

# Ascent and Descent

## Zen Buddhism in Comparison with Meister Eckhart

### PART TWO

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THE MARBURG THEOLOGIAN and philosopher of religion, Rudolph Otto, a great authority on East Asian religiosity, once wrote a short, very important article on Zen Buddhism, prompted by the reading of a short Zen text, *The Ox and His Herdsman*, in D. T. Suzuki's then current English translation and commentary. The article is to be found in one of the appendices to his *West-Östliche Mystik* (1926), in which Meister Eckhart on the one hand and Śaṅkara on the other are examined in depth. There we read:

Suzuki attempts to bring the strange experience of a mysticism of a quite distinctive character closer to us Westerners, a mysticism to which from our standpoint we can only gain access through Eckhart, and only through some of his rarest and most profound moments.<sup>10</sup>

The experience of the old Zen masters is over and again, however high one might climb, "open upwards," without so much as an ideogram to enclose its openness. In this respect they are much more similar to our own German mysticism, as given to us by Meister Eckhart, than to that of the Vedanta (of Śaṅkara). We still interpret Eckhart according to Plotinus' thought, and his highest *Formulas* are also Plotinian. But according to Plotinus, if the soul in

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik*, third edition, revised by G. Mensching (Verlag G. H. Beck, Munich, 1971), p. 269. This appendix is omitted in the English translation.

its flight “of the lonely to the lonely” arrives at the Eternal One, then it is *at rest and is there*. According to Eckhart, however, it sinks and sinks into eternal grounds and is never “there.” And even his concept of the One is not the rounded circle of Plotinus’ *hen*, but an infinity inwards. Eckhart is a Gothic and not a Greek mystic, and is accordingly more similar to the Mahāyāna.<sup>11</sup>

In 1948 a monumental work on Meister Eckhart by Nishitani Keiji appeared in Japan, entitled: *Kami to zettai-mu* (God and Absolute Nothingness).<sup>12</sup> Concerning this title, Nishitani wrote:

The title which I have given this work on Meister Eckhart and German mysticism in the Middle Ages may sound surprising. For “absolute nothingness” has its origin in the Buddhist tradition, and although Eckhart for his part also speaks of the “nothingness” of the godhead, there is a basic difference between his “nothingness” and Buddhist “nothingness,” as much difference as between the occidental and the oriental mind, between Christianity and Buddhism. In each case, “nothingness” belongs to a completely different world. Nevertheless there is a point of contact with Buddhism in Eckhart. Precisely because Eckhart and Buddhism belong to different worlds, this point of contact may well lie on a deep, basic level.

The title *God and Absolute Nothingness* is intended to indicate that Eckhart’s Christian experience contains a correspondence to the Buddhist experience. This seems to me very important for our present situation. At the point where the historical limitations of these very different worlds are broken through, the starting points of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>12</sup> Nishitani Keiji, *Kami to zettai mu* 神と絶対無 (God and Absolute Nothingness), Tokyo, 1948, p. 269. Professor Emeritus of Kyoto University and a disciple of Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani is one of Japan’s leading contemporary philosophers and the author of numerous books, including works on Aristotle, Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, and Nietzsche, as well as works on Zen Buddhism. In one of his main works, *Shūkyō to wa nanika* 宗教とは何か (English translation by Jan Van Bragt, *Religion and Nothingness*, University of California Press, 1982), Nishitani develops his own philosophy on the dimension of a confrontation between the eastern and western traditions of religion and philosophy. See also Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, trans. by J. W. Heisig (New York, Paulist Press, 1980).

original religious experience, as predisposed in the essence of the human being as such, reveal themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Among the latest research on Meister Eckhart we might refer to *Meister Eckhart: Gedanken zu seinen Gedanken* (1979) by the Freiburg theologian and philosopher of religion, Bernhard Welte. In the chapters “The Break-through: God as the Nothingness of Detachment” and “The Things of the World in God,” Welte demonstrates analogies between Meister Eckhart and areas of Zen Buddhism. He takes his inspiration here from two of the most important Zen texts: *The Oxherding Pictures*<sup>14</sup> and *The Blue Cliff Records*.<sup>15</sup> Welte writes:

It seems to me to be of great significance that analogous movements of the spirit appear here from origins completely independent of each other, widely separated in time and space. In an age when cultures are moving closer and closer together it is important to see that such origins—quite independently of each other—can as it were move towards each other, and that analogies suggest themselves, analogies about which we shall have to think further.

One may also perhaps understand Meister Eckhart, with his bold conquest of metaphysics, as a hand stretching out to a distant culture and its highest thoughts. He might then have a new and great significance for present-day humanity’s self-understanding.<sup>16</sup>

Following this suggestion, I should like in this second part to examine Meister Eckhart’s thought, with a view to determining more clearly what is characteristic of the way of ascent and descent in Zen.<sup>17</sup>

The existential thinking of Meister Eckhart is permeated by three basic ideas. First, there is the return of the human individual to the ground of its essence. Second is the idea of the purity and simplicity of this ground—i.e., the utmost absence of mode and characteristic, of form and image, corresponding to its radical transcendence as well as its non-concrete

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<sup>13</sup> Nishitani, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 4 ff.

<sup>14</sup> See n. 4.

<sup>15</sup> See n. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Bernhard Welte, *Meister Eckhart: Gedanken zu seinen Gedanken* (Freiburg/Br., Herder, 1979), p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> I wish to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my friend at ERANOS, the late Ernst Benz, for supporting me in my studies of Meister Eckhart.

nature. The return to the purity of the original ground (*Urgrund*) takes place on the way of negation, of “letting go,” of “detachment.” Third, we see life in its greatest vitality originating precisely out of this original ground. These three basic ideas are found in Zen Buddhism as well. For both, being truly human lies in the dynamic pull back to the original ground and up out of it again, even though in each case the process is formulated in very different concepts, arising from the differing spiritual and cultural-historical backgrounds.

### *The Breakthrough*

We may now look more closely at the way Meister Eckhart’s thought proceeds.<sup>18</sup> In his sermons he repeatedly emphasizes that God bears his only begotten Son in the soul that has become detached. For Eckhart the soul is thus awakened to the divine life, i.e., lifted into the inner life of God—a theme which he emphasizes again and again in his sermons. Eckhart experiences *the birth of God in the soul* (and here the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is decisive) as suddenly being filled with pure, original life, bestowed on one who has surrendered the ego in *detachment*. Here the emphasis on the non-differentiation of the Son whom God gives birth to in the soul and the Son whom God gives birth to in himself is very characteristic of Eckhart. For him, God bears his Son in the soul in the same way in which he bears him in eternity (i.e., in himself). “He must do so whether it pleases him or pains him. . . . Everything which God effects is one; hence he bears me as his only Son without any distinction.”<sup>19</sup> Or, he says elsewhere: “People imagine that God only became human there (in his historical incarnation). That is not so, for God became man *here* (at this point here) just as much as *there*, and he became flesh for this reason: that he should bear *you* as his only begotten Son, and not as anything less.”<sup>20</sup> Absolute

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<sup>18</sup> The following is based on the following texts of Meister Eckhart: *Meister Eckhart: Die Deutschen Werke*, ed. and trans. by Josef Quint (Stuttgart, 1958–1976), Vols. I, II, III, and V (henceforth abbreviated as *DW*). The page numbers in parentheses refer to the corresponding Middle High German texts in the same volume. *Meister Eckhart, Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* (Meister Eckhart, German Sermons and Tracts), ed. and tr. by Josef Quint (Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1955); hereafter referred to as *Q*. Italics in the quotations are my own.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *DW* I, p. 454 (pp. 109, 110).

<sup>20</sup> *DW* II, p. 657 (p. 98).

salvation thus confronts each person directly, in all its originality and not through an intermediary. Understood in this way, Eckhart is very close in this respect to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the philosophico-religious basis of Zen, which teaches the originality of enlightenment in each and every person. The same awakening to the same truth makes each and every person the same Buddha, the “Awakened.” In addition to this general correspondence there is another, deeper-reaching spiritual affinity which becomes apparent when Eckhart speaks of the *breakthrough*, the “breakthrough into the nothingness of the godhead.” “Just as God breaks through me, so I in turn break through him.”<sup>21</sup> But what does Eckhart mean when he says “I break through God”? He speaks of the soul which is not satisfied with being a Son of God. “When God breaks out into his Son, the soul does not become stuck.” “It [the tiny spark or light in the soul] desires to return to the simple ground of God, to the still desert into which differentiation has never penetrated, neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup>

I have spoken of a power in the soul; in its first eruption it does not realize God insofar as he is good, neither does it realize God insofar as he is the truth: it *penetrates to the ground and searches further* to realize God in his unity and his solitude; it realizes God in his desert and in his own ground. Therefore it will not be satisfied with anything; it searches on for what God might be in his godhead and in his own inherent nature.<sup>23</sup>

In the soul which has achieved attachment God gives birth to his only begotten Son. In this way “God breaks through me.” Through the birth of God in the soul the soul is raised to the inner divine life. Then the soul goes on to search for the ground of God. Proceeding from a radical interpretation of the Neo-Platonic understanding of the “Being-One” of pure substance, Eckhart perceives *the essence* or *the ground* of God behind and above the divine God in a pure and simple modeless, formless, inconceivable and inexpressible purity. He differentiates between God and godhead, designating the latter as a nothingness for which “solitude” and “desert” in the above quotation are metaphors. God’s essence defies any

<sup>21</sup> *DW* II, p. 652 (pp. 76, 77).

<sup>22</sup> *DW* II, p. 550 (p. 253) and *DW* II, p. 713 (p. 420).

<sup>23</sup> *DW* I, p. 470 (p. 171).

objectification, any conceptualization on the part of man. "God and godhead are as different from each other as heaven and earth."<sup>24</sup> God is divine in his turning towards the creation. Where God is in himself, beyond any opposition of God and creation, God is in his essence, in his ground, a nothingness. For Eckhart the very thought "God" would be to obscure (*zuobedecken*) his formless purity.

Eckhart's thinking embraces an ascent to the nothingness of the godhead in stages. First he says: "God is good," or "God loves me." That is a statement of faith. Then he says: "God *must* be good, God *must* love me." That is a statement of knowledge. That is to say, the reason why God is good is revealed in such knowledge. Finally, however, he says: "God is not good" (in his essence). This statement belongs to the negative theology which Eckhart pursues very radically, and which bears very existential traits. The radicalism of Eckhart's negative theology shows even in such expressions as: "God is a non-God, a non-Spirit, a non-Person" (*ein nit-got, ein nit-geist, ein nit-persone*).<sup>25</sup> Or: "Neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit." This negation also operates in the sphere of the Trinity. Let us give another example of the existential traits of the ascent: "The tiny spark in the soul . . . thus becomes one with God and strives completely *into* the One and is in a more authentic sense one with God."<sup>26</sup> Becoming one with God is union with the divine God. Striving *into* the One is breaking through the divine God, in a more essential sense being one with God; in Eckhart's words: "A onefold one" (*ein einic ein*), "being one with the simple pure one." The soul is however only one with the simple pure One because it is in itself a simple, pure One. Eckhart describes the soul, simple and pure in itself as it is in this context, with the very same negative theological expressions which he uses for the godhead: among others, nameless, unfathomable, without form and image, spiritless, neither this nor that. When he turns to positive phrasing, then again he uses the same terms as for the godhead: the soul is "one and simple," "a pure one," "alone and free." This intertwining of the doctrines of God and of the soul in Eckhart is pursued to its final consequences when he says: "Wherever God is, there is the soul; and wherever the soul is, there is God."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Q*, p. 272.

<sup>25</sup> *DW* III, p. 586 (p. 448).

<sup>26</sup> *DW* I, p. 510 (p. 345).

<sup>27</sup> *DW* I, p. 471 (p. 173).

A far-reaching and precise agreement between Eckhart and Zen Buddhism is to be found, particularly on the way of ascent, in terms of the negative theology carried out radically for the sake of final reality, and of the dynamic pull of the ascent, with respect to God as well as to the soul. This sometimes goes so far that many lines in Eckhart's sermons could without further ado be almost literal translations from Zen texts.

With reference to Meister Eckhart the question arises: what might the nothingness of the godhead, where God is in himself beyond any opposition to his creation, mean for man? His whole theology is based on the idea that the godhead, the ground of God, is the soul's own ground, such that the soul in its ground is the same as God in his. (Which does not mean that soul and God are identical.)

For Eckhart, the distinction between God and godhead is not only conceptual, but is also brought to bear directly on the doctrine of the soul in a soteriological sense. The former is often found in theology; the connection with the existential, however, is what is distinctive about Eckhart's ideas. For the soul, the beyond of God, the nothingness of the godhead, is in a non-concrete way the ground of the soul itself. "When I [still] stood in the ground, the foundation, in the stream and fount of the *godhead* . . . , " "When I [still] stood in my first cause, I had no God, . . . there I stood free of God and of all things."<sup>28</sup> To return to this, its own original ground, the soul must break through to the nothingness of the godhead in which God "de-becomes." "When I return into 'God' and [then] do not stop there [i.e., with God], then my *breaking through* is much more noble than my flowing forth [from God]."<sup>29</sup> The breakthrough takes place in the soul's letting go of God, i.e., becoming free of God, getting rid of God, as Eckhart puts it on different occasions.<sup>30</sup> It is accomplished again when the soul lets go of itself as united with God. By this Eckhart means the most extreme detachment in which the soul, living with the divine life, becomes completely "de-formed" and fully divests itself of its own self. Eckhart calls this the "ground death," which has a parallel in the Zen notion of the "great death." It is precisely here that the original source of pure life, which lives out of and from itself "without asking why" (*âne warumbe*), opens up in the ground of the soul. Again, parallel to this, Zen

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<sup>28</sup> *Q*, p. 273 and *DW* II, p. 728 (p. 492).

<sup>29</sup> *Q*, p. 273.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *DW* II, pp. 727-31 (pp. 486-517).

has: "Cold ashes catch fire, a withered tree blossoms." The soul now lives from its own ground, not from God, not with God; and through this and in this is one with God, as he is one in the ground.

Here God's ground is my ground, and my ground God's ground. Here I live from what is my own, as God lives from what is his own. To anyone who sees into this ground for but one moment, a thousand marks of red, minted gold are [no more than] a counterfeit farthing. From this innermost ground you should perform all your works without asking why. I say truly: as long as you perform your works for the sake of heaven or God, . . . things are not truly right with you. Such a person is life itself. If someone were to spend a thousand years asking life: "Why do you live?" and if life could answer, it could only reply: "I live *because* I live." That is because life lives from its own ground, and springs from what is its own; thus precisely in living for itself it lives without asking "why."<sup>31</sup>

I live from my own ground as God lives from his own. This is one of Eckhart's golden mottos concerning the true freedom of man. Eckhart now has the soul say:

When I flowed forth from God all things said: God is. But this cannot make me blessed, for now I recognize myself as created. In breaking through, however, when I stand free of my own will and the will of God, free of all his works and of God himself, I am above all creatures and am neither "God" nor creature; I am rather what I was, and what I will remain now and for ever.<sup>32</sup>

That is for Eckhart the true freedom of man, freedom without God (*âne got*), where the nothingness of God is present in this "without God." In this sense Eckhart says: "In this breaking through it is my lot that I and God *are not* (i.e., *not united*)." <sup>33</sup> With this idea Eckhart stands beyond and on this side of the opposition of theism and atheism, beyond and on this side of personalism and impersonalism.

In this sense of life "without God," Eckhart links the nothingness of the godhead directly with his understanding of the *vita activa* in the everyday

<sup>31</sup> *DW* I, pp. 450–1 (p. 90 f).

<sup>32</sup> *DW* II, p. 730 f (p. 504 f).

<sup>33</sup> *DW* II, p. 731 (p. 505).



reality of the world and of life. In his characteristic interpretation of the pericope on Martha and Mary (Luke 10: 38–42) Eckhart sees perfection in Martha, who works in the kitchen providing for the visitors, but not in Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet listening to him talk.<sup>34</sup> Martha works in the kitchen. The breakthrough, in which God is concretely present in Martha as the nothingness of the godhead, takes place in her kitchen work. I will return to this point below.

We see, then, a structured dynamics in Eckhart, namely: returning by means of radical negation to the original, essential ground, and from there going back again into the *vita activa*, the reality of the world and of life. I should like to describe this dynamics as the correlation of negation and affirmation, of nothingness and the here and now of the present. That would be Eckhart's solution to the crisis of faith of his time, which consisted on the one hand of a radical Aristotelianism, and on the other of the poverty of the apostolic life in popular religiosity.

Zen Buddhism is concerned with the same correlation, but is more radical than Eckhart both in its negation and in its affirmation.

Zen Buddhism describes the way of negation, as we have already seen, as an *ascent*. On this path it is said: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him." "Hurry on by wherever Buddha is! Neither stop where Buddha is no more!" This is the Zen Buddhist parallel to Eckhart's *letting go of God*. Zen is concerned with the infinity of negation, with the infinite nothingness "beyond the hundredfold negation," without thereby positing any kind of transcendence. In Zen any idea of an absolute means "being stuck to truth," a more subtle and hence more dangerous form of ego-imprisonment.

Radical negation in Zen is shown in its concern with nothingness as such, whereas with Eckhart there is talk of the nothingness of the godhead. For Eckhart, God in his essence is a nothingness. In substantive thinking the untouchable, incontestable basic proposition "God is" holds sway. In terms of negative theology, "nothingness" is for Eckhart in the final analysis the epitome of all negative descriptions of the purity of God's essence. In contrast, nothingness in Zen is an expression of the de-substantializing tendency that corresponds to the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of relationship.<sup>35</sup> Nothingness in Zen is not, as it is with Eckhart, another

<sup>34</sup> *DW* III, Sermon 86.

<sup>35</sup> On this subject, cf. Ueda Shizuteru "Emptiness and Fullness: Śūnyatā in Mahāyāna Buddhism," *Eastern Buddhist* XV, 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 9–37; esp. p. 24.

description of the pure One, but lies beyond and on this side of the One, like a zero.

It can be seen from the texts that the dynamic nothingness of Zen is more radical than the nothingness in Eckhart. To Eckhart's: "Be detached from everything" (detachment), Zen immediately adds: "Detached even from detachment." In the same vein we read: "Live nowhere, and at the same time do not live in this living nowhere." "Neither being nor nothingness, neither not-being nor not-nothingness."

The *via negationis* and the *via eminentiae* belong together, for Eckhart as well as for Zen. If Eckhart arrives at affirmation in his turn-about, then he does so by means of God as the first affirmation. Thus he says: "Consider a fly in God; it is more noble in God than the highest angel is in itself. For all things are equal in God and are God himself." If all creatures "flourish" in God, then that is Eckhart's affirmation of the fly, indeed as a fly *in God*.<sup>36</sup> Zen puts it more directly and more simply: "Mountains as mountains, water as water, long as long and short, short." Hence Zen arrives directly and without mediation at a full and straightforward affirmation. Zen describes the direction of this affirmation as a path of *descent*. On this path it is said: "What a miracle! Drawing water, carrying wood." "If you are hungry, eat; if you are tired, lie down and rest." One master, asked about the highest truth, said simply: "Let's have a cup of tea." The free movement back and forth between infinite negation and the most direct affirmation of the present moment is for Zen the freedom of the selfless self.

In the end, the category of substance is determinant in Eckhart's thinking. In conformity with his understanding of pure, simple substance without image or form, Eckhart demands of an individual the radical de-forming of the soul, which is achieved in and as an infinite letting go. This "letting go" gives Eckhart's doctrine a dynamic quality which corresponds to the dynamic of the Zen Buddhist correlation of negation and affirmation. It is just that in Zen, with its radical execution of the Mahāyāna Buddhist idea of conditionedness, the range of this correlation is greater than it is with Eckhart. This correlation functions existentially and practically in the same way for Eckhart and for Zen, and as such effects that infinity with which our theme, "Ascent and Descent," is concerned.

Proceeding from these comparative considerations, an example from Meister Eckhart's work affords the possibility of concretizing what we have

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<sup>36</sup> *DW* I, p. 477 (p. 199) and cf. *DW* III, p. 549 (p. 247).

sketched out above, as well as of defining Zen on its way of ascent and descent more precisely. In this way, Zen is brought into sharper relief. The example treated here is selected from Eckhart's interpretation of the pericope on Mary and Martha in Luke's gospel.

First a preliminary question must be dealt with. Is it at all possible to live our lives meaningfully in the corporeal reality of the world if we follow Eckhart's idea of the breakthrough? It sometimes seems as if Eckhart is being carried away by his high-flying speculation on the pure "being-one" that God is in himself, and on the nothingness of the godhead. But that is not really the case. The relationship to the reality of our world and of our life does not disappear, for in mysticism's idea of God, God's transcendence is generally bound up as closely as possible with his immanence. This is particularly so with Meister Eckhart's idea of "letting go of God." The "letting go of God," which we have examined above in the breakthrough to the nothingness of the godhead, is achieved from the very beginning in conjunction with a movement away from God towards the reality of the world. Eckhart refers to this conjunction in a sermon based on a saying of Saint Paul's:

Therefore Saint Paul says: "Would that I were cut off from God for eternity for the sake of my friends and of God." To be separated from God for one moment is to be cut off from God for eternity; but parting from God is hellish torment. Now what does Paul mean by this saying, that he wanted to be cut off from God? Now the masters ask the question whether Paul was here on the way to perfection, or whether he was already perfect. *I say that he was already quite perfect*; otherwise he would not have been able to say this. I want to explain this saying of Paul's, that he wanted to be cut off from God.<sup>37</sup>

We can single out two things from these words of Eckhart's. First, being "cut off from God," "letting go of God," is only possible on the basis of the perfection of having attained "being-one" with God. Second, in "letting go of God" two correlated concerns are expressed, as Paul characteristically says, "for the sake of my friends and of God." On this basis Eckhart begins with his interpretation of Paul's saying: "The highest and utmost one can let go of is that one let go of God for the sake of God

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<sup>37</sup> *DW I*, p. 477 (p. 195 f).

(*daz hoehste und daz naehste, daz der mensche gelâzen mac, daz ist, daz er got durch got lâze*).<sup>38</sup>

Saint Paul let go of everything he was able to take from God, and let go of everything God was able to give him. . . . Having let go of this, he then let go of God for the sake of God, and then God *remained* for him as God has his being in himself [*got, da got istic ist sîn selbes*], not in the manner of something received or won, but in the beingness which God is in himself [*in einer isticheit, daz got in im selber ist*]. He never gave God anything, nor did he ever receive anything from God: it is a One and a pure becoming One [*ez ist ein und ein lûter einunge*]. Here the human being is a true human being . . . ; as I have often said already, there is something in the soul so closely related to God *that it is one and does not unite* [*daz etwaz in der sêle ist, daz got alsô sippe ist, daz es ein ist und niht vereinet*].<sup>39</sup>

For Eckhart, letting go of God is not a union but a being one with the pure One (“is one and does not unite,” *unum et non unitum*). Eckhart designates the pure One, as God has his being in himself, as simply “a nothingness” (*ein niht*), on account of its formless, unspeakable purity. The breakthrough motif in Eckhart’s thought is central to the passage quoted here. Although it is mainly the aspect of “letting go of God for the sake of God,” i.e., breaking through God to the ground of God that is dealt with in this sermon, the other aspect is indicated by Paul’s words, “being cut off from God *for the sake of my friends and of God*.” Eckhart speaks of a *true human being*. “Human being” in this context indicates more than the soul or the ground of the soul. For Eckhart it is directly connected to the ground of God. When he speaks of the true *human being*, he is speaking not only of the ground of the soul, but also likewise of the return to the reality of the world and of life. This is brought out in the words, “for the sake of my friends *and* of God.” Taking up these hints, and laying the emphasis on this “and,” we might describe the two movements as follows: letting go of God for the sake of God points in turn to the opposite movement away from God towards the reality of the world. (Taken in this way, we see an exact correspondence to ascent and descent in Zen.) “Letting go

<sup>38</sup> *DW* I, p. 477 (p. 196).

<sup>39</sup> *DW* I, p. 477 (p. 197).

of God” in these two movements takes place in *one* act. “Letting go of God” has to do with the nothingness of the godhead, and likewise, closely connected with this, with being at the stove—or in the stable or sty; or, as with Martha, being in the kitchen. She is certainly in the nothingness of the godhead, but at the same time she is also at the stove. The concern here is thus not with being carried away to a distant One, but neither is it a question of a relapse into the reality of the world, since Martha is not only at the stove, but also likewise in the nothingness of the godhead. “Letting go of God” in the first movement, towards the nothingness of the godhead, reflects Eckhart’s specific understanding of the *vita contemplativa*, concerned as it is with the illumination of the ground of God with the tiny spark of the soul. The other movement, towards the reality of the world, shows his understanding of the *vita activa*, concerned as it is with the “well-practised body” (*wohlgeübter Leib*), as we will see below in the example of Martha. The peculiarity of Eckhart’s extreme doctrine of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* lies in the fact that for him they are not, when all is said and done, ways *to* God but ways *from* God. For Eckhart, the way to God is not *vita*, life, but only *death*, *detachment*. God gives birth to his son in the detached soul. That is for him the basic presupposition for a *vita contemplativa* with a spark of the soul and a *vita activa* with a “well-practised body.”

### *Letting Go of God and the Vita Activa*

Another sermon on the pericope on Mary and Martha (Luke 10: 38–42)<sup>40</sup> contains further interpretations by Eckhart of “letting go of God” as a return to the reality of the world and of life. We quote the pericope from Eckhart’s own German translation:

Saint Luke writes in the Gospel that Our Lord Jesus Christ entered a small town; there a woman called Martha took him in. She had a

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<sup>40</sup> *DW* III. Sermon 86. The work on Meister Eckhart by Nishitani, quoted above (n. 12) is, as far as I know, the first research on Eckhart to interpret this sermon *in depth*, and integrates it into a general interpretation of Eckhart. The content of this sermon is also treated in a monograph by Dietmar 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).

sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his words; Martha, however, busied about serving her beloved Christ. Now Martha says: "Lord bid her help me." Then Christ answers her saying: "Martha, Martha, you are heedful, you take care of many things. One thing is necessary! Mary has chosen the best part, which can never be taken from her."<sup>41</sup>

Both the literary meaning and the intention of the passage are quite unambiguous. The interpretation completely reverses the obvious evaluation of Mary and Martha; that is, Eckhart sees perfection in Martha, but not in Mary.

Jesus called Martha twice by name. That is for Eckhart confirmation of Martha's twofold perfection, namely perfection in temporal activity and in eternal blessedness. "Martha perfectly possessed everything there might be of temporal and eternal good."<sup>42</sup> On the basis of such perfection Martha now says: "Lord, do tell her (Mary) that she should help me." That means for Eckhart: "Bid her arise and go from you" (*heiz sie ûfstân und von dir gân*). "In the fullness of her being [*weselîche*], Martha stands there, and therefore says: 'Lord, bid her arise'." Martha fears that her sister might remain with God in the contentment of union with him and not progress any further (*niht vîrbaz enkaeme*). Mary has thus to free herself from this union, i.e., arise and go from God. "Bid her arise that she become perfect!" Eckhart thus sees union with God in Mary; in Martha, however, he sees a specific perfection, which consists in arising, freeing oneself from this union and taking leave of God. This re-interpretation of the pericope has its origin in an interpretation of the text that is directed towards life and that corresponds to the idea of the breakthrough.

This is expressed even more strongly in Eckhart's reading of Jesus' answer to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are concerned about many things." Immediately after talking of Martha's twofold perfection, Eckhart says: "Therefore he (Our Lord) said: 'You are heedful'." The word "therefore" used here implies a context. To Eckhart, Martha is concerned with many things because of her perfection. How does Eckhart understand this being concerned with many things? "You are concerned with many things"

<sup>41</sup> According to J. Quint, "The text is taken from the gospel reading for the liturgy of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, according to the old Dominican missal." Cf. *DW* III, p. 493.

<sup>42</sup> On the following short quotations, see *DW* III, pp. 593–98 (482–91).

means for Eckhart, “with many things, not one” (*dū bist betrüebet umbe vil*, *niht umbe eines*); that is to say, not with one thing that is needed, for this one is already present in Martha. What is that one thing, of which Jesus says: “One thing is necessary (*not*)”? It is being one with God. That has already been attained in Martha. Martha is no longer concerned with the one as such. Only because of this *can* she take care of many things without being obstructed by being one, and without being distracted by the many. Thus is Martha concerned with many things. In this case, “take care of” or “concerned” means, according to Eckhart’s interpretation, “*in* concern but not *of* concern”, “*in* things but not *of* things.” Accordingly Jesus might then have said: “You stand in things, but things do not stand in you; that is, things do not hinder you.” Martha stands perfectly close (*vil nâhe*) to things, yet is “unhindered” (*âne hindernisse*).

In this way, Martha exists *in* concern, she stands “in a mature, well-founded virtue, of free disposition, unhindered by anything.” Martha *can* see to many things with an untroubled disposition. In the ground of the soul Martha stands in untouched equanimity, which does not mean that worry, suffering and pain—to which people in the reality of the world and of life are always subject—are at all diminished for her. Being concerned with many things but maintaining an untroubled disposition is not a given state, achieved once and for all. One must learn it, learn it again and again, practise on and on, in the midst indeed of the reality of the world and of life. Eckhart speaks in this connection of the “well-practised body” (*wohlgeübter Leib*). He also refers to this way of acting as “the practice of virtue”. It is a practice that proceeds outwards them the pure ground of the soul in nothingness, and simultaneously a practice that draws virtue inwards into everyday reality. Hence Eckhart describes Mary’s perfection: “Martha has lived long and justly.” “Lived long,” i.e., she is familiar with things in everyday life, such that she can arrange them for the benefit of others. “Justly,” i.e., from the ground of the soul, where she is one with the One. Hence Martha stands “in the fullness of her being” (*wesenhaft*), as Eckhart repeatedly emphasizes in the sermon.

But what is the situation with Mary? Jesus said to Martha: “Mary has chosen the best part.” These words of Jesus’ mean for Eckhart: “Be calm, Martha, she will be blessed, as are you.” “When Mary sat at the feet of Our Lord she was not yet the true Mary,” she still had to “go to school and *learn to live*.”

We can thus understand the words “bit her arise and go from you”

(*heiz sî ûfstân und von dir gân*) as the sermon's basic comment on the idea of the breakthrough: arising from union with God and going from God, as much *through* God to the nothingness of the godhead as *away* from God to the reality of life and the world. Here we see the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* walking together on this, Eckhart's characteristic path.

From his re-working of the pericope, the question arises whether one should not simply reject Eckhart's interpretation as false exegesis, and not take it seriously; or whether one should somehow weaken his interpretation and bring it into line with the wording of the passage. At another point Meister Eckhart follows the explanation contained in the text itself of the relationship between Mary and Martha:

As long as we are not similar to God and the birth whereby God is fashioned in us has not taken place, we are not at peace, and we concern ourselves, along with Martha, with many things. As soon as Christ the Son of God is fashioned in us, however, . . . there is a quite perfect joy in us. . . . Being born is always one, is permanent, is lasting, and is our inheritance. . . . Therefore it follows that Mary has chosen the best part, which will not be taken from her.<sup>43</sup>

We must assume that here Eckhart has, with a full understanding of the pericope, undertaken an intentional re-positioning of Mary and Martha on the way to perfection. This cannot be coincidental, for his deviant interpretation corresponds exactly to his idea of the breakthrough. This is not the place for a discussion of other interpretations. I am concerned with examining what interpretation if any is possible if the so-called radical statements in Eckhart are to be integrated into the total picture without being weakened. We merely point out here that Eckhart, proceeding from the motif of birth—as the above quotation from the exposition of the gospel according to John shows—sees perfection in Mary; whilst proceeding from the motif of the breakthrough he sees perfection in Martha. We cannot avoid the question, which arises again and again, of how the motifs of birth and breakthrough in Eckhart are related to each other. In the breakthrough Eckhart's concern is not with a purely metaphysical re-formulation of the birth of God in the soul. It becomes apparent from his

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<sup>43</sup> *Meister Eckhart: Die lateinischen Werke*, published through the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Vol. 3, *Expositiones. evangelii sec. Iohannem*, trans. by Karl Christ and Joseph Koch (1936 ff), p. 112.



interpretation of the pericope that he conceives the breakthrough in broader terms. By means of the motif of the breakthrough thus conceived we can find an approach to an understanding of Zen.

### *Nothingness of the Godhead and Infinite Openness*

A painting by the Dutch artist Pieter Aertsen from the sixteenth century depicts Jesus' visit to Martha's house.<sup>44</sup> To be sure, the opulent tone of the picture hardly corresponds to the austerity of Medieval German mysticism, but the composition may be explained wholly in the spirit of Meister Eckhart. We have all the more reason to risk such an interpretation because the spirit of Meister Eckhart was widely disseminated in the Netherlands through the *Devotia Moderna* movement. The following is an attempt to understand the composition of the picture on the basis of Meister Eckhart's explanation of the gospel pericope.

In the foreground of the painting Martha is busy in the kitchen with the preparation of the meal. As the main figure she is depicted very large, whilst Jesus and Mary at his feet in the room behind appear very small.

Martha is working in the kitchen. This is the main motif and it looms large in the foreground. That the figure of Jesus behind Martha is painted very small indicates that the concern here is with letting go of God, arising and going from God. Martha has let go of God and returned to the reality of the world. Jesus, in the distance behind her, has become small. Martha's actual return to the reality of the world and of life is likewise the real accomplishment of a breakthrough through God to the ground of God, i.e., to his essence beyond/without form to the nothingness of the godhead. The reduction of the figure of Jesus in the painting expresses a concern with the nothingness of the godhead. It is a sign that the nothingness of the godhead is present in the painting. The smallness of the figure of Jesus is the negative expression of the presence of the formless godhead. Its positive expression is found in the form of Martha, who is working in the kitchen to serve the guests. Because of the breakthrough she has achieved, she is one with the formless godhead. The nothingness of the godhead is present

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<sup>44</sup> Thanks are due to Ernst Benz for drawing my attention to this painting. It is reproduced in *Oil Paintings 1400–1900: Catalogue of the Museum Boymans-van-Beuningen* (Rotterdam, 1972), p. 35; and in R. H. Fuchs, *Dutch Painting* (London, 1978), p. 27.

in a positive way in Martha and as Martha, just as she is at work in the kitchen. One might speak here of the incarnation of nothingness, into which God, on returning to his ground, has dissolved.

At issue then is *nothingness and its incarnation*. Martha illustrates this with her work in the kitchen. From this point of view the figure of Jesus might as well be completely absent—not, to be sure, in the sense of eliminating Jesus Christ, but rather because of the nothingness of the godhead. This is how Eckhart understands Paul's saying: "separating from God for the sake of God and friends." This would be the idea of the breakthrough taken to its most extreme conclusion. We can imagine how the composition of this painting might change. If one or other aspect of the breakthrough were taken to its most extreme conclusion, two changes would occur.

The first change: the actual completion of the breakthrough would have the divine figure, including the figure of Jesus, disappear into nothingness, where Martha too disappears completely, as into her own ground. Nor is Mary in the picture, for she is where God appears, and God has disappeared from here. There is only nothingness, in which the nothingness of the godhead, free of all image and form, is purely and simply present. *In this way* we reach the infinite openness of nothingness, as depicted in the first Zen picture.<sup>45</sup> The first change points quite precisely and concretely to the locus of Zen Buddhism's concern with the way of ascent in its highest sense.

The second change: Martha, in achieving the breakthrough to the nothingness of the godhead, likewise returns to the immediate reality of the world and of life—in this case, to work in the kitchen. The figure of Jesus behind her has completely disappeared. We have only Martha and Mary, who is again present as her sister, and that against the background of nothingness; or more precisely, permeated by nothingness, no longer in a divine space, but in the space of nothingness, in infinite openness. That would be, then, Mary and Martha in infinite openness without a visible trace of the divine. *In this way* we come to the interpersonal movement of the double self, as depicted in the third Zen picture.<sup>46</sup> The second change points quite precisely and concretely to the locus of Zen Buddhism's concern with the way of descent in the deepest sense.

This hypothetical transformation of the picture is intended as an aid to

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<sup>45</sup> See Part I of the present article, *Eastern Buddhist* XVI, 1, p. 58.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

defining the locus of the two Zen pictures. It is shown that with only a slight deviation from Eckhart's thought we are led into the realm of Zen.<sup>47</sup>

In connection with Meister Eckhart one more observation on the nothingness of the godhead may be made. Much is said today of the crisis of faith. The belief in a personified God in heaven has fallen into crisis. Previously much was said of faith and of God—perhaps too much. Today, again, too much is being made of the crisis of faith and the death of God. The factor common to both is too much talk, whether it be of God or of the death of God. God—and so, also, the death of God—is not, however, “something or other that one can speak,” as Eckhart says. Only the most profound and truly complete silence could correspond to the nothingness of the godhead, so that from this silence a new voice might spring forth. In any case, in the silence from the nothingness of the godhead a new way to the original life, even within the present spiritual context, would be opened up.

The two imaginary variations of the picture show, then, Mary and Martha in an open room without a trace of the divine. Now, were Mary—who is concerned with God—to go to Martha—who has achieved the breakthrough and is working in the kitchen—and ask: “What is God?”, Martha would be able to answer immediately from the midst of her absorption in her work: “Three apples!” “What is God?”—“Three apples!” It sounds almost like a Zen example. This reply places Martha infinitely beyond God, in nothingness, and likewise places her totally here in the kitchen. The invisible, infinite span between nothingness and the kitchen is for Martha *at this moment* the actual space of absolute freedom in everyday reality. Martha's movement back and forth in infinite space in a single moment is the concrete reality of the “spark of the soul,” and likewise the transparent movement of the “well-practised body” (*wohlgeübter Leib*). It is a matter of an effective correlation of “ascent” and “descent.” “What is God?”—“Three apples.” The question about God was posed in the inappropriate category of what-is, and the answer hits Mary *at the same instant* in the face. This great negation shows her directly the ultimate, the ground of God, the nothingness of the godhead. It happens in the most concrete way in the

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<sup>47</sup> Indeed one could say either that Eckhart lacks a final step, or that Zen has gone one step too far. Whichever the case may be, for our purposes the changes presented here are intended as a methodological device to help gain access to an understanding of Zen in Rudolf Otto's sense.

## ASCENT AND DESCENT

simultaneity of silence concerning this ultimate and of immediately present reality. Mary's question about God was on the one hand too distant from the ultimate, and on the other took her too far away from her own immediate reality. The example "What is God?"—"Three apples" is a question-answer event and does not as such admit of an explanation. In Zen a further question would be called forth by the example, something like: "For whom are three apples there to be eaten?"

The question-answer, "What is God?"—"Three apples," which we derived from Eckhart, is close to the Zen example from the *The Blue Cliff Records* mentioned above: "What is the Buddha?"—"Three pounds of hemp."<sup>48</sup> Are we dealing here with the same thing in these two examples, or with something different?

TRANSLATED BY IAN ASTLEY AND JAMES W. HEISIG

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<sup>48</sup> See n. 9.