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ECKHART AND DŌGEN ON FORGETTING THE SELF

A Contemplative Studies Perspective

André van der Braak

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) is considered by some the quintessential Christian mystic. He has been invoked extensively by both Christian and Buddhist interreligious scholars (e.g. Roy 2001, 2003; Radler 2006; Braak 2011, 2014, 2016; Joseph 2015; Blum 2015). According to the Korean theologian Hee-Sung Keel, Eckhart’s “Asian Christianity” forms an excellent bridge reconciling Christianity and Buddhism (Keel 2004, 2007).

The comparison between Eckhart and Buddhism has a long history. Schopenhauer (1859) already claimed that Eckhart and the Buddha were essentially saying the same thing.¹ Since the early twentieth century, Eckhart’s thought has been compared to Zen² Buddhism by D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966) and the Kyoto School thinkers Keiji Nishitani (1900–90) and Shizuteru Ueda (1926–2019) in various works (Suzuki 1957; Nishitani 1982; Ueda 1965, 1982, 2001–2003).

This chapter will first give a brief overview of the various approaches to Eckhart-Zen studies. Consequently, Eckhart’s notion of the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul will be discussed further. It will explore the affinities between Eckhart’s contemplative project (illuminating the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul) and the Mahayana Buddhist contemplative project (illuminating and participating in the continuous self-revelation of one’s own inherent Buddha nature), especially as presented by the Zen thinker Eihei Dōgen (1200–53). Dōgen’s presentation of zazen sitting practice as an ongoing contemplative practice that enacts “forgetting the self” will be used to shed light on Eckhart’s contemplative practice.

From the conclusion of this chapter, it will become apparent that Eckhart’s “Asian Christianity” can indeed play an important role in the further development of Christian-Buddhist dialogue.

Approaches to Eckhart-Zen Studies

The British historian of ideas J.J. Clarke has proposed that the philosophical encounters between Asian and Western thought in the twentieth century can be conveniently thought of as a sequence of three phases that overlap both chronologically and conceptually: the universalist, the comparative, and the hermeneutical (Clarke 1997: 119).

The universalist approach aims at synthesizing East and West into a single world philosophy, going back to Leibniz’s *philosophia perennis*. The second comparative approach adopts a more modest picture, dealing with individual concepts or thinkers, attempting to illuminate both

(Clarke 1997: 122). The hermeneutical approach overlaps with the comparative approach but develops a more hermeneutical reflexive and self-critical stance, beyond merely postulating parallels and drawing analogies between distinct thinkers and traditions (Clarke 1997: 125). Western philosophers engage directly with Eastern thinkers (and vice versa) not to compare them but simply as part of a broader philosophical enterprise that can be characterized as a transcultural human activity.

The first approach to Eckhart-Zen studies corresponds to Clarke's universalist phase. Eckhart was used by both Western and Japanese thinkers to build a bridge between the West and Zen. The German theologian Rudolf Otto claimed that only Eckhart can help Westerners understand Zen. He remarked in *Mysticism East and West* that "we can only gain access to this strange experiential world in this mysticism with a very peculiar character by starting out with Eckhart, and then only in some of his rarest and deepest moments" (Otto 1971[1926]: 269–272).³ On the other hand, for Japanese Zen thinkers, Eckhart served as a way to build a bridge from Zen to the West and reconceptualize (or rethink) Zen for a Western audience as a form of mysticism. In his *Mysticism East and West*, Suzuki (1957) drew extensive parallels between Eckhart and Zen, based on a perennialist philosophy that saw Eckhart as going beyond Christianity, in a similar vein as Zen (according to Suzuki) went beyond Buddhism (see Huxley 1945; Guénon 1945; Schuon 1975). This was part of Suzuki's attempt to imagine Zen for the West as a universal mysticism (see Braak 2008, 2011, 2020).⁴

The second approach to Eckhart-Zen studies corresponds to Clarke's comparative and hermeneutical phases. Their chief representatives were members of the Japanese Kyoto School who engaged, from their Zen background, with Eckhart. Nishitani wrote about Eckhart in relationship to the Zen philosophy of *sunyata* in his *Religion and Nothingness* (Nishitani 1982). His successor Ueda wrote his dissertation on Eckhart (Ueda 1965) and several articles on Eckhart and Zen (Ueda 1982, 1983a, 1983b). As his student Bret Davis (2008) notes, for Ueda, Zen is not a form of mysticism but a non-mysticism.

Some have criticized the Kyoto School interpreters of Eckhart for marginalizing his Christian roots, and for assimilating him too much into the Buddhist camp. Also, one can wonder to what extent Ueda's thinking is truly historical and contextual. Heisig notes in a review of Ueda's collected works that "for one writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Ueda's concern with historical paradigms or the deconstructing of assumptions is remarkably scant" (Heisig 2005: 257).

In a third, more truly hermeneutical approach to Eckhart-Zen studies, both Eckhart and Zen are properly contextualized. Eckhart is not separated from his Christian, specifically Dominican, roots, but his "mysticism" is seen as a mystical way or mode of appropriating that Christian tradition, in order to deepen and develop it further (see Dobie 2010). For example, Keel (2004, 2007) illuminates Eckhart's "Asian Christianity" to stimulate the further development of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. Also, Joseph (2015) and Blum (2015) situate Eckhart in his historical and religious context when they compare his work to the Zen tradition. In an earlier publication (Braak 2011), I explored Eckhart's mystical theology in its Christian context, focusing on a comparison with the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen.

Whose Zen? Which Eckhart?

For a truly cross-cultural hermeneutical approach to Eckhart-Zen studies, both Zen and Eckhart need to be properly contextualized. How is Zen being imagined in the meeting of Western and East Asian horizons? How is Eckhart being imagined in the meeting of medieval and (post) modern horizons?

What is commonly indicated by the single word “Zen” in reality comprises a vast and historically variegated network of Buddhist traditions in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Knowledge of these traditions has come to the West filtered through the sectarian filters of Japanese missionaries, scholars, and philosophers. The Zen that has been presented to the West by Suzuki (and to a lesser extent Ueda) has been primarily the Japanese Rinzai tradition, going back to the Chinese Chan masters Linji Yuan (d. 866) and Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163). This tradition has often been presented to the West as if it were an antinomian anti-ritual tradition focused on breaking through to an enlightenment experience beyond language and thought. Recent historical research has shown, however, that such antinomian rhetoric often does not reflect actual historical practice (Welter 2008; Braak 2010) and that ritual has always played, and continues to play, a very important role in the Zen traditions (Heine and Wright 2008).

The second important Japanese Zen tradition, Dōgen’s Sōtō-tradition, was initially little known in the West. This tradition goes back to the Chinese Chan masters Dongshan Liangjie (806–869) and Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091–1157) and focuses on “silent illumination.” For Dōgen, Zen is not about realizing a universal mystical experience that transcends language and thought, but about the ongoing verification and actualization of one’s ever-present original enlightenment through the continuous illumination of one’s inherent Buddha nature within language and thought (Kim 2004, 2007; Heine 1994, 2012, 2020; Wirth, Schroeder and Davis 2016; Davis 2009, 2016, 2018, 2019).⁵

With regard to Eckhart, it is important to take into account what it meant “to become God in fourteenth-century Europe” (Morgan 2013: 101–124). Eckhart’s work had been gathering dust since the fourteenth century until he was reimagined in the nineteenth century as the quintessential German “mystic” (see Flasch 2006, 2010).⁶ His German sermons were emphasized over his Latin works, and his apophatic “mystical” thought was emphasized over his more kataphatic Christian formulations.⁷ In the first half of the twentieth century, Eckhart was studied by “everybody in the intellectual world of the time,” including Robert Musil, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, Martin Buber, Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, and Belá Balázs (Largier 2008: 739). Also Martin Heidegger was intensively studying Eckhart (see Davis 2007: 122–45).

Two Tenets in Eckhart

The two most important types of mystical formulation in the work of Eckhart are the birth of the Son of God in the soul and the breakthrough to the Godhead (McGinn 1991, 2001). As Ueda describes it:

The first type goes: “God gives birth to his Son in the soul, and through this the soul as his Son,” whereas the second type says: “The soul breaks through to the ground of God and grasps God as he is bare and one.” In the first type Eckhart speaks of the union of the soul with God; in the second, of the oneness of the ground of the soul with the ground of God. In the first type, what matters is the Father-Son relationship between God and the soul, whereas in the second, the relationship is completely stripped of a concept or image.

(Ueda 1965: 25f)

Various commentators have differed in their assessment of which of these two tenets is primary in Eckhart’s thought.⁸ In Suzuki’s comparison, Eckhart’s breakthrough to the Godhead is seen

as more important than the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul. Also, Ueda considers the breakthrough motif to be more radical than the birth motif. He regards the birth motif as the substructure on which the superstructure of the breakthrough motif is built (Ueda 1965: 140–150). Nagel (1998) has criticized Ueda for drawing the breakthrough motif too much in the direction of Zen, at the expense of the Christian birth motif. Nagel (1998: 22) argues that the birth motif is no less radical than the breakthrough motif. Other authors such as Caputo (1978: 222ff) even argue that Eckhart's birth motif is more radical than the breakthrough motif.

The tenet of the birth of the Son of God in the soul is at the heart of Christian orthodoxy. Its classic formulation goes back to the Council of Nicaea, held in 325, where it was proclaimed that Christ was begotten, not made. Athanasius (d. 373), the bishop of Alexandria, defended this formulation and argued that “Christ as Son is begotten from the Father eternally, unceasingly, much as sunlight is constantly, unceasingly, generated by the sun, or as springwater gushes up constantly, unceasingly, from its fountainhead” (Harmless 2008: 116). This theme of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father was interpreted by Eckhart as the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul. The theme of the birth of the Son of God in the soul goes back to Origen in the third century, who is actually quoted by Eckhart in sermon 43 (Eckhart 2009: 240). The theme appears in 47 of Eckhart's 114 German sermons and in several Latin works (Harmless 2008: 292 note 77 and 78). Eckhart once gave a sequence of four sermons devoted to it, starting on Christmas Day.

Eckhart's second tenet of the breakthrough to the Godhead involves the apophatic image of the Godhead, that refers not to the Trinitarian God, but to God as the One who is behind the Trinity. “God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth,” Eckhart notes (Sermon 56; Eckhart 2009: 293). The distinction between them is that “God works, while the Godhead does no work: there is nothing for it to do, there is no activity in it. It never peeped at any work. God and Godhead are distinguished by working and not-working” (Sermon 56; Eckhart 2009: 294).

According to most interreligious scholars, regardless of which of the two tenets is primary in Eckhart's work, it is his breakthrough motif, in which a perfect unity with the ultimate foundation of reality is realized, that resonates most with Asian spirituality in general, and Mahayana Buddhism in particular (see e.g., Keel 2007: 48). However, in this chapter, I want to explore the resonances between Eckhart's birth motif and aspects of Dōgen's thought.

The Birth of the Son of God in the Soul

A traditional theme in Christianity is that Christ has three births: “he is begotten unceasingly from the Father in eternity; he was born from the Virgin Mary in time; and he comes to birth in the heart of the just person” (Harmless 2008: 120). However, for Eckhart, these three births are conflated into one:

The Father bears His Son in eternity like Himself. “The Word was with God, and God was the Word” (John 1:1): the same in the same nature. I say more: He has borne him in my soul. Not only is she with Him and He equally with her, but He is in her: the Father gives birth to his Son in the soul in the very same way as He gives birth to him in eternity, and no differently. He must do it whether He likes it or not. The Father begets his Son unceasingly, and furthermore, I say, He begets me as His Son and the same Son. I say even more: not only does He beget me as His Son. But He begets me as Himself and Himself as me, and me as His Being and His nature.

(Sermon 65; Eckhart 2009: 331)⁹

The birth of the son of God in the soul is an ongoing divine activity. Eckhart even declares that “for God, this is an act He so delights in and which pleases Him so well that he does nothing else but beget His Son” (Sermon 40; Eckhart 2009: 227).

The ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul leads to a profound longing in the soul to return to its origin:

The Father always speaks the Son in unity and pours forth all creatures in him. They all have a call to return whence they flowed forth. All their life and being is a calling and a hurrying back to what they came out of.

(Sermon 22; Eckhart 2009: 154)

Eckhart speaks about the two faces of the soul. One face is turned toward the world, whereas the other is “turned directly to God.”

There the divine light is without interruption, working within, even though (the soul) does not know it, because she is not at home. When the spark of intellect is taken barely in God . . . *then* the birth takes place, then the Son is born. This birth does not take place once a year or a month or once a day, but all the time, that is, above time in the expanse where there is no here or now, nor nature nor thought.

(Sermon 31; Eckhart 2009: 188)

The birth of the Son of God in the soul is not a one-time event but an ongoing one. As long as we remain unaware of it, it cannot transform us existentially. This formulation of our ontological reality bears some resemblance to the distinction in Mahayana Buddhism between one’s ever-present original enlightenment and one’s verification or realization of that enlightenment.¹⁰ Both Eckhart’s ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul and the Buddhist ongoing realization of one’s original enlightenment can be interpreted as the continuous illumination or unveiling of Buddha nature. For both Dōgen and Eckhart, the goal of all contemplative practice is to come to a personal and inward participation in this illumination.

In the first chapter of his *Shōbōgenzō*, *On the Endeavor of the Way* [Bendōwa], Dōgen starts out with contextualizing the Zen path. “All Buddha Tathagatas who individually transmit inconceivable dharma, actualizing unsurpassable, complete enlightenment, have a wondrous art, supreme and unconditioned. Receptive samadhi is its mark” (Dōgen 2010: 3).

The ongoing transmission of the ultimate dharma is characterized by a state of pure receptivity (Eckhart’s *Gelassenheit*). Dōgen continues: “Although this inconceivable dharma is abundant in each person, it is not actualized without practice, and it is not experienced without realization” (Dōgen 2010: 3). Although the Son of God is being born in us all the time, it takes contemplative practice (the practice of receptive Samadhi) to fully actualize this, to actually bear the Son of God within us.

The ongoing birth of the Son of God in us is not something that we necessarily experience ourselves: “Sentient beings continuously move about in this dharma, but where they are is not clear in their consciousness” (Dōgen 2010: 3). The ongoing transmission of dharma takes place below the threshold of individual discriminative consciousness. It takes a different kind of consciousness (a state of receptive samadhi) to fully allow this transmission to flower. For this, Dōgen recommends the sitting practice of zazen, an enlightening practice of non-thinking (Davis 2016).

The Contemplative Practice of Forgetting the Self

Rather than approaching Eckhart and Dōgen from the discipline of comparative mysticism, I want to relate them to each other from the discipline of contemplative studies, a new interdisciplinary field of research that concerns itself with contemplative experiences that occur within the context of contemplative practice: “various approaches, disciplines and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom, and the like” (Komjathy 2018: 51).

Both Eckhart and Dōgen see the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul, or the continuous verification of one’s original enlightenment, not as a mere theological dogma but as the ground and foundation of contemplative practice.

If anyone were to ask me: Why do we pray, why do we fast, why do we do all our works, why are we baptized, why (most important of all) did God become man?— I would answer: in order that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God. For this reason all the scriptures were written, for that reason God created the world and all the angelic natures: so that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God.

(Sermon 29; Eckhart 2009: 177)

For both Eckhart and Dōgen, such contemplative practice involves leaving behind, even forgetting, the limited individual self for the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul, or the silent illumination of Buddha nature, to take place unobstructedly. Eckhart speaks about adopting “a wholly God-receptive attitude, such that one’s own self is idle, letting God work within one” (Sermon 1; Eckhart 2009: 30). He refers to it as both a “detachment” (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and a “letting go” (*Gelassenheit*) (see Radler 2006). It is a withdrawal from the world that is a “forgetting and an unknowing” (Sermon 2; Eckhart 2009: 43). As theologian Robert Dobie puts it:

Self-understanding begins not with any immediate reflection upon oneself. To make oneself an object of reflection is to lose oneself, for, as soon as one tries to grasp oneself in any concept or image, one’s “I” has retreated “behind” the reflection. . . . That is why, for the medieval mystic, all authentic self-knowledge must begin and end with a complete letting-go of the self, a radical . . . *abgeschiedenheit* or *gelassenheit* (a detachment or letting-be) from the finite, created self so that one may live and abide in and through the divine Logos.

(Dobie 2010: 4)

For Dōgen, awakening is conceived of as casting off body and mind, leaving behind the sense of self and becoming available for the larger dimension of reality that is called the Buddha: “Just set aside your body and mind, forget about them, and throw them into the house of the Buddha; then all is done by the Buddha” (*Birth and Death* (Shōji); Dōgen 2010: 885).

Such a setting aside of body and mind is even expressed by Dōgen as a forgetting of the self:

To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away.

(*Actualizing the Fundamental Point* (Genjōkōan); Dōgen 2010: 30)

Also for Eckhart, the self needs to be destabilized and decentered. The very knower of truth with his or her limitations and preconditions must be left behind, forgotten. In this way, the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul can take place without obstructions:

How is God all the time born in that man [a detached person]? Pay attention: Whenever that man lays bare and discloses the divine image which God has created in him by nature, then God's image in him stands revealed. Birth must here be understood in the sense of revelation of God, for when the Son is said to be born of the Father, that means that the Father paternally reveals to him His mysteries. Accordingly, the more, and the more clearly, God's image is revealed in a man, the more evidently God is born in him. Thus when it is said that God is all the time being born in him, it is to be understood that the Father lays bare the image and shines forth in him.

(Sermon 63; Eckhart 2009: 319)

This metaphor of the Father laying bare the image and shining forth in the detached person resonates with Dōgen's metaphor of the Buddhas transmitting the inconceivable dharma through receptive samadhi. This will cause the Buddha nature to shine forth in those that have managed to forget their self. This is where the similitude between Eckhart and Dōgen is very close.

For both Eckhart and Dōgen, the contemplative process involves forgetting the self for the ongoing birth of the Son of God in the soul, or the ongoing transmission of the inconceivable dharma, to take place unobstructedly. We tend to become enclosed in and attached to our own finite subjectivity, and in this way become closed off to the revealed nature of being. We become stuck on being itself, or, even worse, on our created concepts about being or beings, rather than on the act of revelation itself. From a contemplative perspective, true religion consists of continually breaking through a blind adherence to static conceptions of being: what we call "reality" needs to be continually "made real" or "made true." This is only possible by letting go of the limited personal self and allowing oneself to be conformed to revealed truth. For this, we need to fall silent and allow ourselves to not speak but be spoken.

Conclusion

In juxtaposing Eckhart's and Dōgen's thought, I have focused on their contemplative practices aimed at forgetting the self, to become fully available to participate in a wondrous and inconceivable larger process that is actually going on (although mostly unnoticed) continuously. Interestingly enough, from this point of view, such a forgetting of the self is not a necessary preliminary stage to facilitate a breakthrough to the Godhead, or a breakthrough experience of enlightenment (*kenshō*). Rather, forgetting the self is the beginning and end of ongoing contemplative practice itself. It is not a means to an end but is its own fulfillment. Forgetting the self *is* realizing one's Buddha nature and *is* breaking through to the Godhead.

Using Dōgen's work to illuminate Eckhart's Christian metaphor of the birth of the Son of God in the soul does not attempt to make a Buddhist out of Eckhart. It rather strengthens the fundamental Christian nature of his thought. My aim has not been to have Eckhart and Dōgen meet in the silence of some ineffable Absolute beyond both Christianity and Buddhism. In such a (deafening) silence, there wouldn't be much room left for their individual voices and their embeddedness in their respective traditions.

In the universalist approach to Eckhart-Zen studies, comparisons between Eckhart and Zen masters have interpreted the commonalities in their writings to mean that they both somehow rose above their own religious traditions and captured some universal essence. From a cross-cultural

hermeneutical approach, however, Eckhart did not rise above Christianity, but, to the contrary, entered very deeply into it. The same can be said about Dōgen and the Buddhist tradition.

Rather than claiming that thinkers from various religious traditions meet one another by breaking through the linguistic and perspectival stances of their tradition, it might be precisely in entering into the depths of their respective traditions that we may find unexpected points of convergence. As Dobie puts it: “If one is to find a common core to mystical thought and experience, it can only be found in and *through* the religious traditions that give life to it, and not outside of them” (Dobie 2010: 2). In their emphasis on the continuous contemplative practice of forgetting the self, both Eckhart and Dōgen point beyond their own religious traditions, not to some universal type of mysticism but to the continuous illumination of and participation in a wondrous and inconceivable spiritual process. Perhaps the notion of such an ongoing illumination and participation can form the ground for new and productive avenues in Buddhist-Christian studies.

Notes

- 1 Schopenhauer 1859: 48: “If we turn from the forms, produced by external circumstances, and go to the root of things, we shall find that Sakyamuni and Meister Eckhart teach the same thing; it is only that the former dared to express his ideas plainly and positively, whereas Eckhart is obliged to clothe them in the garment of Christian myth and to adapt his expressions to it.”
- 2 Since the term “Zen” has become commonplace in the West, I will use it here to refer to both the Chinese Chan and the Japanese Zen traditions.
- 3 The reference is from the German edition. In the English translation, the ap-pen-dix that contains this passage was not included. Carl Jung also wrote that the *satori* ex-perience of Zen can be found in the West in Eckhart (Jung 1991: 14, 19).
- 4 Later in his life, Suzuki regretted his presentation of Zen as a form of mysticism, see Sakamoto 1977.
- 5 As Heine notes (1994: 8), however, such distinction between Rinzai and Sōtō is more complex than a simple stereotypical polarization.
- 6 To explain the popularity of Eckhart as a mystic among twentieth-century German intellectuals, Flasch points to several cultural and historical reasons. The crisis in Christianity that was widely experienced led to a fascination with the newly found category of “German mysticism,” a form of German Christianity that emphasized living experience over dogmas and institutions. It promised a freer spirituality, independent of institutions (Flasch 2006: 17).
- 7 See McGinn (2001: 36f) for an overview of the various types of mysticism that have been ascribed to Eckhart’s thought.
- 8 Keel (2007: 40–49) gives an overview of the various interpretations of Eckhart’s images of the breakthrough to the Godhead and the going birth of the Son of God in the soul.
- 9 Parts of this passage were labeled by John XXII in his papal bull *In agro dominico* as “having a very bad sound and suspect of heresy,” although they could be salvaged by many explanations (Eckhart 2009: 27).
- 10 Especially addressed in the *Awakening of Faith Sutra*. See Hakeda 2006; Braak 2014.

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