Ascent and Descent

Zen Buddhism in Comparison with Meister Eckhart

PART ONE

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Zen

WE OUGHT TO begin with the question, "What actually is Zen?" I am not in a position myself to come up with the sort of direct answer the Zen masters give, speaking from within Zen itself. "Clouds float across the sky above, water lies in the pitcher below," says one master. "Have you already taken breakfast?" replies a second. A third straightway gives the questioner a healthy kick in the shins, while a fourth explains somewhat more intelligibly, "There is nothing at all you can call Zen."

For the purposes of the topic to be pursued in these pages we should prefer some more approachable description. Let us accordingly direct our attention to what the individual actually does on the Zen way to realize the true self. We may distinguish three aspects or components:

Zazen 坐禅: the practice of Zen through sitting in silence.
Sanzen 参禅: the practice of Zen through encounter with an other (which, in terms of training in Zen discipline, most often takes the form of dialog and confrontation with a master).
Samu 作務: active service (mostly involving work in a garden or in the fields) and *angya* 行脚 (wandering), the practice of Zen in nature.

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* Originally a lecture given at the ERANOS CONFERENCE 1981 in Ascona, and published in ERANOS YEARBOOK 50–1981, E. J. Brill, Leiden, Netherlands.

Why is Zen practiced in these three aspects? Because, as we shall clarify in due course, the true self with whose realization Zen is concerned functions as a dynamic correlatedness of three elements, to which these three aspects of Zen practice correspond. Hence the practice of Zen is the way *to* the true self as the way *of* the true self. That is to say, the way is not first opened up through one's practice but rather through the dynamism of the true self which is itself a dynamic movement. In this sense we speak of the way of the true self as being at the same time the way to the true self. It is, as a Zen saying has it, a question of "imitating the self."

Why speak of a "true self"? Because we find ourselves first and foremost fallen into the perversity of the ego, fettered to our own egos. Our concern is therefore to awaken from this wrongheaded egoism to our true selfhood, to cast away the shackles of the ego for the freedom of the true self, wherein the truth of the self is at the same time the truth of the self in one accord with the truth of all beings. Let us begin by clarifying the first aspect of Zen practice, zazen, in order later to return to the question of the true self and the perversity of the ego.

Zazen

The *za* 坐 of zazen means "to set oneself down" or "to sit." In this context *zen* 禅 takes on the sense of "centering" or "recollectedness," and as such is comprised of two elements: the element of detachment, composure, relaxation, stillness; and the element of seeing, beholding, perceiving. We may thus speak of Zen here as *a recollection to the point of self-forgetfulness in which the truth of the self and of being becomes present and is perceived as such.* In a word, *zazen* is Zen in and through sitting, or perhaps better, sitting as Zen and Zen as sitting.

Now what does "sitting" actually entail here? When one uses the word *za* in Japan, one always means sitting on the floor (Japanese uses another word to speak of sitting in a chair). We may further distinguish between *seiza* 静坐, sitting correctly in a tense stillness; *agura* 胡坐, sitting in a relaxed stillness; and *zazen* 坐禅, which is at the same time a tense and a relaxed sitting. Now each of these forms of sitting corresponds to a particular situation, each having its own value as a posture and its own significance. In other words, the posture one assumes in sitting both represents and effects one's posture or attitude to the world.

In zazen and as zazen, sitting is raised to the level of the original and fundamental posture of the human being. From the very outset a particular understanding and a particular estimation of sitting grounds zazen. Translated into living terms, to sit means fundamentally "to sit still and composed." It does not of itself entail sitting in prepared conditions of stillness, but *becoming* still through sitting. Sitting bestows stillness. To sit is to express rest, to be well adapted to one's place and circumstances, to be tuned to an inner harmony. It is as the resonance of this disposition of being attuned that sitting bestows stillness. Under the sway of stillness the difference between the inner and the outer, between motion and rest, is eliminated. This is what is implied by *za*, and already here there is something of Zen to be found. In Zen the stillness and composure of sitting is seen as the fundamental posture of the human being, not as merely one more posture among others, not as a mere transitional stage between standing up and lying down. For Zen Buddhism, sitting down directly implies entering into zazen. Thus zazen treats sitting as a physical expression and an achievement of the stillness of recollection and the openness of composure, as a recollecting of oneself and allowing this recollectedness to be permeated with an infinite openness. As Zen, sitting makes use of the everyday act of sitting to fill the reality of life with meaning and from there spread out in a variety of dynamic forms.

How is zazen practiced? The one who practices enters into zazen through the threefold attunment of disposition of body, breath, and spirit. *The disposition of the body* is achieved through setting the spine in a vertical position, crossing the legs, and resting the hands folded on the abdomen. In so doing, the center of gravity of the entire body is shifted to the abdomen. It is so to speak a binding together of oneself into a concrete recollectedness. This posture is also the embodiment[1] of an attitude free of every object or opposition. The eyes are kept lightly open. This is critical for Zen Buddhism. One is to direct one's gaze to the floor, but neither to see nor not to see. Zazen is not concerned with the contemplation of objects inner or outer. One finds oneself in the midst of openness without any opposition. In a wider context we may speak of this attitude as the embodiment of a posture of non-action. One does not use one's arms or legs and therefore is not doing anything, and yet at the same time

[1] The word "embodiment" is meant to express corporeal embodiment in the sense of a realization through and in one's own physical body.

one *is* doing in doing nothing. Hence zazen is not only doing nothing but also the doing of doing nothing. This latter doing first becomes explicit in coming out of zazen, while during zazen it is absorbed back into doing nothing. Here we need only point out that in the doing of doing nothing—or the action of non-action—the element of primordial doing proceeds from nothingness.

Looking at this anthropologically may help to render the meaning of zazen more intelligible. What sets humans apart from the rest of living beings is the fact that they stand erect and walk erect. In contrast to the animals who are continually bound to a particular environment, standing erect discloses to human beings an openness which we call world (*Welt*) as distinct from environment (*Umwelt*). With their hands now free and at their disposition, humans can build environments about themselves according to their own world-plan. But that is only one side of the picture. The other side must also be kept in mind: by virtue of standing erect there is opened to human beings the world in which they always first position themselves at the center of the world. Anthropocentricism and egocentrism are thus part of the picture. One's hands reach out to grab what is around one, to claim more and more as one's own. But if the sitting in Zen described above is indeed the original posture of the human being, it must also mean renouncing for the first time the anthropological privilege of standing erect. One removes oneself from the world so that the world that has been twisted through egocentrism may be restored to its openness; one rediscovers oneself in one's original and authentic openness. That openness, in which one finds oneself in and through zazen, is nothing less than a space for the dynamic of ascent and descent to take place.

The disposition of the breath occurs by breathing naturally through the nose, putting a gentle inner accent on exhaling wherein the impulse to breathe no longer arises from the chest but from the abdomen. The drawing in of breath becomes progressively thinner, longer, deeper, It is a sort of sinking into one's respiration—rest in motion, motion in rest. Exhaling means continually departing from oneself out into the infinite expanse of openness. Here already a dying takes place. Here already we may speak of a non-selfhood. Inhaling means drawing the infinite openness into oneself. Here already there is resurrection. Everything is within—an all-selfhood.

The disposition of the spirit refers to deploying the spirit in such a way that it enters into a state of complete recollection. On what is this recol-

lection centered? On nothingness—thinking nothing, willing nothing. But thinking nothing, or making nothingness the aim of thought, is not a goal one attains by setting out to achieve it. The way to thinking nothing is known in zazen as *su-soku-kan* 数息観, perceiving as breath-counting, recollecting oneself by counting one's breathing. With each exhale one counts silently to oneself from one to ten. At first blush that seems *simple* enough, as indeed it is; but as one learns through experience the practice is not really all that *easy*, because one does not come prepared for its simplicity. We have been scattered into multiplicity, while for *su-soku-kan* we must be extremely alert and present. To do something so simple purifies us from the diversity into which we have been dispersed. By counting our breath alertly and present to what is going on, we become recollected and forget ourselves. Here being alert and present is the equivalent of self-forgetfulness.

In this way the practice of zazen is a bodily anticipation of the true, selfless self: openness without opposition, rest in motion and motion in rest; alert, present, and self-forgetful; a correlatedness of emptiness and fullness. It is thus a matter of bringing to completion through one's own performance something that has been anticipated in the discipline of practice, but not in the sense of something that can be achieved through repeated practice. What really is the impetus to performance? Here we come to the key point of zazen. The driving force behind zazen and in zazen is nothing other than the basic existential question that we find Gotama the Buddha asking himself: who am I really? what is the ultimate meaning of life and death? Existentially speaking, zazen is primarily the embodiment of a total questioning of the human through this basic question with its unanswerability. In zazen the individual as such becomes an unanswerable question, or as the Zen saying puts it, "a mass of question and despair." At this point one can almost literally do nothing more. It is the terminus of all human effort and questing. Nothing further remains for one to do than to give oneself up for dead in this "can do no more." This is zazen. Without this existential questioning zazen could easily degenerate into mere practice or disciplined training, which is why Zen Buddhism again and again inquires of the one who practices: what is that authentic and primordial self that you were when you were not thinking of this or that, when you were not yet born of your parents? But here again, to repeat, zazen is also the embodiment of the answer, of the dissolution of the mass of question and despair, of the resolution as something an-

ticipated in its practice. Thus, to practice zazen means to come into the presence of the Buddha and the masters of old.

In order to safeguard zazen from slipping into mere practice, Zen Buddhism gainsays every characterization of it as a practice even as it stresses practice. It does this either through the irony of regarding the practice of zazen as useless or through the emphatic insistence that zazen as such is never anything more than the presence of the Buddha. As an illustration of the first, a master makes an ink drawing of a frog seated upon a rock and inscribes it with the words, "If one could become Buddha by practicing zazen." Typical of the latter are the sayings, "As zazen you are Buddha or you can never become Buddha," and "To be Buddha is simple, to become Buddha is impossible."

As we have been saying, then, zazen is both the embodiment of human existence as a question *and likewise* the embodiment of its final resolution. The "and likewise" here points to a fundamental conversion, a conversion from *Existenz* as question to *Ek-sistenz* as answer.[2] Though we still want to ask precisely when this conversion takes place, there is no answer forthcoming. Zazen does not follow a program. It is enough for those who practice zazen that there are examples of real conversion and awakening in the history of Zen Buddhism. Zen therefore provides direction in the form of examples rather than focus primarily on doctrines or theories. It happens like this: in zazen SOMETHING suddenly clicks into place or strikes like a bolt of thunder, SOMETHING unspeakable and incomprehensible yet clear and forceful, SOMETHING that one might otherwise take in its everyday, objective sense as part of the outside world, such as the song of a bird or the beat of a drum, or SOMETHING that one must otherwise comprehend in religious terms as the experience of grace. In the immediate presence of this SOMETHING, experience leaves no room for interpretation. This SOMETHING breaks through the I-am-I, and does so, as it is said, "in ten directions at once." This breakthrough reverberates often in poetry or sayings articulated in self-evident form, as in the following words of the Japanese master Daitō (1283–1337): "Once the gate of clouds has been walked through, the path of life leads to the east, to the west, to the south, to the north. In the repose of the evening and in the wanderings of the morning there is neither host nor guest, only a clean

[2] This term borrowed from Heidegger, refers to a being-outside-of-oneself or a finding-oneself-in-infinite-openness.

breeze blowing at the traveller's feet." Or again, we have the saying of the Chinese master Gensha (835–908): "The world in its totality, open infinitely in ten directions, is a single clear, transparent pearl, a pearl that rolls out of itself. The body of the true self as a whole is nothing other than this pearl." Reports of experiences of awakening give others who practice zazen certitude and proof, serving them as images of orientation, as signs that point and invite to awakening to the truth.

The True Self

Let us now consider how this solitary transparent pearl rolls out of it itself, and how this rolling expresses an event of the truth of the self, which we shall here take up at greater length. To illustrate the dynamic of the true self we may draw attention to three pictures from a small classic Zen text, *The Ox and His Herdsman*.[3] The three pictures in question form a unity depicting the fulfillment of the way to becoming a self. Together they give us a self-portrait of the self in triptych, displaying the disclosure of the truth of the self.

The first picture is really not a picture at all but only an empty circle containing nothing. It deals with absolute nothingness, neither being nor non-being. It gives the impression at first of being an infinite negation. "Holy, worldly, both vanished without trace," reads the accompanying text. Here we have a radical neither/nor, a fundamental and total negation of every form of duality. In order to achieve a breakthrough to the true

[3] The three pictures treated here represent stages 8, 9, and 10 of the Oxherding Pictures. Quotations are taken from the English translation of H. M. Trevor, made from the German text prepared by Tsujimura and Buchner: *The Ox and His Herdsman* (Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1969).

self that corresponds to its unconditioned selflessness, one must leap once and for all into pure nothingness. As the Zen saying has it, one must "die the Great Death." At the same time this means that the self free of all form first discloses itself as the formless, or as formlessness itself, untouchable, unspeakable, unanalyzable. Hence the empty circle.

In this absolute nothingness with its desubstantializing dynamic, the fundamental turnabout occurs as a "dying and becoming" or as a "death and resurrection" wherein the formless takes on concrete form.

This brings us to the second picture which depicts a tree in bloom alongside a river, and nothing more. The text reads, "Boundlessly flows the river, just as it flows. Red blooms the flower, just as it blooms." Here, on the human way of the self, it is not some outer, objective landscape that is being expressed, but neither is it a metaphorical landscape depicting some state of the individual's soul. It is rather a representation of the selfless self. In the absolute nothingness of the first picture the subject-object dualism was broken through; and so here, in the resurrection from nothingness, the tree in bloom alongside a river is nothing other than the being of the human being. A tree in bloom, just as it blooms, embodies the selflessness of the true human being in a non-objective manner. The blooming of the tree, the flowing of the river, are just what they are in an altogether straightforward manner, and at the same time are the locus of the selfless freedom of the self.

On the basis of the reality of this embodiment in nature that confirms the selflessness of the self, there now comes into view in the third picture the selfless "self." Because of selflessness, the "in between" of the I-Thou now becomes the arena of the self. We see there an old man and a youth meeting on a road. It is not just any two people, but an old man *and* a youth meant to represent the selfless self-unfolding of the old man. Through absolute nothingness the self is cut open selflessly and becomes a double-self. Whatever concerns the other becomes the proper concern of the self in its selflessness. Thus we see the old man turning to the youth and asking, "How is it going with you?" or "Where are you coming from?" or "What is your name?" or "Do you see this flower?"—to take a few examples from the history of Zen Buddhism. All of these are simple, everyday questions, but for the one who is being questioned they have the effect of asking whether one really and truly knows where one actually comes from, whether one really does see the flowers "just as they bloom" of themselves. The old man puts his question in the simplest manner so

that in the other there awakens the question about himself, about his true self: who am I really? The in-between of the two serves the one as a selfless inner arena, and the other as a locus for the existential question about the self.

To sum up, we might say that these three pictures depict a threefold manifestation of the selfless self which on each occasion is completely present in its own way. The self, the selfless self, for its part is only fully real insofar as it can realize itself in each facet of the threefold transformation in a completely different manner. It is a question of a movement that consists in drawing with Existenz an invisible circle of nothingness-nature-communication. It is present not only in the de-becoming into nothingness that leaves not a trace behind—as, for instance, in the selfless blooming together of the flowers—but also in the encounter with an other in which one sees one's other self in the other. This movement brings to actuality for the first time the true, selfless self, and to that extent can still be objectified in the manner of these pictures. But the dynamic as such that is involved here is not an object that lends itself to being depicted or fixed. Once again we come back to absolute nothingness, for when Buddhism speaks of absolute nothingness it is just this composite dynamic complex that it has in mind.

In contrast to the so-called mandala drawings, Zen pictures are typically as simple and unadorned as those we have just seen. For Zen Buddhism it is the simplest that is always the most original, the unconditioned. In addition to simplicity, Zen drawings have another important distinctive trait: they contain, as an essential element, the dissolution of the pictorial into an imagelessness that surpasses depicting. "The infinite openness in all ten directions is a single, clear, transparent pearl." Within the image as a whole, the image of the universe becomes transparent as a pearl. On the one hand the pearl is dissolved into infinite openness, and on the other infinite openness is concretized in the image of the pearl. The transparent pearl in which and as which the infinite openness is crystallized, at the same time absorbs its own depictability into its own transparency and thus eliminates it. In the pictorial correlatedness of nothingness-nature-communication, the second and third pictures are once again dissolved into the first picture of absolute nothingness, while that first picture in turn is embodied in the other two. A Zen picture is, through its very character as a picture, a dynamic image for this movement of drawing and un-drawing, of depicting and un-depicting. In this way the Zen

picture mediates the dynamic from the invisible to the visible, and from the visible to the invisible. The importance of this dynamic character of the Zen picture is apparent when one considers the danger inherent in the power of an image because of its pictorial nature. The power of an image consists in its making seen what is unseen, which makes all the greater the danger that the image might imprison and constrict, as happens when we confuse the symbolized with the symbol.

Let us now turn to a formal description of the selfless self in terms of its structure, in order more sharply to define the contours of its essential nature. The true self functions as the selfless self—selflessly—not only ethically but structurally as well. This selfless self should not be taken as a substance but only as a dynamic movement that proceeds out of itself and then back again to itself. In this movement self-identity is indeed contained as an essential element, but only in tension with another element, namely the negation of self-identity for the sake of selflessness. Self-identity and its negation are correlated to one another, and this leads to the movement of the self away from itself and back again to itself.[4] This process is to be seen in the example of freedom insofar as freedom belongs to the essence of the self. We speak of freedom *from* something and also freedom *for* or *towards* something. The "from" and "towards" of freedom signals an existential dynamic at work, according to which the most original freedom of the self as self is the freedom from itself and towards itself. Hence the movement out of itself and back again to itself. If this dynamic is somehow interfered with, the self becomes sick with the sickness of Existenz, which shows up in a number of different forms. First is the sickness of the self-enclosed self wherein one is no longer able to go out of oneself; second is the sickness of the wayward self that cannot find its way back to itself; and third is the sickness of self-entanglement in which the dynamic process does not take place in openness but remains imprisoned within the walls of the ego.

Kōjō and Kōge: Ascent and Descent

The true self is the selfless self, and as such entails a dynamic movement

[4] See S. Ueda, "Emptiness and Fullness: Śūnyatā in Mahāyāna Buddhism," *Eastern Buddhist* XV, 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 9–37.

out of itself and back again to itself. The self departs itself selflessly into infinite openness, *ek-statically*, and returns to itself from openness, taking this openness into itself, *en-statically*. Infinite openness belongs to the selfless self in its selflessness, and the selfless self for its part belongs to infinite openness as the arena of its movement from and towards itself, just as in Heidegger Dasein is seen as a pure being-in-the-world. Infinite openness works in this regard as the extreme disclosure of the world; it *is* disclosure itself. The arena of Dasein in which the self at any given moment locates itself concretely is open to all sorts of variations—family, community, a certain company, and so forth. But if the self is to be opened up to the world that grounds it at any given point, this can only happen at a fundamental level if the self opens up to openness in the first place. The self has to be cut open by means of infinite openness. Otherwise, for example, there is no question of a father becoming a true father, but only remaining an egoistic father within his family. Insofar as he is related to his fatherhood within the family egocentrically, his relationship to his family is not an open one.

The dynamic movement in infinite openness we speak of here, then, is not a mere idling within oneself but an encounter with the other and with nature that takes place within the dynamic corresponding to that encounter. In every encounter the movement from and towards reappears. In the fundamental process of moving out of oneself and back towards oneself there is also realized a freedom from the other and towards the other, from nature and towards nature. The correlatedness we saw in the three pictures above showed the same thing. In this regard freedom from means negation and freedom towards means affirmation. The movement out of oneself points to an extreme self-negation and the movement back to oneself points to the most immediate self-affirmation. Seen in this total context, negation is spoken of in Zen terminology as the way of ascent and affirmation as the way of descent. The word "way" is not normally used in the texts, but only the grammatically indefinite terms *kōjō* 向上[5] and *kōge* 向下, which we are translating here as ascent and descent respectively. This motif is central to Zen Buddhism and understandably runs throughout the whole of Zen writings: on the one hand, a No that expands

[5] *Kōjō* was originally an everyday word during the T'ang Period signifying: above, further, next, etc.

ever wider and wider into every possible shape and form, and on the other a countermanding Here-and-Now. As an example of negation, we may cite the case of a Zen student who so binds himself to the image of the universe as a pearl referred to above that he gets trapped there, whereupon his master tells him, "Smash your pearl." To show affirmation, the master grabs ahold of that same student bodily and tells him, "The pearl of totality, it's here!" Zen is fundamentally a matter of performance, which is why it has few images and few theories. Zen Buddhism offers us instead countless concrete illustrations of performance in all sorts of shapes and forms. (One should not on this account neglect to remember that this simplicity also leaves room in the spectrum between radical negation and immediate affirmation for the development of metaphysics and ethics. Only it is characteristic of Zen that such developments can always be dissolved again through the dynamic of ascent and descent just referred to. We cannot, however, go any further into this problem within the scope of the present essay.)

The characteristic features of ascent and descent for Zen may be summarized in three points. First, Zen deals with the dynamic of ascent and descent *as a dynamic* and not with any representational terminus of the process. Whenever an image of the terminus is presented, the movement of the dynamic is liable to get stuck in the images and halt there. At such points the process must be set on its way again to advance unimpeded (ascent) and come still closer (descent).

Secondly, this means that it is not only a question of the dynamic as such but also of the actual opening up of the arena in which this dynamic moves, namely, infinite openness. Thus it is a question of letting oneself be opened up *by* infinite openness and *for* infinite openness. Infinite openness belongs to the true, selfless self in its selflessness, and that in a manner that infinite openness as it were cuts the self open. If this is the case, then the selfless self is in the highest degree both dynamic and non-dynamic. That is to say, as the arena of the dynamic process, infinite openness does not move itself. Hence the movement of ascent and the movement of descent are at the same time a non-movement.

Thirdly, all of this is not mere matter for speculation but has to do with the existential self-confirmation of the self. Zazen in this regard is directed to infinite openness and sanzen, as we shall see, to the dynamic of ascent and descent.

In speaking of the true self we referred to the selfless self as a movement

out of itself and back again to itself, a dynamic of from and towards. In virtue of this identity one may say, "I am I," and thus effect a great journey out of oneself and back to oneself again. "A nobleman went into a far country to receive kingly power and then return" (Luke 19: 12). For Meister Eckhart this constitutes the nobility of human nature.[6] With a slight alteration we might read: a certain one set out to attain nothingness in infinite openness—which is only a way of objectifying the great journey out of oneself and back again to oneself. What it means is this: I am I precisely because I am not I—which represents the journey from oneself and towards oneself as a clarification of the self.

The Closed Ego

The true self was represented above in terms of a dynamic movement out of oneself and back again towards oneself. A false development of this "from oneself towards oneself," however, can result in each of the movements of the self getting its "self" stuck in the other. Identity with oneself becomes a clinging to oneself, thus giving rise to an ego closed up in itself. The same words, "I am I" are spoken, but the basis for speaking them has shifted from a dynamic of selflessness to an "I am I because I-am-I." The ego closed up in itself, the I-am-I, represents the fundamental perversion of the selfless self, and as such gives us the fundamental statement of the ego-assertiveness of the I. The genuine, selfless "I am I" is turned upside down, perverted into an I-am-I in which the original openness is closed off.

Buddhism sees this I-am-I, this self-substantializing clinging to the self, as the basis of human misery, which affects not only human beings—but all beings. This I-am-I effects a triple poisoning of the ego—blindness, hatred, and greed—in which the ego is at the same time the perpetrator and the victim of the damage. It is an existential self-poisoning.

Blindness towards oneself. Here the ego opens itself up only halfway in the direction of the selfless "I am I," and so gets trapped in the I-am-I in such a way that the ego represents itself to itself and then comprehends its identity in terms of that representation. The half-opened ego is caught in the passionate grip of the represented ego and inclines towards it.

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[6] Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, Band V (W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1968), pp. 109ff.

It is a self-gripping that leads to the self-closure. The represented ego is the actualization of a self-love, of one's "beloved ego." Narcissism is thus always a part of ego-consciousness. In lieu of true clarity with regard to the self there is only an apparent clarity that turns out at bottom to be a blindness towards the self, as it was with Narcissus who admired the beauty of his own image reflected in the water and fell infatuated with it. Consciousness gets thoroughly clouded over, disturbed, and darkened because of such ego-consciousness.

Hatred. As a result of the I-am-I of the beloved ego, the arena between the I and other turns into a battleground. Hatred of the other is part of the I-am-I, even though the I-am-I try to masquerade itself under various forms of compromise for the sake of conviviality. As a poison of the ego hatred works more or less in covert fashion, though often enough it breaks out in acute and open fashion, and shows up not only between ego and ego but also between one group and other, one state and another, one people and another, and, as history tells us, between one religion and other—in short anywhere that the I-am-I spreads over into a collective consciousness.

Greed. The I-am-I is an identity with oneself lacking in all content. In order to fill itself up and provide itself with ostensible importance, this empty ego requires its own attributes and possessions. The *I* is therefore transformed into a *mine* which grows stronger and stronger in that the ego is only capable of confirming itself with self-certitude as one who owns possessions. The nature that the ego-individual encounters becomes the ego's "own" world, and the things of nature become objects in the ego's property. The fundamental form of its connection with things is "having": the ego reckons itself as having its being, and is therefore intent in increasing its greediness in order to consolidate its hold on its being and enlarge it. What it does not yet have the ego wants to have, and what it already has it does not want to let go of. Thus it is with greed as a poison of the ego.

In relation to itself the I is blind to itself, in relation to others it is hateful, and in relation to nature it is greedy to possess. Out of this triple self-poisoning of the I-am-I originates suffering. Here we have one of Buddhism's pivotal insights. It means that the fundamental form of human misery is to be seen in the ego blinded to itself, hateful towards others, and battling over possessions. By imagining another world free

of all suffering and practicing asceticism and worship as a way to reach that other world, the ego seeks to free itself from suffering. But such attempts to the ego to secure its own salvation remain within the sphere of influence of the I-am-I, and only draw the ego over into religion while the roots of suffering remain buried beneath the I-am-I as such. The ego-individual needs to pass through a fundamental death for the sake of the true self, as well as for the sake of the other and of nature. The I-am-I cannot free itself *from* the other and nature, let alone free itself *for* the other and nature.

The whole process therefore revolves about the dissolution of the I-am-I, and this is where zazen is of service. Openness free of all opposition dissolves hatred towards the other; being alert and present breaks through the illusion of the ego and dissolves blindness towards oneself; being empty dissolves greed. Thus is the Zen saying confirmed: letting go brings superabundance.

Now the I-am-I must be broken through again and again, ever anew, for there is an imprisonment in "oneself" inherent in each movement out of oneself and back again to oneself. It matters not how long and how often one practices zazen. What matters is that zazen becomes a basic attitude towards life.

We have been speaking of the true self in its Buddhist sense, that is, as a selfless self. One may wonder why nothing has been said of the Buddha, indeed whether anything essential to Buddhism can be asserted without speaking of the Buddha. Actually to treat the selfless self and treat the Buddha are fundamentally and originally one and the same thing. Because of its selflessness the selfless self can, in a basic and original sense, be spoken of as the Awakened One, the Buddha. One who has awakened to the truth of the self is in accord with the truth of being. Is this also the case, though, with the saving Buddha and the cosmic Buddha that we encounter in the historical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism? So long as the self has not yet truly realized its selflessness, the Buddha appears to such a self as its own fundamental ground and the wellspring of its being, albeit as an absolute other in its infinite greatness. The self here reaches its selflessness in the form of a total surrender to the saving Buddha (as in Amida Buddhism) or in the form of a mystical union with the cosmic Buddha (as in esoteric Shingon Buddhism). Whatever form it takes, however, Buddhism is ultimately concerned with the selfless self.

Again, one who has died is spoken of in popular parlance as having become a Buddha—in Japanese, *hotoke*—not so much because of any relation to "ancestor worship" but rather because of the selflessness that is central to the truth of the self. In virtue of its being-no-more, the being of the dead one becomes greater, purer, more intense, with the result that it can take on a higher significance for those who have been left behind. This is what grants death its strong symbolic power in religion, why it can become a symbol of detachment for Meister Eckhart and also for Zen Buddhism. "They are right who live as if they were no longer living," says Eckhart. "First die, then you can come to me," the Zen master tells his student.

Sanzen and Mondō

Let us now pass from zazen to a second aspect of Zen practice, sanzen. Here we are concerned with Zen in encounter and communication with others, which shows up in practice as training through dialogue and confrontation with a master.

The departure from zazen is also part of zazen. Going in and coming out belong together. The departure from zazen begins in the movement of getting up from zazen, which by no means implies that one gives up doing zazen but rather that zazen itself stands up on its feet and sets itself in motion.

In getting up from zazen something new is achieved. To stand up means inevitably coming into confrontation with an other. It means a meeting of one vis-à-vis an other, and this relationship can be effected with another human, with a tree, or whatever. But what the other that is now encountered is, and what it appears encountered as, is connected with the very depths of zazen. What in other circumstances might appear to be only a tree can, for one who has arisen from the depths of zazen, at the moment of encounter become a crystallized concretization of the entire universe.

Relations to others are of course part of being human, but here, for one who has gotten up from zazen, relating becomes something different because of the groundless depths of zazen, the ungrounded deep. The relationship to the other no longer operates in a context of subject and object, yet neither is it entirely the "I and Thou" that Martin Buber speaks of, although the I-Thou relationship is an essential element in it.

Roughly put it comes to this: I and Thou, on the ungrounded depths

of neither-I-nor-Thou of zazen, are penetrated by this neither-I-nor-Thou so that the "in between" of I and Thou becomes an ungrounded groundlessness of those depths. For Buber the ground that sustains the "I and Thou" is the Eternal Thou of which each particular Thou is an extension. "Every particular Thou is a glimpse into the Eternal Thou." Without that relationship to the Eternal Thou, which of its essence is incapable of becoming an "it," the particular Thou is transformed from an *I* into an *it*. In other words, so forceful is the I in propelling itself onesidedly from the I that it can objectify everything it comes into contact with, can constitute everything as an object. The I has to be stopped and pushed back from this onesidedness through the encounter with a powerful Other so that space can be made for the opposition of an I-Thou relationship. This powerful Other is for Buber the Eternal Thou, and his concern is with the overcoming of onesided egocentrism. For Zen Buddhism the ground that sustains the "I and Thou" is the ungrounded depth that is opened up beneath the "in between" through zazen. Here, too, it is a question of overcoming egocentrism in its onesidedness, though in another form. Instead of being directed immediately to the one encountered, one first sinks selflessly into the nothingness of the ungrounded groundlessness of the "in between," in order then, arisen from the depths of nothingness, resurrected, to enter into the vis-à-vis of the I-Thou. In this way both reciprocal self-sufficiency as well as reciprocal dependency—the basic twofold condition of the I-Thou, of dialog—are brought to their highest potential. On the one hand I am self-sufficient even so far as to include the nothingness of my partner, insofar as the other is embraced by me in my selflessness; on the other hand, I am dependent on my partner even so far as my nothingness, as the partner is so dependent on me. But this is a subject all its own and we cannot go further into it here.

In the present context what is important is that confrontation with the other occurs upon arising from zazen. There the selfless self is practiced as a reciprocal confrontation. This is sanzen: to act out the dynamic of the I-Thou permeated by the neither-I-nor-Thou together with one's master so that the selfless self can verify itself in a corresponding dynamic.

But now how is such an encounter to become an occasion for practice? Precisely because the encounter itself already entails a mutual questioning and answering. In the confrontation and ungrounded "in between," the I-Thou is not a situation of stillness but a continually new event that is performed by the two partners in ever more concrete manner and needs

to be verified. In each case the encounter is an event from self to self, an event in which the self is brought into question and located in the correlatedness of selflessness and selfhood. Fundamentally the encounter is a mutual questioning: who are you really? In Zen Buddhism the encounter is performed expressly as a question-and-answer. For example, a monk once came to master Hui-neng to practice Zen with him. The monk greeted his master with a bow at which point the master asked, "Who are you really that comes to me in this manner?" The question has the instant effect of bringing the monk's relationship to himself into question and throwing him into an essential uncertainty. Only after three years of probing the ground of the self through zazen and sanzen did he awaken to his self and bring his own reply to the master: "Even a single word about the self misses the true self."

This question-answer event that is carried out expressly as an encounter is what Zen refers to as *mondō* 問答, literally "question and answer." It is Zen Buddhism in the midst of life, a free, unique, lived event between one living being and other. It is primarily in the actual examples of *mondō* rather than in the form of teachings that the true concerns of Zen Buddhism are represented. The principal writings of Zen Buddhism are largely made up of collection of such examples, as we see for instance in the *Bi-yän-lu* (Blue Cliff Records). The doctrinal writings of Mahāyāna (sūtras and tracts) do in fact form the philosophical and religious foundations of Zen Buddhism, but the practice of Zen based on those writings is concerned with breaking through the doctrinal level in order to open up to the level of living actualization. Thus the way a topic is treated in *mondō* will be completely different from the way it is treated doctrinally. For example, we read in the doctrinal writings, "Prajñāpāramitā (consummate wisdom) is the wisdom beyond every dualism." But in *mondō*, the same theme is pursued in altogether distinct manner, as the following example should illustrate. A master is working in the garden with his broom when another master happens by and inquires of him, "What is prajñāpāramitā?" The first master throws his broom to one side, breaks out in laughter, and hastens off to his room. Thereupon the second master also breaks out in laughter and departs. Here the difference of type and level between doctrinal formulas and *mondō* experiences becomes clear. The same emphasis on the event-quality of encounter and dialog is also present in other contexts, for instance in narrative literature where the

narration pases over into dialog at the critical and climactic points.

This is the practice of Zen that occurs in and as *mondō*. In terms of what actually happens we may describe it as follows: A master gives his student a Zen task. Most commonly this means presenting the student with some classical question-and-answer story chosen from the annals of Zen literature. A good illustration is the dialog that took place between the great master Tung-shan of China's T'ang Period and an unnamed monk. Asked by the monk, "What is the Buddha?", Tung-shan replied, "Three pounds of hemp."[8] According to the transmission the setting for the dialog was that the master was at the very point of weighing hemp when the monk came up to him with the question about the Buddha. The master's reply flowed directly out of the work he was absorbed in meditatively at the moment. What is the Buddha?—Three pounds of hemp. The crude disjunction between question and answer is apparent. "Three pounds of hemp" is what Zen Buddhism describes as a *sudden*, unmediated event. But to try to deduce from the *mondō* some statement of doctrine or other, such as "The Buddha is something ordinary and everyday like three pounds of hemp," would be completely to miss the quality of event that it portrays. From the viewpoint of the doctrinal statement, the presentation of the topic in the form of a *mondō* would be of no consequence. Here the doctrinal proposition is leaped over by means of what takes place in the "in between," by an event that brings about a lived actualization in the immediacy of the present. Such an event cannot be presented in doctrinal formulas.

What is the Buddha?—Three pounds of hemp. Calling to mind this timeworn example, the master next asks his student, "What is the point of the three pounds of hemp?" The task for the student consists in giving the master an answer of his own making. Then master and student engage in a brief dialog in which as a rule the master strictly rejects the student, who then returns to zazen. The student later gets up from zazen with a new response, and the process is repeated once again and until such time as the student has really found something to say to the example in the

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[7] Martin Buber, *Die Schriften über das dialogische Prinzip* (Lambert Schneider, Heidelberg, 1954), p. 76 (the beginning of the section on "I and Thou").

[8] See *Bi-yän-lu, Niederschrift von der smaragdenen Felswand*, explained and interpreted by Wilhelm Gundert (Carl Hanser, Munich, 1960), Vol. I, pp. 239–40.

service of his own awakening. Then the master gives another example to work on. Through this going back and forth between sanzen and zazen the correlatedness of discussion and solitary reflection, of speech and silence, is being performed. This correlatedness is a critical element in genuine Zen dialog, since without solitary reflection the reciprocity of discussion easily deteriorates into a purely formal reciprocity lacking all quality as an event. Genuine *dialog* requires both *solitary* reflection as well as the *repetition* of the dialog.

In sanzen the *mondō* is thus involved twice, first as the original question and answer transmitted from the history of Zen, and secondly as the medium of practice for master and student occasioned by that original question and answer. In order to enter properly into the original *mondō*, the student must appropriate history and make it present, that is, one must experience oneself immediately as questioned and questioner respectively. The standpoint of the student is not that of a third party looking at things from the outside, putting question and answer together to form an objective statement of doctrine, and thereby supposing the example to have been understood. What is essential is that one set oneself squarely in the "in between" of the event of the original *mondō*. Thus as a medium of practice for master and student, the *mondō* is intended to transport the original *mondō* of the old masters into the present and reconstruct it in its full vitality. What that means in practice may be seen from another example. A monk once asked Chao-chou, "What is the meaning of the Bodhidharma's coming to China?" to which Chao-chou replied, "The oak tree in the garden."[9] One of Chao-chou's disciples took this original *mondō* into the present when another asked him, "I have heard it said that your master answered the question about the meaning of the Bodhidharma's coming from India to China by saying, 'The oak tree in the garden.' Is that so?" The disciple replied, "Do not make a fool of my master. He never said such a thing." Such is the freedom of the disciple that he can take his master's words, "The oak tree in the garden," in his own completely original way in bringing them to the present.

The core of the *mondō*, the correlatedness of negation and affirmation, is brought out concretely in a story that makes immediate both its quality of event and its dynamic interplay of reciprocity. Two masters were

[9] See *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, translated with commentaries by K. Sekida (Weatherhill, New York), p. 110.

sitting opposite one another drinking tea. (For Zen, any setting can become a suitable occasion for *mondō*.) Forthwith master A remarks, "The All is present in full measure in a cup of tea" (1). At that point master B tips over master A's cup and the tea spills out. Master B then turns to master A and asks, "Now where is the All?" (2). Master A replies simply, "Oh, what a shame, and such good tea!" (3). And thereupon both laugh (4).

1. Here we have the introduction of the doctrine of All-is-One into a concrete, everyday situation. While this way of adaptation already gives us some hint of Zen, the words form a thesis that remains on the level of doctrine. This should not, however, be taken to mean that master A is stuck on the level of doctrine, since his words confront master B and prompt him to give response by taking a stance to the thesis, and thus to disclose something of himself.

2. Master B tips over the teacup of master A. The apparently coarse and unexpected behavior serves to break through the level of doctrine at a single stroke. It is a total negation achieved *on the way of ascent*, as a result of which the level of conversation on the topic is shifted from the formulation of a thesis to the occurrence of an event. From this standpoint of event, then, master B takes master A to task for his beautiful thesis, "Now where is the All?"

3. Master A replies, "Oh, what a shame, and such good tea!" Here we have a complete reversal of the unaccustomed that had broken into the customary, a reversal achieved *on the way of descent*. The cup has fallen over and the tea spilled out. Undiverted by the intervening question that explains the crude behavior of master B, yet without clinging to his own thesis, master A only replies, "What a shame!" He draws himself out of the discussion on the All-is-One and out of the disturbing deed back into the immediate presence of the everyday. The event of the moment is taken in completely and without remainder through this "What a shame!"

4. Then the two masters laugh together. This laugh in chorus is the conclusion. The dynamic correlatedness of infinite negation and the immediate here-and-now present transforms the seriousness of the mutual questioning into a sharing in a game of truth. The play of truth that takes place in the confrontation of one individual with another thus answers the question and wipes it away. The two laugh and in their laughter the *mondō* is resolved.

In conclusion to this first part a modern Zen question may be adduced

from the context of the current encounter between Christianity and Buddhism, in order to clarify the direction in which the Zen question moves.

D. T. Suzuki asks: "It is written in the Bible, 'God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.' *Who* saw that happen? [Who was the eye-witness?]"

TRANSLATED BY JAMES W. HEISIG

Ascent and Descent

Zen Buddhism in Comparison with Meister Eckhart

PART TWO

UEDA SHIZUTERU

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.[10]
>
> 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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* Originally a lecture in German given at the ERANOS CONFERENCE 1981 in Ascona, and published in ERANOS YEARBOOK 50–1981, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt.

[10] 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.[11]

In 1948 a monumental work on Meister Eckhart by Nishitani Keiji appeared in Japan, entitled: *Kami to zettai-mu* (God and Absolute Nothingness).[12] 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.
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> 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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[11] *Ibid.*, p. 271.

[12] 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.[13]

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 Breakthrough: 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*[14] and *The Blue Cliff Records.*[15] 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.[16]

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.[17]

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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[13] Nishitani, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 4 ff.

[14] See n. 4.

[15] See n. 9.

[16] Bernard Welte, *Meister Eckhart: Gedanken zu seinen Gedanken* (Freiburg/Br., Herder, 1979), p. 110.

[17] 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.[18] 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."[19] 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."[20] Absolute

[18] 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.

[19] Cf. *DW* I, p. 454 (pp. 109, 110).

[20] *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."[21] 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."[22]

> 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.[23]

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

[21] *DW* II, p. 652 (pp. 76, 77).
[22] *DW* II, p. 550 (p. 253) and *DW* II, p. 713 (p. 420).
[23] *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."[24] 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*).[25] 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."[26] 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."[27]

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[24] *Q*, p. 272.
[25] *DW* III, p. 586 (p. 448).
[26] *DW* I, p. 510 (p. 345).
[27] *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 god*head* . . . ," "When I [still] stood in my first cause, I had no God, . . . there I stood free of God and of all things."[28] 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]."[29] 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.[30] 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

[28] *Q*, p. 273 and *DW* II, p. 728 (p. 492).
[29] *Q*, p. 273.
[30] 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."[31]

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.[32]

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*)."[33] 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

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[31] *DW* I, pp. 450–1 (p. 90 f).
[32] *DW* II, p. 730 f (p. 504 f).
[33] *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.[34] 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, incontravertible 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.[35] Nothingness in Zen is not, as it is with Eckhart, another

[34] *DW* III, Sermon 86.

[35] 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.*[36] 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

[36] *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.[37]

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

[37] *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*)."[38]

> 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 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*].[39]

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

[38] *DW* I, p. 477 (p. 196).
[39] *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)[40] 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

[40] *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."[41]

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."[42] 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 vürbaz 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"

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[41] 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.

[42] On the following short quotations, see *DW* III, pp. 593–98 (482–91).

means for Eckhart, "with many things, not one" (*dû 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.[43]

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 reformulation of the birth of God in the soul. It becomes apparent from his

[43] *Meister Eckhart: Die lateinischen Werke*, published through the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Vol. 3, *Expositions. 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.[44] 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

[44] 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.[45] 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.[46] 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

[45] See Part I of the present article, *Eastern Buddhist* XVI, 1, p. 58.

[46] *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.[47]

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

[47] 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.

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."[48] Are we dealing here with the same thing in these two examples, or with something different?

TRANSLATED BY IAN ASTLEY AND JAMES W. HEISIG

[48] See n. 9.