THE MYSTICAL HERMENEUTICS
OF ECKHART AND DŌGEN

The Continuous Self-Revelation of Buddha Nature

Introduction

The practice of dialogue between Western and non-Western religious traditions can be a complex and hazardous exercise. Non-Western religious thinkers are often forced into the conceptual frameworks of Western religions, different cultural traditions are sometimes seen as incommensurable, and the dangers of chauvinism and orientalism are always present. But interreligious dialogue also offers chances and opportunities. The encounter with something foreign can help turn what one considers to be one’s “own” into something foreign in order to gain critical distance from one’s own European tradition.\(^1\) What is foreign can bring one’s own implicit pre-understandings about one’s “own” thinkers to light.

One strategy of interreligious dialogue to avoid the looming incommensurability of cultural traditions has been to focus on mystical experience rather than on religious or philosophical doctrines. Therefore, the study of mysticism in East and West has held out the promise of a mutual dialogue that goes beyond dogmas and traditions. But such a comparative mysticism also faces several dangers: on the one hand, the risk of Western provincialism and orientalism and, on the other, the risk of a reverse orientalism that considers the East spiritually superior to the West. As a case study in comparative mysticism, this article will use some comparisons that have been made between Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and the Zen Buddhist tradition.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The expression “questioning one’s own from the perspective of the foreign” is from the Nietzsche expert Eberhard Scheiffele (Scheiffele 1991). Van der Braak 2010 shows how Nietzsche himself, for example, uses Buddhism (in *The Antichrist*, section 23) to criticize Christianity.

\(^2\) Since the term “Zen” has become commonplace in the West, it is used here to refer to both the Chinese tradition of Chan Buddhism and the Japanese tradition of Zen (a Japanese transliteration of “Ch’an”).
Meister Eckhart is considered by some to be the quintessential mystic in the Western religious tradition. He has been invoked by scholars in comparative mysticism in both East and West. On the one hand, from early on in the twentieth century, Eckhart’s mysticism sparked an interest among Western intellectuals in what they considered to be the “mystical philosophy of Zen.” On the other hand, Japanese Zen scholars such as D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966) have used the comparison between Eckhart and Zen to explain Zen to the West.

The most important engagement with Meister Eckhart from a specifically philosophical Zen Buddhist perspective has come from the members of the so-called Kyoto School. Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) and especially his successor Ueda Shizuteru (1926-) have highlighted important affinities between Eckhart’s mysticism and that of Zen. In their approach to Eckhart, they have focused on Eckhart’s two main themes: the birth of the Trinitarian God in the soul and the breakthrough to the ineffable Godhead. They suggest that the birth of God in the soul is an initial stage in a process that eventually results in the breakthrough to the Godhead, conceived as absolute nothingness. Some have criticized such interpretations of Eckhart for marginalizing his Christian theological roots. For example, Jan van Bragt, the Belgian theologian and expert on the Kyoto School, has argued that Japanese interpreters of Eckhart have cut him off the Christian mainline and pulled him into the Buddhist camp. In this way, Eckhart can no longer constitute a challenge to Buddhist ideas (see Roy 2001: 182).

In this article, I will explore Eckhart’s mystical theology in its Christian context, especially with regard to the notion of revelation. After first giving a brief overview of the Eckhart interpretations by Suzuki and Ueda, I will focus on a comparison between Eckhart and the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen (1200-1253). Since reflection on scripture is very important for Eckhart, his mysticism can be seen as a form of mystical hermeneutics—similar to the approach to Zen that characterizes Dōgen’s work. Dōgen’s notion of ongoing participation in the genjōkōan or “presencing of truth” that is constituted by the Buddha nature that permeates the universe will be compared to Eckhart’s notion of revelation. Can Dōgen’s genjōkōan be seen as the ongoing self-revelation of Buddha nature?

Suzuki: Eckhart and Zen as Examples of Universal Mysticism

Comparative and intercultural thought originally attempted to identify the common core elements of various traditions in order to arrive at a common world philosophy, in which the philosophical traditions of East and West both have their place. Some attempted to come to a synthesis of East and West, holding that, although there are fundamental differences between East and West, the two traditions are complementary. The holistic, spiritual East was often placed over against the reductionistic, materialistic West. Another approach
was taken by those who defended the notion of a “perennial philosophy”: there is a timeless truth that has been rediscovered throughout the ages by great minds that transcended their own tradition (Huxley 1945; Guénon 1945; Schuon 1975). Afterwards, their followers let their original insights petrify into fixed dogmas and formulas, and religions and institutions arise. Perennialism points to such free spirits in all traditions: Eckhart, Buber, Rumi, Boehme, Lin-jí, Zhuangzi. According to the perennialists, mysticism represents the central core of all religions and is therefore what most closely connects East and West. They claimed that there is a universal stratum of mystical experience that transcends cultural boundaries.

The mystics in East and West were described by the perennialists as independent free spirits, rebellious thinkers that rose above their own institutionalized traditions. Mysticism was regarded as a system of thought or practice separate from or parallel to the religious traditions to which it belonged. The mystic was seen as an iconoclast who criticized the ecclesiastical authorities of his own traditions and practiced a unique form of spiritual practice, aimed at a direct and personal experience of the divine. The mystics were able to realize an eternal, ahistorical truth that was unaffected by the social, political, and historical factors that constitute a tradition. They laid bare a direct path to the common core of all religions: the path of the ineffable, universal mystical experience beyond the words and letters of the theologians and scholastics.

In the early twentieth century, the Japanese Zen tradition held a magnetic attraction for European intellectuals with a passion for mysticism. The Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki was the foremost interpreter of Zen to a larger audience in the West. In his voluminous writings, Suzuki interpreted Zen as a universal mysticism, free from cultural trappings, that offered a meditation practice aimed at the realization of a nondual state of consciousness. 3 Eckhart’s work was seen as a way to begin to understand Zen adequately. Schopenhauer had already compared Eckhart’s thought to that of the Buddha. 4 Rudolf Otto 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 mo-

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3 For more on Suzuki’s presentation of Zen to the West, see Van der Braak 2008a, 2008b.

4 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.”
ments” (Otto 1971: 269-72). As Suzuki once quipped, “Eckhart is the foremost Zen man in the West.”

In the first chapter of his Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist, Suzuki starts out by comparing Eckhart and Zen (Suzuki 1957). Suzuki contrasts Eckhart’s “unique Christianity,” which is based on his own religious experiences, with traditional Christianity. The pope’s persecution of Eckhart contributes to the Romantic image of a radical mystic who goes against Christian dogma and comes into conflict with the conservative authorities of his church. As a radically free spirit, speaking about and bearing witness only to his own experience, transcending all fixed images and conceptions, the mystic again and again challenges the religious authorities of his own tradition.

Suzuki’s approach to Eckhart is in line with universalist Eckhart interpretations that stress that his work touches a perennial mystical core that transcends institutionalized Christianity. Similarly, the Zen masters of Tang China are presented by Suzuki as iconoclastic rebels who incite us to “kill the Buddha” and whose spiritual practice constitutes “a direct transmission beyond words and letters,” which practice makes them unique within the larger Buddhist tradition. Suzuki notes that, in reading Eckhart, “I grew firmly convinced that the Christian experiences are not after all different from those of the Buddhist. Terminology is all that divides us and stirs us up to a wasteful dissipation of energy” (Suzuki 1957: 8). In his comparison between Eckhart and Zen, Suzuki picks up on Eckhart’s distinction between God and the Godhead:

With him God is still a something as long as there is any trace of movement or work or of doing something. When we come to the Godhead, we for the first time find that it is the unmoved, a nothing where there is no path (apada) to reach. It is absolute nothingness; therefore it is the ground of being from where all beings come. (Suzuki 1957: 15)

Suzuki equates Eckhart’s Godhead with the Zen Buddhist notion of śūnyatā (emptiness or nothingness). He notes that “Eckhart is in perfect accord with the Buddhist doctrine of śūnyatā, when he advances the notion of Godhead as ‘pure nothingness’ (ein bloss niht)” (Suzuki 1957: 16). As Suzuki stresses, both the Buddhist śūnyatā and Eckhart’s Godhead as pure nothingness are beyond linguistic determination.

Suzuki’s interpretation of Eckhart and Zen as examples of universal mysticism can be criticized in several ways. Zen is not the kind of mysticism that Suzuki

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5 The reference is from the German edition. In the English translation, the appendix that contains this passage was not included. Carl Jung also wrote that the satori experience of Zen can be found in the West in Eckhart (Jung 1991: 14,19).

describes. Recent work in Zen studies reveals that the image of the iconoclast Zen master was cultivated during Song China and has been presented to the West by twentieth-century Japanese Zen apologists. This image has been rather uncritically embraced by Western Zen enthusiasts, practitioners and scholars alike (Heine and Wright 2008: 4f.). Later in his life, Suzuki himself also regretted having called Zen a form of mysticism, “as I find it now highly misleading in elucidating Zen thought. Let it suffice to say here that Zen has nothing ‘mystical’ about it” (quoted in Sakamoto 1977: 65-66).

Analogously, Eckhart may not be the kind of mystic Suzuki describes. There is disagreement within Eckhart research as to the extent and according to which criteria Eckhart should be read as a mystic at all. Kurt Flasch thinks he should not (Flasch 2006). Many of Eckhart’s works are more scholastic than mystical, especially his Latin works (which are less widely read than his German sermons). In his work, Flasch argues, Eckhart writes in just as scholastic a manner as his contemporaries: he argues rather than portrays experiences. He explains Bible passages, he remains much closer to the dogmatic representations from the Christian tradition than many realize but gives them a new twist. He was also very much influenced by other writers. Eckhart, Flasch concludes, is primarily a philosopher who should be understood from within the Christian tradition (see Flasch 2010).

Ueda: Eckhart and Zen as Forms of Non-Mysticism

Let us, therefore, now turn to a second way in which Eckhart and Zen have been compared: as philosophies that include universal mystical experience as a stage but ultimately go beyond mysticism. The members of the Japanese Kyoto School in the early and middle twentieth century were often oriented to German philosophy. They inherited the fascination with Meister Eckhart as the quintessential mystic. Other than Suzuki, however, they approached Eckhart primarily as a philosophical thinker who could be used to facilitate a dialogue between Western philosophy and Zen. Nishitani published a monograph on Eckhart in Japanese in 1948. In a later work, he compared Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Eckhart with Zen, finding Eckhart to have the most affinity (Nishitani 1982). The philosophical comparison between Eckhart and Zen was worked

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7 For a description of this process, see Welter 2008: 15-24.
8 See McGinn (2001: 36f) for an overview of the various types of mysticism that have been ascribed to Eckhart’s thought.
9 In his overview of this discussion, McGinn (2001: 21) argues that Flasch has an either/or mentality, and uses too narrow a definition of mysticism.
10 Nishitani studied with Heidegger from 1937 to 1939 and was often invited into his house to teach him about Zen. However, they also shared a mutual fascination with Eckhart. Although Heidegger dismissed mysticism in 1939 as a “mere counter-image of
out further by Nishitani’s student and successor in the Kyoto School, Ueda Shizuteru.

For Ueda, the similarity between Eckhart and Zen is found not so much in a universal mystical experience that they share as in the way that they both go beyond such mystical experience in their philosophies. Ueda’s way of dealing with Eckhart’s mysticism is to consider the mystical experience a preliminary stage on Eckhart’s path to spiritual perfection. He attempts to find a connection between Eckhart and Zen by making a clear distinction between two themes in Eckhart’s work: the birth of God in the soul and the breakthrough to the Godhead. These two themes are connected with two different conceptions of God in Eckhart: the birth in the soul takes place by a God that is still nameable, God the creator as Trinity, whereas the breakthrough is to the unnameable Godhead beyond all distinction. Ueda interprets the birth of God in the soul and the breakthrough to the Godhead as two events that constitute two distinct types of mystical experience (or in any case, two distinct languages of mystical experience). Hee-Sung Keel has made the distinction between a “mysticism of union,” which considers the finite and the infinite ontologically distinct and pursues their union, and a “mysticism of unity,” which starts with presupposing the unity or oneness between the finite and the infinite (Keel 2007: 39). In terms of this distinction, Ueda interprets Eckhart’s birth of God in the soul as a mysticism of union that can be accommodated within the Trinitarian theological framework. The breakthrough to the Godhead, Ueda argues, is a description of a more radical mystical unity that goes beyond orthodox theological tradition.

Ueda therefore 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: 140-50). He views the movement from the substructure to the superstructure as an existential intensification (Steigerung) of the mystical experience (Ueda 1965: 143). Whereas the birth of God in the soul refers to the experience of the triune God with names and attributes, the breakthrough to the Godhead culminates in the experience of God as nothingness (śūnyatā). For Ueda, the breakthrough constitutes the ultimate in Eckhart’s mysticism, to the extent that mysticism culminates in what he calls non-mysticism (Nicht-Mystik or hi-shinpishugi): not so much a rejection of mysticism as a movement through mysticism and beyond it.

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metaphysics,” in 1955 he acknowledged that “the most extreme sharpness and depth of thought belong to genuine and great mysticism …. Meister Eckhart gives proof of this.” (quoted in Davis 2007: 122f.).
I regard true mysticism as the entire movement “from union to ekstasis,” that is to say, the entire movement “from mysticism to non-mysticism”, hence up to the point of including the moment of “to non-mysticism”. In fact, in this case the expression mysticism ceases to be fitting; it is no longer appropriate. True mysticism is not mysticism. Rather, it is appropriate to call it non-mysticism. (Ueda 2001-2003, 8: 38, quoted in Davis 2008: 225f.)

Non-mysticism is both an ultimate realization of true mysticism and a breakthrough beyond the mystical experience. According to the Ueda expert Bret Davis, it concerns both a complete development of mysticism (in the sense of realizing its full potential) and a shedding of and releasing of mysticism:

Non-mysticism involves a double negation, first a release from the ego and then from God. God is let go of for the sake of nothing, that is, for an experience of absolute nothingness, which in turn returns us to a direct engagement in the here and now of everyday activity. (Davis 2008: 222f.).

Davis distinguishes four moments in this non-mysticism:

1. An ecstatic transcendence of the ego;
2. A mystical union with God or the One;
3. An ecstatic breakthrough beyond God or the One to śūnyatā;
4. A return to an ecstatic/instatic engagement in the here and now (Davis 2008: 223).

These four moments are not consecutive but are part of one movement. According to Ueda, mysticism in the narrower sense ends at the second moment of this movement, at the mystical union with God or the One as religious experience. The third moment constitutes the self-overcoming of mysticism. This is completed and expressed in the fourth moment. For Ueda, unlike Suzuki, śūnyatā is not an apophatic indicator of an ineffably transcendent Godhead beyond God; it is not a negative theological sign for something “wholly Other” that lies “beyond Being”. Rather, Ueda understands absolute nothingness dynamically as “the activity of emptying out”, that is, as the ecstatic movement of de-mysticism itself. (Davis 2008: 224f.).

Davis points to this movement of śūnyatā in Eckhart, for example in his sermon on the biblical story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), that reverses the biblical preference for Mary’s vita contemplativa over Martha’s vita activa (Maas 1975: 81-89). For Eckhart, Martha’s activity is a deeper expression of the union with God than Mary’s experience of ecstasy is.

Compared to Suzuki, Ueda is a much better reader of Eckhart. Much more than Suzuki, Ueda emphasizes that the realization of śūnyatā does not end with a mystical experience but includes a renewed engagement with the everyday

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11 Davis suggests the term “de-mysticism” (Ent-Mystik or datsu-shinpishugi).
world. But one can wonder to what extent Ueda’s thinking is truly historical and contextual. Jim 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).

Ueda’s sharp distinction between the birth motif and the breakthrough motif and his preference for the latter, is controversial. In a critique of Ueda’s thought, Bruno Nagel argues that Ueda in effect makes a distinction between a theistic and a non-theistic spirituality, whereby “theism is a less radical early phase of a more proper, non-theistic spirituality” (Nagel 1998: 75). But Ueda draws the breakthrough motif too much in the direction of Zen, at the expense of the Christian Trinitarian birth motif (Nagel 1998: 87). Nagel argues, pace Ueda, that the birth motif in Eckhart is no less radical than the breakthrough (Nagel 1998: 92). John Caputo even argues that the birth motif is more radical than the breakthrough one: our act of breaking through to the deepest ground of our own being is for the sake of experiencing the birth of the Son there (Caputo 1978: 222ff.).

Apart from disagreeing on which of the two motifs is more radical, various scholars have also disagreed with Ueda’s strict separation of Eckhart’s birth motif and breakthrough motif. Louis Roy argues that, in speaking about God and the Godhead, Eckhart is not speaking about various types of mystical experiences but is differentiating between two different ways of speaking about God. According to him, Eckhart aims to point out the need for transcending all limited discourses about God (Roy 2001: 185ff). Robert Dobie argues that Eckhart’s distinction between God the creator, as the highest being and cause of creation, and the Godhead beyond all distinction and relations, should not be read dualistically. According to Dobie, the thrust of Eckhart’s mystical project is to show the identity between the God of revelation, the Creator God, and the God “beyond God,” the Essence or “God in Himself”…. The same movement by which God reveals himself in creation takes the believer who enters into its deepest meaning back up into himself. (Dobie 2010: 8)

The relationship between the birth motif and the breakthrough motif is one of the most difficult problems in Eckhart research. In my view, they do not form a hierarchical order in Eckhart’s mysticism, but correspond to two complementary aspects, two phases in our experience of the divine. They reflect two different movements: the birth of God reflects the emanation from the divine, whereas the breakthrough reflects the return to the divine. It is beyond the scope of this article to go fully into the various interpretations of the birth motif and the breakthrough motif in Eckhart’s work (for an excellent overview, see Keel 2007: 40-49). I now want to move on to a third and different way of comparing Eckhart and Zen.
The Hermeneutical Turn

The study of comparative mysticism has recently been influenced by a new approach to intercultural thought that has been described by the historian of ideas J.J. Clarke as the hermeneutical approach (Clarke 1997: 125). This approach views comparative philosophy not only as a comparative science but also as an integral part of the philosophical enterprise itself, interpreted as a continuous dialogical practice of philosophical questioning. Non-Western philosophers are considered equal participants in the philosophical conversation. This goes further than only comparison and attempts to initiate a true philosophical dialogue between Western and non-Western religious traditions and to include the non-Western traditions in what Rorty, following Michael Oakeshott, has called “the conversation of mankind.”

The hermeneutical turn in comparative and intercultural thought is based especially on the work of Heidegger and Gadamer and rests on two basic insights. First, as Heidegger puts it in section 32 of Being and Time, our understanding of a text and a tradition is always based on our pre-understanding. We always understand a text or a thinker “in terms of” a framework that is already known and available within our conceptual world. This framework determines the range of possible interpretations. Our pre-understandings determine what we do and do not notice in a thinker. Secondly, our pre-understanding is always determined by the tradition in which we stand, the given interpretations of texts and thinkers, the way they are given to us. This givenness is never neutral or objective. The conclusion that philosophical hermeneutics draws from these two basic insights is that an objective interpretation of a text, thinker, or tradition can and should be pursued but should always be mindful of the realization that it can never be fully obtained. We can only interpret on the basis of our implicit pre-understanding, and it is therefore important to explicate this pre-understanding as much as possible. Second, texts and thinkers are to be studied as much as possible within their historical, cultural, and intellectual context. Understanding a text comes down to a fusion of the horizon of the text itself and the reader of the text. These two horizons can be separated from each other by centuries. The basic method for coming to such a fusion of horizons is the hermeneutical circle. Our understanding of a text is based on an interpretation of its parts. But the parts of that text only receive their meaning in the context of the text as a whole (see Garfield 2002: 236ff.).

The hermeneutical turn has consequences for the study of comparative mysticism. It calls for a re-examination of such foundational categories as mysticism, the mystical experience, and mystic. In the case of Eckhart and Zen, we might ask ourselves: what are our pre-understandings about both Eckhart and Zen? And why would we even want to compare them?
As we have seen, Flasch argues against reading Eckhart primarily as a mystic. Nor should the Zen masters be read only as mystics. I think that in both Eckhart and Zen studies we observe a similar pattern. First, philologists create the image of “the mystic,” based on an ahistorical reading of the texts. Second, philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion uncritically accept this image and expand on it. Third, scholars of comparative religion notice the isomorphic resemblance in the images of the “iconoclastic Zen mystic” and “Eckhart the mystic.” They use these images in numerous books and articles on mysticism East and West, pointing to the universal occurrence of the mystical experience.

So what is the alternative? Starting with Eckhart: how does one come to a more historical and contextual reading of his work? The difficulties are manifold. Pranger has described how the notions of “the Middle Ages” and “medieval Christianity” have been unmasked by recent research as anachronisms, the result of nineteenth-century inventions (Pranger 2008: 513). In light of this, he concludes, “we often do not have a clue as to exactly what notions such as “Christian” and “religion” did in fact mean then—and we certainly do not have the analytical tools to establish this” (Pranger 2008: 522).

Eckhart’s Mystical Hermeneutics

Bernard McGinn calls attention to the ways in which “timeless” mystical experience has been conditioned by changes and developments in the church and society at large (McGinn 1991: xv). There is no such thing as “universal mysticism”: mystical reflection is always part of a specific religious tradition, as formed by its core texts and their interpretation. This means that, rather than presupposing a universal mystical experience across traditions, the mystical experience should be studied in its historical and traditional context. According to McGinn, the emphasis on mystical experience in the study of mysticism, and especially in comparative mysticism, has so far blocked a careful analysis of the special hermeneutics of mystical texts (McGinn 1991: xiii).

When we look at Eckhart within the context of his own times and his religious tradition, his mystical writing and thinking appears inseparable from the hermeneutical activity of interpreting sacred texts. Mysticism is about the revelation of hidden truths. In the original Greek, “mystical” refers to the hidden or inner meaning of scripture. Mysticism is not something that stands outside or next to the revealed texts and its exegetical tradition but is the practice of revealing the inner, original meaning of that text.

Theologian Robert Dobie argues in a recent study, *Logos and Revelation*, that Eckhart’s mysticism is not separate from the Christian tradition but constitutes a “mystical” way or mode of appropriating that tradition, in order to deepen and develop it further (Dobie 2010). Mysticism is not a noun for Eckhart: it is
not a system of thought or practice that is detached from his own religious tra-
dition: it is only a “mystical” way to comprehend that tradition. As Dobie puts
it: “Mysticism does not float around in any “pure experience” of a purely per-
sonal, subjective nature” (Dobie 2010: 2). Therefore,
The thirst for individual and extraordinary experiences of divine things, already preval-
ent in the high Middle Ages but even more so in the modern era, misses the essential
nature of the mystical as understood by Meister Eckhart…. The goal of … Meister Eck-
hart’s thinking is not to lead the soul to new, discrete experiences but to lead it to a new
way of experiencing the world and the self in and through God. (Dobie 2010: 12)
Dobie argues that mystical experience in medieval authors, including Eckhart,
is fundamentally hermeneutical in nature. In medieval mysticism, personal ex-
perience always takes place from, in, and through the revealed text, and the
way in which this text is read and experienced. It is an experience that is
formed through the divine word as it reveals itself in the holy text. Since mys-
tical experience always arises in the context of a religious tradition, and in in-
timate contact with its revealed text, it can never be free from contextual deter-
mination. However, mystical experience, seen as revelation, is never purely
contextual: it breaks through the hard shell of conventional and pre-established
notions, concepts and imagery. The mystical has two poles: the subjective in-
ner experience and the objective outer content of revelation.
Mystical experience is always an experience in and out of an objective content which,
by definition for the mystic, is always a revealed content. The revealed content, to be
objective, valued, true, cannot be private, but rather common to all. There is, therefore,
nothing, technically speaking, esoteric about mystical experience. (Dobie 2010: 12)
At the same time, Dobie adds, for mystic al experience to be transformative, it
must come as much from deep within the soul as from outside it. Therefore,
the goal of the mystical project for Eckhart is, as Dobie puts it, “to come per-
sonally and inwardly to participate in the realities revealed or unveiled by re-
velation” (Dobie 2010: 12).
The notion of “revelation” is crucial for the medieval mystic as well as the me-
dieval theologian. As the religious studies scholar Gershom Scholem has ar-
gued:
Revelation, for instance, is to the mystic not only a definite historical occurrence which,
at a given moment in history, puts an end to any further direct relation between man-
kind and God. With no thought of denying Revelation as a fact of history, the mystic
still conceives the source of religious knowledge and experience which bursts forth
from his own heart as being of equal importance for the conception of religious truth. In
other words, instead of the one act of Revelation, there is a constant repetition of this
act. (Scholem 1974: 9)
As Dobie comments, revelation is both the transcendent act that breaks
through the finite categories of mental thought and simultaneously the imman-
ent ground of the soul’s self-understanding. It is tempting to distinguish be-
tween the experiential “inner revelation” of the mystic, and the “outer revelation” of the textual tradition, and to privilege the inner revelation over the outer. However, as Dobie notes, the “inner realization” of the mystic is not separate from or parallel to the revealed text: “In fact, the ‘inner’ revelation is nothing but the ‘outer’ or ‘textual’ revelation become the living ground of the soul’s being, thinking, and acting” (Dobie 2010: 7). The immanent revelation that springs from the soul can never be separated from revealed scripture. The modern separation between experience and doctrine, between mysticism and theology, would have been incomprehensible to medieval man, also to Eckhart.

As William Harmless notes,

Theology lies at the very heart of the mystical experience. Mystics often set forth their (or others’) experiences as the experience of doctrine. This sets mystical theologies apart from other ways of doing theology. Mystical theologies work from the conviction that doctrine is not extrinsic, not some outer standard or mere verbal measure of the truth. Rather, doctrine itself lies within the realm of the experiential. (Harmless 2008: 233)

Dōgen’s Zen as a Mystical Hermeneutics

Approaching Eckhart as a mystical theologian seems to put him a long way from the Zen Buddhist tradition. An incommensurability of cultures looms large. However, it is exactly Eckhart’s mystical hermeneutics perhaps that can make us more sensitive to some aspects of the Zen tradition that have been underappreciated in the West so far.

The Zen presented by Suzuki (and, to a lesser extent, Ueda) to the West has been primarily the Japanese Rinzai tradition that goes back to the Chinese Chan masters Linji Yixuan (d. 866) and Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163). This school has an iconoclastic attitude toward language and thought and considers itself “a special transmission outside the teachings (or scriptures).” The Japanese Zen thinker Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253), on the other hand, is the founder of the Japanese Sōtō tradition that goes back to the Chinese Chan masters Dongshan Liangjie (806-869) and Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157). Dōgen advocates continuing hermeneutical reflection on scripture. Therefore, his Zen is sometimes referred to as the “oneness of Zen and teachings (or scriptures)” (kyōzen itchi). For Dōgen, Zen is not about realizing a universal mystical experience or transcending language and thinking but about the continuing realization-practice of Buddha nature within language and thinking.

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12 As Heine notes (1994: 8), however, such a distinction is more complex than a simple stereotypical polarization.
As Kim notes, both scriptural tradition and a special tradition were legitimate parts of Dōgen’s “rightly transmitted Buddhism” (Kim 2004: 53). Dōgen admonished his disciples to study the sūtras:

An enlightened teacher is always thoroughly versed in the sūtras …. The sūtras are made the instruments for liberating others and are turned into sitting, resting and walking in meditation. Being thoroughly versed changes the sūtras into parents, children, and grandchildren. Because an enlightened teacher understands the sūtras through practice, he/she penetrates them deeply” (Shōbōgenzō, Bukkyō; quoted in Kim 2004: 78).

For Dōgen, the specific revelation of the Buddhist sūtras in their conventional sense was only a small portion of the sūtras in their cosmic context. Life is “an incessant round of hermeneutical activities aimed at trying to understand such cosmic sūtras” (Kim 2004: 79). For Dōgen, Zen koans were not nonsensical attempts to frustrate the intellect in order to facilitate a breakthrough to awakening but “parables, allegories, and mysteries that unfolded the horizons of existence before us” (Kim 2004: 81). The koan does not aim at an exit from language but to enter more deeply into the universal and non-anthropocentric language of mountains and rivers, bushes and trees. All phenomena in the universe can be seen as the self-expressions (jidōshu) of Buddha nature and emptiness (Kim 2004: 83), and they all endlessly express the truth. Therefore, Hee-Jin Kim has characterized Dōgen’s approach to Zen as a mystical realism:

Mystery, in Dōgen’s view, did not consist of that which was hidden or unknown in darkness or that which would be revealed or made known in the future. Rather, it consisted of the present intimacy, transparency, and vividness of thusness, for “nothing throughout the entire universe is concealed” (henkai-fuzō). (Kim 2004: 86)

For both Eckhart and Dōgen, an important aspect of their mysticism is the ongoing study and penetration of sacred scripture. Therefore, their mysticism can be fruitfully interpreted as a form of mystical hermeneutics. Let us now look at how both practice their mysticism.

The Continuous Self-Revelation of Buddha Nature

McGinn has suggested that it is more fruitful to approach mysticism as a process, not as an experience. In Eckhart’s work, such a process consists of thinking back, not to being as such, but to the primal revelation of being…. [P]rior to any concept we might have of “being” is the revelation of being, its “presencing” to us…. “Being” or “existence” as such cannot be captured by our finite minds, but rather our finite minds must be captured by it, conformed to it. (Dobie 2010: 2)

Eckhart’s mystical reflection, in its attempt to understand being or existence properly, can be seen as a spiritual practice in which one attempts to conform oneself to pure being or existence. In order to be able to do so, one must be open completely to its revealed character. Mystical reflection attempts to bring
being into the light of consciousness; in this process, being is unveiled (revealed) to the mind, thereby realizing truth in the Greek sense of \textit{aletheia} (literally: the state of not being hidden; the state of being evident).\footnote{Truth as \textit{aletheia}, instead of as correspondence or coherence, represents a clear departure from nearly every philosophical tradition since the ancient Greeks. Martin Heidegger renewed attention in \textit{aletheia}.} Truth as \textit{aletheia} refers to what first appears when something is seen or revealed. Allowing something to appear is the first act of truth. One must give attention to something before it can be a candidate for any further understanding. Mystical reflection could be seen as the attempt to participate in the ongoing self-revelation of being, the ongoing presencing of truth.\footnote{This presencing, however, also includes absence. As McGinn notes ((McGinn 1991: xviii), mystics have never confined themselves to the positive language of presence: “the paradoxical necessity of both presence and absence is one of the most important of all the verbal strategies by means of which of which mystical transformation has been symbolized.”}

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

Also, for Dōgen, enlightenment is not a static mystical experience but constitutes an awakening to the truth that is always already presencing. One of his main essays, the \textit{Genjōkōan}, has been translated by Bret Davis as “the presencing of truth.” As Davis puts it,

\begin{quote}
The koan that Dōgen’s text ultimately presents us with verification for is that the presencing of truth is always fully realizable—without ever being closed off and self-satisfied—in each singular moment of our being unceasingly under way. (Davis 2009: 256)
\end{quote}

Both Dōgen and Eckhart see reality as a process of ongoing revelation, a presencing of truth seen as \textit{aletheia}. For both, mystical experience is not so much a pure intuition of an ineffable realm as the ongoing affirmation and verification of this presencing of truth. Such a process always takes place within thought and language. According to Kim, Dōgen’s mysticism is a far cry from apophatic mysticism, where reality is considered ineffable and unnamable. For Dōgen, mystical experience is constantly in need of affirmation through language and thought:
The ineffable, however self-evident it may be, does not imply the absence of linguistic mediations; to the contrary, it is affirmed as such precisely because of linguistic mediations. Without the latter, the affirmation of the ineffable is unthinkable and impossible to experience in the first place. (Kim 2007: 97)

*Forgetting the Self*

For both Eckhart and Dōgen, the mystical process involves leaving behind, even forgetting, the self, in order for the presencing of truth to take place unobstructedly. 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:

> When you cast off and forget your body and mind and plunge into the abode of the Buddha, so that the Buddha may act upon you and you may devote yourself completely to him, you become a buddha, liberated from the suffering of birth-and-death, without effort and anxiety. (Dōgen, *SB Shōji*; quoted in Kim 2007: 110)

Eckhart also stresses the need for leaving behind the self. As Dobie notes, we tend to become enclosed in and attached to our own finite subjectivity, and thus become closed off to the revealed nature of being. We become stuck on the being itself, or, even worse, on our created concepts about being or beings, rather than on the act of revelation itself. From a mystical 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:

> 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 the presencing of truth to be able to occur, 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 God in the soul can be fully experienced 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 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. (Eckhart, Sermons II, 118; quoted in Keel 2007: 243)
Dōgen expresses this as follows:

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by the myriad things [of the world]. To be verified by the myriad things is to let drop off the body-mind of the self and the body-mind of others. (Shōbōgenzō, Genjōkōan; quoted in Davis 2009: 256f.)

When the self has been forgotten, the ongoing universal expression of truth by the myriad things, the continuous self-revelation of Buddha nature, can take place in oneself without any hindrance.

Discussion

In this article, I have first looked at the comparisons done by Suzuki and Ueda of Eckhart and Zen. In both cases, a true dialogue is somewhat lacking. In Suzuki’s universalist approach, Eckhart and Zen meet each other in the silence of the ineffable absolute. But in such a (deafening?) silence the individual voices of both Eckhart and Zen are somewhat drowned out. Ueda’s comparison is much more nuanced and takes Eckhart’s Christian and medieval background more into account. However, Ueda’s approach is to relegate Eckhart’s more theological views to a lesser status, and to promote the apophatic aspects of Eckhart’s thought to a radical, transcultural status. Only in these radical, non-dualist spheres is Eckhart allowed to converse with Zen. A true dialogue does not really get off the ground in Ueda’s work either.

A cross-cultural hermeneutical approach to the comparison of Eckhart and Zen needs to be more dialogical in character. Rather than serving to show the superiority of either East or West, such a dialogical exchange can be interesting and enlightening in its own right. It can help to not only shed new light on the existing images of both Eckhart and Zen that have been formed in the Western imagination but also to create new images.

As far as Eckhart is concerned, the aim here would not be to come closer to the “true” Eckhart but to find new and creative ways of reading that can bring Eckhart’s texts to life in new ways in our time, and let them do their work. The aim of intercultural philosophy and interreligious dialogue is not so much to get closer to “the truth” about our own thinkers as to provide the texts from our own and other mystical traditions with a new effectivity. With regard to Zen, a dialogue with Eckhart can also help us to get beyond the images of Zen as either mysticism or non-mysticism.

Rather than claiming that mystics from various 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 traditions that we find points of convergence. Perhaps now the time is ripe for a second wave of Zen to the West that also takes into account the hermeneutical aspects of some Zen traditions, such as those of Dōgen. In such a way, comparative mysticism and
interreligious dialogue can open up new vistas of mutual clarification and stimulate the proliferation of a wider range of perspectives and horizons. We can make our “own” Eckhart more foreign (but not by making him Buddhist).

So far, most comparisons between mystics from various traditions have interpreted the commonalities in their writings to mean that these mystics somehow rose above their own religious traditions and taught a universal religion. From the perspective of mystical hermeneutics, 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 concluding that mystics from various traditions are fundamentally incommensurable, it might be precisely in entering into the depths of their traditions that we find 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). Both Eckhart and Dōgen point beyond their traditions, not to some universal religion but to the continual presencing of truth right before one’s very eyes. Perhaps this presencing of truth can form the ground for a new understanding between religious traditions and a new way of practicing mysticism.

LITERATURE


