the marketplace.)

These five points of convergence are in the character of an event or realization for both Eckhart and Zen. If we had to sum up their affinity in a single term, it would be "free and exempt" (*ledig und frei*).

The Unity of Negation and Affirmation

Let us now consider what kind of relationship to reality these connections open up for Eckhart. In life "without God" (*leben ane got*) in the breakthrough motif, Eckhart links the nothingness of the godhead directly to his idea of the *vita activa* in the daily reality of life and the world.¹⁴ In his quite characteristic interpretation of the pericope of Martha and Mary (Luke 10,38-40) Eckhart sees perfection in Martha who works in the kitchen to take care of the guest, but not in Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him talk. Martha works in the kitchen and frets over what is going on inside her sister. For Eckhart the essence of God, or the nothingness of the godhead, is present very concretely in Martha. In his interpretation of the passage, Eckhart is trying to transcend the standpoint of "union-mysticism." Viewed from the standpoint of the birth paradigm, the Martha figure also serves as the

¹⁴ DW III, Predigt 86. Cf. Nishitani Keiji, *Kami to zettai mu* 神と絶対無 [God and Absolute Nothingness] (Tokyo, 1948). This work of Nishitani on Meister Eckhart and German mysticism is the pioneering Japanese monograph on Eckhart. Here for the first time, as far as I know, the sermon in question was interpreted in detail and integrated into a general interpretation of Eckhart. There is now also a German monograph on this theme: D. Mieth, *Die Einheit von vita activa und vita contemplativa in den deutschen Predigten und Traktaten Meister Eckharts und bei Johannes Tauler. Untersuchungen zur Struktur des christlichen Lebens* (Regensburg, 1969).

further concretization of the incarnation of God, without the rest of the godhead becoming *a man*.

In its existential reality, detachment displays a process that moves through a radically realized detachment back to the original, ineffable, pure ground of being and from there back into the *vita activa*, back into the reality of the world and life. There is a double return going on here, back to the original ground and back to reality in one process of realization. We may call this process a lived unity of negation and affirmation, or a union of nothingness and the here-and-now of the present.

Zen Buddhism is also concerned with this unity. But Zen carries out the negation and the affirmation more radically than Eckhart does. This is already apparent in the fact that Zen Buddhism is concerned purely with nothingness, while Eckhart speaks of the nothingness of the godhead. In Eckhart nothingness is in the end the sum total of all negative expressions for the unspeakable, ineffable purity of the essence of God in the manner of negative theology. "God is something, but neither this nor that which man is able to say." Therefore God is a nothingness, that is to say, God is (God is being itself), and for that very reason, God is as a nothingness for man. The negation is directed toward the human individual. Thus there is a double duality at work here: "being and nothingness" and "God and man." In contrast, for Zen nothingness is always and forever a question of breaking through every form of duality. It is a kind of "double forgetfulness." Viewed in terms of its negations, Eckhart's is a negative theology, however radically he pursues it. But Zen's concern is more like a "theology of nothingness," if such an odd phrase may be permitted. The same thing can be said of the affirmations of each. When Eckhart returns to affirming God, he does so only through the mediation of God as the first affirmation. Eckhart does not come to this affirmation without speaking of God. "All creatures are green in God" (Q. 413; W. 2:327). "In fact, seen in that [divine] light, any bit of wood would become an angel . . ." (Q. 258; W. 2:64). That is a great affirmation of the wood, as an angel in the divine light. Zen, with its simple nothingness, also keeps its affirmation simple: "The mountains as mountains, water as water, that which is long as long, that which is short as short." "O wonder! to draw water and carry wood." For Zen, free coming-and-going between infinite nothingness and the immediate

here-and-now of the present is the freedom of the selfless self. To Eckhart's existential way of thinking, the notion of the Trinity is decisive and in the final analysis the category "the One" is crucial. "Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one." "This One is neither Father nor Son nor Holy Ghost." In line with his idea of the radical imagelessness and formlessness of the pure, simple One, Eckhart demands a radical un-forming of the soul, which takes place in and as infinite "leave-taking." "Taking leave of oneself," "taking leave of creatures," "taking leave of God for God's sake"—for God's sake, who is so pure in himself that even the term "for God's sake" obfuscates the reality. Once again we come across the phrase "taking leave of God," but this time it is "for the sake of the reality of the world and life." This movement, which begins from "leave-taking," is such that the essence of God that takes leave of "leave-taking" and this in turn means one who takes leave of oneself becomes real (in his sermon on "Mary and Martha," Eckhart says "Martha stood there in her essence.") "Leave-taking" thus gives Eckhart's thought an extremely dynamic character, which corresponds to the Zen Buddhist unity of negation and affirmation. In Zen, however, the reach of the unity in question is greater than it is in Eckhart. This is due to the concrete use it makes of Mahayana's de-substantializing idea of relationship, which employs the category of "emptiness" in contrast to the role of the "One" in Eckhart. The range and nature of the conceptualities that bring the movement to "self-awareness" are indeed different in Zen and Eckhart, but we find the same realization of existence and the existential mode of thinking in both.

Rudolf Otto, the Marburg theologian, philosopher of religion, and specialist in Asian religions, turned his attention to the affinity between Meister Eckhart and the "old Zen masters" at a time when Zen was still scarcely known in the West. In the appendix to his famous book *West-Östliche Mystik* (1926) Otto says that access to the "unique world of experience" of Zen Buddhism can be gained "from our standpoint only from Eckhart, and only through some of his most peculiar and most profound moments."¹⁵

From the Japanese perspective, Nishitani Keiji points out in the

¹⁵ R. Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik*, 3d ed., revised by G. Mensching (Munich, 1971), p. 269.

MEISTER ECKHART AND ZEN

Foreword to his monumental work on Meister Eckhart, *Kami to zettai mu (God and Absolute Nothingness)* (1948):

The title *God and Absolute Nothingness* is meant to indicate that Eckhart's Christian experience contains something corresponding to the Buddhist experience. This seems to me to be very important for the present situation. Where the historical limitations of these very different spiritual worlds have been broken through, there can be found the starting points of original religious experience, as it is predisposed in the human being as such.¹⁶

Another voice from the Western world on this topic is the Freiburg theologian and philosopher of religion, Bernhard Welte. In his book *Meister Eckhart, Gedanken zu seinen Gedanken* (1979), he indicates several analogies between Meister Eckhart and certain areas of Zen Buddhism:

It seems to be of great significance that, from origins completely independent of each other, and quite historically and spatially separated from each other, analogous movements of the spirit appear. In an age when cultures are drawing closer and closer together, it is important to see that such origins which are totally independent of each other are able to make signals to each other and to recognize that some analogies suggest themselves for further consideration.¹⁷

Today Zen Buddhism is rather well known in the Western world. At the same time, as is only to be expected, attempts to distance Meister Eckhart from Zen Buddhism are being stepped up. This makes the question more and more urgent: What is Zen Buddhism? Or (just as one can distinguish between Christendom and Christian faith), what is Zen?

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD F. SZIPPL

¹⁶ K. Nishitani, *Kami to zettai mu*, p. 4 of the original (trans. by Ueda Shizuteru). See also note 14 above.

¹⁷ B. Welte, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 110. See especially the chapters "Das Durchbruch: Gott als das Nichts der Abgeschiedenheit" (The Breakthrough: God as the Nothingness of Detachment) and "Die Dinge der Welt in Gott" (The Things of the World in God).