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Mystical Purification of the Mind: Meister Eckhart on Calmness/*Gelassenheit*

Christoph Elsas

In 1260, that means 750 years ago, the Christian theologian Meister Eckhart was born in Germany. Nevertheless his thoughts are fresh till now. So my reflections on mystical purification of the mind are embedded in the Western,¹ especially German² discussion on Eckhart's concept of *Gelassenheit*.

For there seem to be interesting chances for connections with Japanese discussions. I think of three important books on Eckhart inspired from Kitarō Nishida's Kyoto School of Philosophy in a Japanese Buddhist Perspective: of Keiji Nishitani³ in Tokyo, of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki⁴ in New York (and Berlin), of Shizuteru Ueda⁵ in Marburg (and Gütersloh), followed by the integration of Eckhart's thoughts in Nishitani's famous work on religion and nothingness.⁶

For Eckhart, the solution for all problems in human life is founded upon embracing the essential nothingness and emptiness of humans, because God loves all creatures equally and fills them with his being. Detachment into the bareness of our universal human nature and the imageless character of the soul's essence make it a place which God can inhabit. His Word is spoken in the nakedness of this nature, when one's own powers have been completely withdrawn from all their works and images. Therefore Eckhart's main point is calmness resulting from the birth of God in the bare human soul. He called this calmness, using a special German word, *Gelassenheit*.

Eckhart himself was a Dominican monk. His order not only honoured him twice by sending him to the famous university of Paris, but also entrusted him with the solution of some explosive ecclesiastical and socio-political conflicts involving religious women. His attempt of mediation between the individualistic exuberance of such women and the hierarchical regulation of the church includes an attitude of criticism towards exclusive fixations on either side:

Indeed, if a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies or by special infusion of grace than by the fireside or in the stable – that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak round His head and shoving Him under a bench. For whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God, who lies hidden in it. But whoever seeks God without a special way gets Him as He is in Himself, and that man lives with the Son [of God], and he is life itself.⁷

Such preaching indicates Eckhart's understanding of calmness, *Gelassenheit*.

Eckhart's approach towards a solution of the great conflicts of suffering and sorrow is determined by this as well:

Truly, a man who had quite renounced his own would be so surrounded by God that all creatures could not touch him, and whatever got to him would have to pass through God, and in doing so take on His flavour and become godlike. However great the suffering may be, if it comes through God, then God suffers first from it ..., and if you will endure that which God endures and which comes to you through Him, then it inevitably becomes godlike ...⁸

Acknowledging the common creatural neediness means to leave oneself and the world (Latin *relinquere*).

Eckhart emphasized more clearly than Thomas Aquinas that 'all creatures are a pure nothing. I do not just say that they are insignificant or are only a little something: They are a pure nothing. Whatever has no being, is not. Creatures have no being because their being depends on God's presence... If God would turn away from creatures for an instant, they would turn to nothing'.⁹

Humans are distinguished by the special feature of being able to reflect – up to the point that a part of one's own life is one's own death in which one has to leave everything that can be perceived with the senses. Thus Eckhart teaches to understand the ideal of virginity:

'Virgin' is as much as to say a person who is void of alien images, as empty as he was when he did not exist ... – if I had these without attachment, whether in doing or in leaving undone, ... rather standing free in this present Now ready to receive God's most beloved will and to do it continually, then in truth I would be a virgin, untrammelled by any images, just as I was when I was not.¹⁰

Eckhart also adds 'that man who is established thus in God's love must be dead to self and all created things, paying as little regard to himself as to one who is a thousand miles away'.¹¹

Therefore, 'people should not worry so much about what they have to do, they should consider rather what they are'.¹² 'The simple intellect is so pure in itself that it comprehends the pure bare divine being immediately ...'.¹³

**The willingness to leave oneself to God (Latin *committere*)
belongs to the act of recognizing God as the sole being.**

Because this aspect belongs to the Middle High German word *geläzenheit* coined by Eckhart, it includes: 'The soul is all things. Whatever is the noblest, the purest, and the highest in all things beneath the soul, God pours all this into it [the soul]. God is all and is one'.¹⁴ This is the other side of the act of leaving: 'All our perfection and all our bliss depends on our traversing and transcending all creatureliness, all being and getting into the ground that is groundless. We pray to our dear Lord God that we may be one and indwelling, and may God help us to find this ground'.¹⁵ Eckhart's sermon on Mt. 5.3, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' gives the explanation: 'A poor man is one who wants nothing and desires nothing, 'who knows nothing' and 'who has nothing'.¹⁶

This means: 'We should place ourselves with all we have in a pure renunciation of will and desire, into the good and precious will of God'.¹⁷ And: 'Then I am what I was ... Here God finds no place in man, for man by his poverty wins for himself what he has eternally been and shall eternally remain. Here, God is one with the spirit, and that is the strictest poverty one can find'.¹⁸ Then the spirit will be a place in which God can work, and as an essential and not only as an assumed God: 'So we say that a man should be so poor that he neither is nor has any place for God to work in. To preserve a place is to preserve distinction. Therefore I pray to God to make me free of God, [that means God in the sense of a human concept; Ch. E.] for my essential being is above God, taking God as the origin of creatures'.¹⁹

**Man can experience a gracious birth of God in himself,
because Jesus Christ as His essential son manifests the love of
God that is bestowed upon mankind.**

In the beginning of Eckhart's treatise 'On Detachment' we read of the 'highest virtue whereby a man may chiefly and most firmly join himself to God, and

whereby a man may become by grace what God is by nature, and whereby a man may come closest to his image when he was in God ..., before God made creatures.²⁰ Reflecting upon his creatural nothingness men will recognize: 'Poverty of spirit means being so free of God and all His works [in the sense of a human concept], that God, if He wishes to work in the soul, is Himself the place where He works.'²¹

Because the imageless character of the soul's essence makes it a place which God can inhabit the soul 'must keep absolutely pure and must live in a noble fashion, quite collected and turned entirely inward.'²² 'It is in the purest thing that the soul is capable of, in the noblest part, the ground – indeed the very essence of the soul which is the soul's most secret part. There is the silent "middle," for no creature ever entered there and no image.'²³ 'For God to be born in the soul, all time must have dropped away from her.'²⁴ Then 'God must enter into your being and powers, because you have bereft yourself of all possessions, and become as a desert.'²⁵ For 'God's natural place is unity and purity' and 'therefore God is bound to give Himself to a detached heart.'²⁶

Orientated towards Christ Eckhart can preach about God like this: 'What is God's love? His nature and His being: that is His love. If God were deprived of loving us, that would deprive Him of His being and His Godhead, for His being depends on His loving me' because 'God has only one love: with the same love with which the Father loves His only-begotten Son, He loves me.'²⁷

In relying on God's own grace, man sufficiently prepares for God's birth within himself.

Eckhart is sure for the soul: 'In drawing God into itself it is changed into God, so that the soul becomes divine. God does not become the soul. Then the soul loses its name and its power, but not its will or existence. Here the soul remains in God as God remains in Himself.'²⁸ There is the example of St. Paul, as Eckhart remarks: He

left everything that God was able to give him and everything that he was able to receive from God. When he had left all this, he left God for God's sake, and there remained for him God as God exists in Himself ... He never gave God anything nor did he ever receive anything from God. It is a oneness and a pure union. In this state a person is a true human being.²⁹

For 'when the soul receives a kiss from the Godhead, then she stands in absolute

perfection and bliss; then she is embraced by unity'.³⁰ And: 'God creates the world and all things in one present now ... If a soul stands in this present now, the Father bears in her His only-begotten Son, and in that same birth the soul is born back into God. It is one birth: as often as she is born back into God, the Father begets His only-begotten Son in her'.³¹

This implies the solution for the fundamental conflict of dying: 'There is oneness in the Godhead and in eternity'.³² Therefore 'be careful not in the least to hold unto yourself as you are this person or that, but preserve yourself as a free, undivided human nature'.³³ For it is this universal human nature which was assumed and so divinized by Christ.

Inasmuch as it leads towards receptivity for God's power, love as an ability of the soul can be called the highest creatural power by Eckhart. For love is the necessary and sufficient readiness for God who unites the soul with Himself through the love power of the Holy Spirit. Then 'God is acting above the power of the soul, not as in the soul, but divinely as in God. There the soul is plunged into God and baptized in the divine nature, receiving the divine life therein and taking upon herself the divine order, so that she is ordered according to God'.³⁴ Thus the soul experiences God's naturally overflowing love that offers only to man the liberty to reject it or to open up towards it, to 'receive' it.

Eckhart preaches thus: 'When the soul does not go out after things outside, it has come home and dwells in its simple, pure light'.³⁵ And:

In my breaking-through, where I stand free of my own will, of God's will, of all His works, and of God Himself, then I am above all creatures and I am neither God nor creature, but I am that which I was and shall remain for evermore. There I shall receive an imprint that will raise me above all the angels. By this imprint I shall gain such wealth that I shall not be content with God inasmuch as He is God, or with all His divine works: for this breaking-through guarantees to me that I and God are one.³⁶

For Eckhart that birth of God in man is orientated towards Christ, in the Trinity of the One God the Son as image of the Father: 'To the degree that we are like the image in which all images have flowed forth and have left, and to the degree that we are reconstituted in this image and are carried directly into the image of the Father',³⁷ 'God can do no more for the detached mind than give Himself to it ... That is what St. Paul meant when he said: "I live and do not live - Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2.20)'.³⁸

The body serves to convert God's birth into the calmness in life.

According to Christian conviction, God has co-suffered in the suffering and dying of Jesus Christ. Therefore Eckhart combines the idea of God's birth in man with the compassion. In the imitation of Christ the immediate presence of divine love can be ascertained. Therefore Eckhart writes in his 'Talks of Instruction': 'One must have a well-trained detachment' and 'we must school ourselves in abandoning till we keep nothing back. All turbulence and unrest comes from self will ... We should place ourselves with all we have in a pure renunciation of will and desire, into the good and precious will of God'.³⁹

Moreover, the mortal fear of Jesus, and Mary's lamentation under the cross according to Eckhart are only related to their external nature experiencing sensory perceptions and vehement emotions: 'You should know that the outer man can be active while the inner man is completely free of this activity and unmoved. Now Christ too had an outer man and an inner man, and so did our Lady, ... but the inner man remained in unmoved detachment'.⁴⁰

The person who has totally delivered himself to God, even if he suffers the experience of himself being deserted by God, remains in his interior through God's nature 'in equality and in unity and remains completely the same': 'The person who has forsaken all and remains in this state and never for an instant casts a glance toward what he has forsaken and remains constant and unmoved in himself and unchanging, only such a person is detached'.⁴¹ In another sermon Eckhart explains: 'A person who is in a race, a continual race, and is in peace, such a person is a heavenly person. The heavens are constantly running around [i.e. revolving] and in running they seek peace'.⁴²

'Out of this inmost ground, all your works should be wrought without Why ... And so, if you were to ask a genuine man who acted from his own ground, "Why do you act?", if he were to answer properly he would simply say, "I act because I act". Where creature stops, God begins to be'.⁴³ Eckhart explains the unity of contemplation and activity in a Christian way: 'It was not until after the time when the disciples received the Holy Spirit that they began to perform virtuous deeds'.⁴⁴

In this context it is all about enhancement of world and life: 'See God in all things, for God is in all things'. St. Augustine says God made all things, not that He might let them come into existence while He went His way, but He stayed in them'.⁴⁵ This does not mean any pantheistic deification of the world, but lays a foundation for the love of God and one's neighbour: 'The first intention of your

love should be purely God and then your neighbour as yourself and not less than yourself'.⁴⁶ According to Eckhart this should be happening in the certitude that he who has left his own will becomes 'just because of justice'.⁴⁷ 'Thus God loves all creatures equally and fills them with his being. And thus too, we should pour forth ourselves in love over all creatures.'⁴⁸ For 'whatever God works, the humble person works'.⁴⁹

A first example for responses to social challenges is living together in religious plurality.

Eckhart's starting-point is to turn against attaching more importance to one's own interests than to anything else, even in piety: 'If a man were in an ecstasy as St. Paul was (2 Cor. 12.2-4), and if he knew of a sick person who needed a bowl of soup from him, I would consider it far better if you were to leave that rapture out of love and help the needy person out of greater love'.⁵⁰

These explanations in the tenth chapter of the 'Talks of Instruction' demonstrate at the beginning of Eckhart's activity the meaning of the many forms in which God's activity can be translated into life and love. At Eckhart's time and nowadays different ways of men and women are being seen, and today more than in the former days also different ways of confessions and religions, according to the seventeenth chapter of Eckhart:

God has not bound man's salvation to any special mode. Whatever has one mode has not another, but God has endowed all good ways with effectiveness and denied this to no good way. For one good does not conflict with another good ... Let every man keep to his own good way and include all ways in it, and take up in his way all goodness and all ways.⁵¹

A final example for responses to social challenges is living together of men and women.

Eckhart, the medieval theologian, has sometimes taken up social traditions of the superiority of males above females that can be found in the New Testament as well. However, he just uses them for preparing his subject, to leave things behind in order to set free the highest power of the soul: 'This power grasps all things in truth. Nothing is hidden from this power. According to scripture men's heads should be bare, and women's covered (cf. 1 Cor. 11.6-7). The women are

the lower powers, which should be veiled. The man is this power, which should be bare and unveiled.⁵²

As he joins Antiquity and the Middle Ages in assuming that the male is the natural and normal human form, Eckhart emphasizes God's partiality for the one who is – allegedly – placed at a disadvantage by nature: 'Nature's intention ... is always the man ...; and when nature ceases her operation, God begins to work and create, for without women, there would be no men.'⁵³ Another step in his argument leads to equality in love: 'Love does not wish to be anywhere but where there is likeness and oneness. Where there is a master and a servant there is no peace, for there is no likeness. A woman and a man are unlike, but in love they are alike.'⁵⁴

In a way typical for him, Eckhart relates this towards God's own love: 'St. John says: "The Word was with God." It was all together equal and side by side with Him, not below or above, but equal. When God made man, he made the woman from the man's side, so that she should be like him. He did not make her from the head or from the feet, so that she ... should be his peer.'⁵⁵ This paragraph ends with the words: 'And so the just soul will be equal with God and beside God, just equal, neither below nor above.' This sentence shows that in Eckhart's argumentation love and justice caused by God are the foundation for calmness as a way to solving conflicts by mystical purification of the mind.

Notes

- 1 Cp. Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1991); Bernard McGinn with Frank Tobin and Elvira Borgstadt (eds), *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (London: SPCK and New York: Paulist Press, 1986) – this translation is abbreviated McGinn; Maurice O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart, German Sermons and Treatises. Translated with Introduction and Notes* (London: Watkin; Longmead: Element Books, 1979, 1981, 1987, 3 vols) – a concordance of the sermons' numbers in different editions in Vol. 3 – this translation is abbreviated Walshe.
- 2 Cp. Markus Enders, *Gelassenheit und Abgeschiedenheit. Studien zur deutschen Mystik* (Hamburg: Kovač, 2008); Niklaus Largier (ed.), *Meister Eckhart: Werke* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993, 2 vols); Peter Reiter, *Der Seelen Grund: Meister Eckhart und die Tradition der Seelenlehre* (Mainz: Univ. Diss., 1992; Würzburg: Koenigshausen & Neumann, 1993); Adeltrud Bundschuh, *Die Bedeutung von Gelassen und die Bedeutung der Gelassenheit in den deutschen Werken Meister Eckharts unter Berücksichtigung seiner lateinischen Schriften*

- (Freiburg: Univ. Diss., 1989; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990); Konrad Weiss et al. (eds), *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die lateinischen Werke* (vols I/II/III/IV/V, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1964/1992/1994/1956/2006) – this critical edition Latin/German is abbreviated LW; Josef Quint (ed.), *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Die deutschen Werke* (vols I, II, III, V; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958/1971/1976/1963) – this critical edition Latin/German is abbreviated DW.
- 3 Keiji Nishitani, *Kami to Zettaimu (God and pure Nothingness)* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1948, rev. edn, Tokyo, Sōbunsha, 1971).
 - 4 Teitaro Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957; repr. New York, 2002); German trans. Liselotte und Walter Hilsbecher; *Der westliche und der östliche Weg. Essays über christliche und buddhistische Mystik* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1960; 2nd edn 1981).
 - 5 Shizuteru Ueda, *Die Gottesgeburt in der Seele und der Durchbruch zur Gottheit. Die mystische Anthropologie Meister Eckharts und ihre Konfrontation mit der Mystik des Zen-Buddhismus* (Marburg: Univ. Diss.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1965).
 - 6 Keiji Nishitani, *Shūkyō towa nanika* (Tokyo 1961; new edn, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002); Engl. trans. Jan van Bragt; *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: The Eastern Buddhist Society, 1980); German trans. Dora Fischer-Barnicol; *Was ist Religion?* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1982; rev. edn, 1986).
 - 7 DW II, p. 363 = Sermon 13b Walshe I, pp. 117–18.
 - 8 DW V, pp. 228–9 = Talks of Instruction 11 Walshe III, pp. 27–8.
 - 9 DW I, pp. 69–70 = Sermon 40 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 4 McGinn, p. 250.
 - 10 DW I, pp. 24–6 = Sermon 8 Walshe I, p. 71.
 - 11 DW I, p. 201 = Sermon 57 Walshe II, p. 87.
 - 12 DW V, p. 197 = Talks 4 Walshe III, p. 15.
 - 13 DW I, p. 250 = Sermon 51 Walshe II, p. 52.
 - 14 DW I, p. 370 = Sermon 97 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 21 McGinn, p. 283.
 - 15 DW II, p. 309 = Sermon 80 Walshe II, p. 238.
 - 16 DW II, p. 488 = Sermon 87 Walshe II, pp. 271–3.
 - 17 DW V, p. 283 = Talks 21 Walshe III, p. 48.
 - 18 DW II, p. 499 = Sermon 87 Walshe II, pp. 275–6.
 - 19 DW II, p. 502 = Sermon 87 Walshe II, p. 274.
 - 20 DW V, p. 401 = Detachment Walshe III, p. 117.
 - 21 DW II, p. 500 = Sermon 87 Walshe II, p. 274.
 - 22 1 Pfeiffer = Sermon 1 Walshe I, p. 2 – sermons in the Medieval German without critical edition are cited with their number in Franz Pfeiffer, *Deutsche Mystiker des 14. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 2: *Meister Eckhart* (Leipzig, 1857 = Aalen: Scientia, 1966).
 - 23 1 Pfeiffer = Sermon 1 Walshe I, p. 3.

- 24 DW II, p. 231 = Sermon 29 Walshe I, p. 216.
- 25 3 Pfeiffer = Sermon 3 Walshe I, p. 33.
- 26 DW V, p. 403 = On Detachment Walshe III, pp. 117–18.
- 27 DW II, p. 287 = Sermon 43 Walshe II, p. 2.
- 28 DW III, p. 387 = Sermon 94 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 80 McGinn, p. 334.
- 29 DW I, p. 197 = Sermon 57 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 12 McGinn, pp. 268–9.
- 30 DW I, p. 172 = Sermon 66 Walshe II, p. 145.
- 31 DW I, p. 172 = Sermon 66 Walshe II, p. 144.
- 32 DW I, p. 216 = Sermon 24a Walshe I, p. 189.
- 33 DW II, pp. 381–2 = Sermon 47 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 46 McGinn, p. 305.
- 34 DW III, pp. 23–4 = Sermon 45 Walshe II, p. 15.
- 35 DW III, p. 547 = Sermon 19 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 71 McGinn, p. 324.
- 36 DW II, pp. 504–5 = Sermon 87 Walshe I, p. 275.
- 37 DW III, pp. 197–8 = 41 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 70 McGinn, pp. 318–9.
- 38 DW V, p. 411 = Detachment Walshe III, p. 120.
- 39 DW V, pp. 280–1 = Talks 21 Walshe III, pp. 47–8.
- 40 DW V, pp. 419–22 = Detachment Walshe III, p. 124.
- 41 DW I, p. 203 = Sermon 57 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 12 McGinn, p. 270.
- 42 DW I, p. 118 = Sermon 72 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 7 McGinn, p. 253.
- 43 DW I, pp. 91–2 = Sermon 13 b Walshe I, pp. 117–18.
- 44 DW III, p. 492 = Sermon 9 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 86 McGinn, p. 344.
- 45 DW II, pp. 100–1 = Sermon 18 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 30 McGinn, p. 292.
- 46 DW II, p. 104 = Sermon 18 Walshe; *ibid.*, p. 294.
- 47 LW III, p. 104; author's translation.
- 48 DW III, p. 296 = Sermon 88 Walshe II, p. 280.
- 49 DW I, p. 235 = Sermon 50 Walshe; here I prefer Tobin's translation of Sermon 15 McGinn, p. 273.
- 50 DW V, p. 221 = Talks 10 Walshe III, pp. 24–5.
- 51 DW V, pp. 251–2 = Talks 17 Walshe III, p. 36.
- 52 DW I, p. 160 = Sermon 68 Walshe II, p. 160.
- 53 DW II, p. 64 = Sermon 17 Walshe I, pp. 143–4.
- 54 DW II, pp. 47–8 = Sermon 12 Walshe I, p. 105.
- 55 DW I, pp. 106–7 = Sermon 65 Walshe II, p. 134.