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"Nothingness" in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism

*With Particular Reference to the Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology**

Ueda Shizuteru, born in 1926, has been a disciple of Nishitani Keiji for over fifty years and his successor in the Department of Religion at Kyoto University, thereby assuring the continuation of the Kyoto tradition which began with Nishida Kitarō. After receiving doctorates from Kyoto University and the University of Marburg, he contributed numerous studies in the fields of German mysticism and modern German thought, on Zen Buddhism, and on the philosophy of Nishida, to both Japanese and German journals. He was also a regular speaker at the Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland. His major work on the mysticism of Meister Eckhart, *Die Gottesgeburt in der Seele und der Durchbruch zur Gottheit*, has been received with particular interest.

I

According to Meister Eckhart, God gives birth to his Son in the solitary soul. "The Father begets me as his Son, as his very same Son. Whatever God works is one. Thus he begets me as his Son without any distinction."[1] The "birth of God in the soul,"[2] spoken of here in the language of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, is the leap to realization of his own authentic life that man experiences in "solitariness" with the surrender of the ego. "The Father begets me as his Son without any distinction." This means that the absolute event of salvation touches each and every individual in its full originality, without first passing through a mediator. This being the case,

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Eckhart stands very close to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the philosophical-religious base of Zen Buddhism. According to Mahāyāna teaching, the very same awakening to the very same truth transforms each and every individual into the very same Buddha—that is, it makes of each individual the same "Awakened One" that it made of the historical Buddha, Gautama.

So far the similarity is only of a general nature. A more deep-reaching spiritual kinship appears when Eckhart speaks of a "breakthrough to the nothingness of the godhead."[3] "The soul is not content with being a Son of God." "The soul wants to penetrate to the simple ground of God, to the silent desert where not a trace of distinction is to be seen, neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit."[4] By carrying out in radical fashion his Neoplatonically laden understanding of "being one," Eckhart transfers the essence or ground of God back beyond the divine God to the simply modeless, formless, unthinkable, and unspeakable purity that he calls, in distinction to God, "godhead" and that he describes as a nothingness. This means that the essence of God is withdrawn from every objectification on the part of man, from every representation. God is divine in turning towards his creatures: for in his essence, beyond the opposition of God and creatures, he is a nothingness pure and simple.

Eckhart's thought exhibits a gradual ascent to this nothingness of the godhead. He begins with statements like "God is good" and "God loves me," which still represent statements of faith. But he goes on to say that "God must be good, God must love me." These represent statements of knowledge, for it is in knowledge that the reason for God's being good is disclosed. Lastly, however, he arrives at the position that "God is not good" (i.e., in his essence). This statement belongs to negative theology, which Eckhart not only pursues in a very radical way but also accords a strongly existential tone.[5]

For Eckhart, the nothingness of the godhead is, in a non-objective manner, the soul's very own ground. Hence the soul, in order to return to its original ground, must break through God and out into the nothingness of the godhead. In so doing the soul must "take leave of God" and "become void of God." This is accomplished only if the soul lets go of itself as what has been united with God. This is what Eckhart understands by extreme "solitariness," the "fundamental death." At the same time, the original source of genuine life that lives of itself and from itself, "without why or

wherefore," is thereby disclosed in the ground of the soul, so that the soul now lives from its own ground. Eckhart has the soul speak at this point: "I am neither God nor creature."[6] Here is true freedom, freedom without God, a "godlessness" wherein the nothingness of the godhead, and thus the essence of God, is present. Eckhart's thought draws him here beyond the opposition of theism and atheism, beyond the opposition of personalism and impersonalism.

Eckhart links this "beyond" in the "godless" life directly to the *vita activa* of the everyday reality of the world. In unison with the movement "away from God to the nothingness of the godhead" goes a movement "away from God to the reality of the world." In his exposition of the gospel passage on Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38ff.), Eckhart sees a completeness in Martha at work in the kitchen to take care of the guests that is lacking in Mary who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to what he has to say,[7] thus inverting the usual interpretation of the story. Martha toils away in the kitchen. In her, the return to the everyday reality of the world is at the same time the real achievement of a breakthrough beyond God to the nothingness of the godhead. For Eckhart, God is present as the nothingness he is in his essence in and as Martha at work in the kitchen. He points the way to overcoming the so-called *unio mystica* and to arriving at a non-religious religiosity.

We may also note the structured dynamic at work in Eckhart's thought here. He proceeds through radical negation back to the ground of essence at its first beginnings, and from there back again to the *vita activa* and to the reality of the world. It is a dynamic that we might describe as a coincidence of negation and affirmation, of nothingness and here-and-now actuality. Here, too, we have Eckhart's solution to the crisis of faith of his time, torn between a radical Aristotelianism on the one hand, and a popular religious movement for the witness of poverty in the apostolic life on the other.

In Zen Buddhism this same coincidence is at stake—except that there negation and affirmation are effected more radically than they are in Eckhart. The radicalness of Zen is evident from the fact that it speaks of nothingness pure and simple, while Eckhart speaks of the nothingness of the godhead. For Eckhart, to say that God is in his essence a nothingness is to treat nothingness merely as the epitome of all negative expressions for the purity of the essence of

God, after the manner of negative theology. Conversely, when Eckhart arrives at affirmation, he does so in the first instance mediately, through God who is the first affirmation. Thus we find him choosing an example like the following: "To one who looks at a stick in the divine light, the stick looks like an angel." Eckhart's affirmation of the stick is not an affirmation of the stick as stick, but of the stick as an angel in the divine light. Zen Buddhism speaks more straightforwardly: "Mountain as mountain, water as water; long, long and short, short."[8]

In Eckhart's thought it is the category of "substance" that is, in the last analysis, definitive. But concomitant with his arrival at, and insistence on, the imageless and formless nature of substance pure and simple, Eckhart advances a radical de-imaging of the soul which is consummated in and as a ceaseless "letting go." This "letting go" accords his teaching its extremely dynamic quality, corresponding to the dynamic of the Zen coincidence of negation and affirmation—except that in Zen, where we see a radical execution of the Mahāyāna Buddhist thinking on relatedness, the scope of this coincidence is wider than it is in Eckhart. This brings us, then, to a discussion of nothingness in Zen Buddhism.

II

Absolute nothingness is concerned with the coincidence of ceaseless negation and straightforward affirmation, such that the coincidence as such is neither negation nor affirmation. In the history of Buddhism, it has been Zen that has given this coincidence a fresh, existential concreteness to cut through the layers of speculation surrounding it. This Zen has achieved by having the concepts of absolute nothingness and the self interpenetrate one another. In a word, we are presented with a nothingness-self—or, one might say, a nothingness viewed as *someone* rather than as *something*. This nothingness-self is presented graphically in a classic Zen text through three pictures dynamically connected to one another.[9] Together they are intended to show the perfection of the Zen way of self-becoming, reached after various stages of the religious life have been left behind, one after the other.

The first picture is in fact not a picture at all, but the mere drawing of an empty circle with nothing inside of it. It points to absolute

nothingness functioning "in the first place" as radical negation. The text accompanying this empty circle says of it: "holy, worldly, both vanished without a trace." It gives us a radical neither/nor: neither religious nor worldly, neither immanence nor transcendence, neither subject nor object, neither being nor nothingness. It indicates a fundamental and total negation of every sort of duality, albeit not for the sake of a unity. It is "neither two nor one." It is absolute nothingness.

This is not to say that there is simply nothing at all, but that man needs to be set free of substantializing thought. For Buddhism, everything that is, is in relationship to others, indeed in a reciprocally conditioned relationship. For anything to "be related," therefore, means that in itself it is a nothingness, and that in this nothingness the totality of all relationships is concentrated in a once-and-for-all, unique manner. Corresponding to this coincidence of nothingness and the dynamic of relatedness, Buddhist thought makes frequent use of the typical formula: "It is and likewise it is not. It is not and likewise it is." In the double perspective that this "and likewise" opens up on *a* and *not-a*, Buddhism sees the truth of both being and nothingness. Insight into this "and likewise" of *a* and *not-a* inhibits substantializing thought. For Buddhism, at the core of substantializing thought lies the substantializing of man, which in turn has its roots sunk deep in the ego as such. Ego here means ego-consciousness, the elementary mode of which is expressed as "I am I," or better, "I am I because I am I." This "I am I" that has its ground again in "I am I," and in that way is closed off and sealed up in itself, represents the fundamental perversity of man. In contrast, the true man is able to say of himself, "I am I *and likewise* I am not I." The man of ego, whose egoity reaches even into the realms of religion, must in a basic sense die. As a radical neither/nor, absolute nothingness signifies this "fundamental death" of man.

Now absolute nothingness, the nothingness that dissolves substance-thinking, must not be clung to as nothingness. It must not be taken as a kind of substance, or even as the nihilum of a kind of "minus substance." The important thing is the de-substantializing dynamic of nothingness, the nothingness of nothingness. Put in philosophical terms, it refers to the negation of negation, which entails a pure movement in two directions at the same time: (1) the negation of negation in the sense of a further denial of negation

that does not come back around to affirmation but opens up into an endlessly open nothingness; and (2) the negation of negation in the sense of a return to affirmation without any trace of mediation. Absolute nothingness, which first of all functions as radical negation, is maintained as this dynamic coincidence of infinite negation and straightforward affirmation. In this coincidence, and because of it, a fundamental transformation and a complete return—a sort of "death and resurrection"—are achieved in *ex-sistence*.

This brings us to the second picture, where we see merely a tree in flower alongside a river, and nothing else. In the accompanying text we read the words: "Boundlessly flows the river, just as it flows. Red blooms the flower, just as it blooms." It is not a picture of an external, objective landscape; nor even of a metaphorical landscape meant to express an inner condition of man or to project an interior spiritual landscape. It is a picture of reality seen as an actual appearance of the selfless self. Since in absolute nothingness subject and object, which have been split from one another, are returned to their state "prior to the split," so too in our example here, the tree blooming alongside a river is none other than the selfless self. This should not be taken as a statement of the substantial identity of man and nature, but rather as a statement that things like trees in flower—just as they bloom—incarnate the selflessness of man in a nonobjective manner. The blooming of the tree and the flowing of the water are at the same time the self at play in its selfless freedom. Nature "naturing," as in the way trees bloom, represents here the first resurrected body of the selfless self.

The Chinese-Japanese equivalent for the word "nature" properly connotes something like "being so from out of itself." Here nature is not seen in the sense of one realm of beings within the whole of being, but as the truth of the being of beings. If man, in his nothingness and hence not from out of his ego, experiences flowers just as they bloom from out of themselves—or more appropriately put, if flowers actually bloom in the nothingness of man just as they bloom from out of themselves—then at the same time and in the truth of his own being, man makes himself present just as he is from out of himself. Here, grounded in selflessness, we have a particular joining together of the subjective/existential and the objective-factual. Nature, as the "just-as-it-is-from-out-of-itself," is synonymous in Buddhism with truth, whose Sanskrit word is *Tathatā*—literally,

"thusness." This "thus" means an unveiling of what is present, and thereby also an elementary confirmation, an original concept of truth prior to the differentiation of the truth of being and the truth of knowledge or propositions.

Next, on the basis of this incarnational reality that confirms selflessness and sustains it, there appears the selfless self which, by its very selflessness, takes the hyphenated "between" of the I-Thou, as its own existential inner realm of activity. The third picture shows us an old man and a youth meeting on a road, but it is not the chance encounter of two different people that is being depicted there. "An old man and a youth" means the selfless self-unfolding of the old man. For the self in its selflessness, whatever happens to the other happens to itself. This communion of common life is the second resurrected body of the selfless self. The self, cut open and disclosed through absolute nothingness, unfolds itself as the "between." I am "I and Thou," and "I and Thou" are I. What we have here is the self seen as a double self grounded on selflessness in nothingness. It is a coincidence—a reciprocal coincidence—of absolute self-sufficiency and absolute dependency, which takes us further than the I-Thou relationship that Buber speaks of.

To review what we have been saying, these three pictures portray a threefold manifestation of the self, at any given moment of which the same reality is fully present in a special way. This same reality, the selfless self, is for its part only fully real insofar as, in a threefold process of transformation, it is able to realize itself on each occasion in a totally different way. Hence the self is never "there," but is at each moment in the process of transformation, now losing every trace of itself in nothingness, now blooming selflessly with the flowers and like one of them, now meeting another and making the encounter into its own self. The nonsubstantiality of the selfless self is evident in the freedom of one aspect to be interchanged with another. It does not portray a permanent identity with itself in itself, but an *ex-static* process of drawing with *ex-sistence* an invisible circle of nothingness-nature-communication. This movement of *ex-sistence* constitutes for the first time the truly selfless self. In so doing, the various aspects of the selfless self are still able to be objectified and depicted in images like those represented in the three pictures referred to, but the process as such, which is the main thing, is never able to be fixed as an object or image. This is also the case with absolute nothingness. When absolute nothingness is spoken of

in Zen Buddhism, it is this entire dynamic complex that is meant.[10] Still, we are left with the question: Why speak of merely nothingness then, if it is this entire complex that one has in mind? The answer lies in the nonobjectivity of the process, in its nonsubstantiality, and in the fact that Buddhism locates the decisive moving force of this process in dynamic negation, in the nothingness of nothingness. Man grounds the positive only by means of and as his *ex-sistential* dynamic, at any given moment fully concrete and individual.[11]

III

What is represented in the three pictures just referred to and their accompanying text shifts back and forth, as we have seen, between two different dimensions. We may distinguish *Dimension A*, where what is depicted is actually taking place; and *Dimension B*, where that event is presented, or presents itself, as such. In a word, we must distinguish between the dimension of the event and the dimension of its self-presentation or self-articulation.

Presence (for instance, the presence of flowers in the nothingness of man) occurs on Dimension A, while the phrase, "the presence of flowers in the nothingness of man" (or in its earlier formulation, "flowers bloom just as they bloom from out of themselves") lies on Dimension B where it originates as a self-unfolding of the event to self-clarity in the form of an elemental proposition. Did it not so unfold itself, the event would needs remain a *small* nothingness. Only in that unfolding is the original event signified as a *great* nothingness. Thus nothingness points directly back to the original event where it retracts what had been unfolded. In so doing, however, nothingness does not leave the event to rest in itself but returns it again to its unfolding. Thus nothingness makes an open field for the inter-dimensional process: unfolding *and likewise* the retraction of unfolding, the retraction of unfolding *and likewise* unfolding. Therein lies the supreme paradox *and likewise* no paradox at all, for in the retraction to nothingness the paradox is also retracted.

In this way of looking at how an event unfolds into an elemental proposition, Zen Buddhism, as is its wont, avoids faith propositions. Dimension A deals originally with nothingness. Dimension B

unfolds into a treatment of the knowledge of reality as it is. There is no faith proposition involved here, but an elemental proposition in which reality articulates itself, as in the formula, "Flowers bloom just as they bloom from out of themselves" or "Self and other are not two." This state of affairs gives Zen its special significance for philosophy. Already on Dimension B, where in most cases theology is concerned with specific dogmas, Zen is able to "neutralize" itself, so that the elemental propositions it speaks there—despite the difference of dimensions—might be taken as an elemental form of philosophical principle. Of course, it is altogether a matter of individual philosophical initiative whether this is taken into consideration in the quest for principles or not. To clarify this further, however, we must bring into the picture a third dimension, the dimension on which philosophy operates. In so doing, I should like to adopt as my model a work from the early philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), *A Study of Good* (1911).

In his Foreword, Nishida writes: "I would like to try to clarify everything in the light of the claim that pure experience is the only real reality." What unfolds here is a threefold process that in turn represents a manifold of different levels: (1) pure experience, (2) pure experience as the only real reality, and (3) clarifying everything in the light of the claim that pure experience is the only real reality. In connection with this threefold process, we see at work the characteristic relationship found in Nishida between East Asian Zen and Western philosophy. In this relationship there is effected a "transformation of Zen into a philosophical principle." It may also serve as an example of the multidimensional process that belongs to the open field of nothingness.[12] We are not concerned here directly with the content of his statement, but rather with the structure of the process of thought to which it gives expression.

A. Pure experience as event: "In the moment of seeing or hearing prior to reflection—e.g., 'I see a flower'—and prior also to judgment 'This flower is red'—in this moment of actual seeing or hearing, there is neither subject nor object, but only the simple presence that obtains before their split." In this sense, "neither subject nor object" is a nothingness that is nothing other than genuine fullness. This experience immediately experiencing, which for Nishida guarantees the original unity of the empirical, the metaphysical, and the existential, is what he designates as "pure experience" because it has not yet been elaborated by reflection and

judgment. For Zen, this pure and simple experience obtains on Dimension A.

B. The context then points to an unfolding on another dimension: "The only real reality is pure experience." Pure experience as an event next arrives at an epistemic realization of what it itself is, and that in the form of an elemental proposition. What we have here is the self-articulation, or the primary articulation, of an event wherein that event *de-cides* itself in an elemental proposition and presents itself at any given moment in its entirety. By itself, this elemental proposition would count as a Zen saying, a saying in which a Zen insight is assigned its initial verbal expression—for instance, "Endless expanse, nothing hidden."

C. Finally, the full context: "I would like to try to clarify everything in the light of the claim that pure experience is the only real reality." Here Nishida directs his method onto a philosophical dimension, to clarify everything (philosophy as the science of the totality) through a single principle (philosophy as the science of principles). Once incarnated into this philosophical context, both pure experience as well as the elemental propositions of knowledge no longer have a distinctive Zen character. In this full context of Dimension C, the phrase "pure experience" is already a philosophical term. Here, "the only real reality is pure experience" is no longer an elemental proposition of knowledge but a philosophical principle, the first principle through which everything is to be clarified. That is why Nishida states his aim as "to clarify everything." In one respect, "everything" has already been grasped on Dimension B. But there, within the self-unfolding of the event A, the unity is the elemental givenness, so that "everything" is grasped concomitantly in its unity in that elementally given unity. The connection of unity, as an elemental givenness, with everything contained therein can also be explicitly unfolded on Dimension B. As the Zen saying has it, "Oneness is everything, everything is oneness." Another Zen saying goes, "In the spring wind, steady and invisible, the long branches with their blossoms are long, and the short branches short, each from out of itself."

Far from being philosophical thought, however, this is more analogous to theology, for which first principles are given in advance as an original source, and for which this original givenness functions as an axiom. But when philosophy seeks to clarify everything, the

given is everything in its particularity of manifoldness, distinction, and opposition—for example, nature and spirit, or reflection and intuition—not in an original unity given from the start. To produce for the first time a unified (that is, here, a systematic) clarification of "everything" in its distinction and opposition, and thereby at the same time to seek a first principle, is the task of philosophy. And any possible philosophical principle must be submitted to criticism (the ineluctable self-criticism of philosophy) as to whether or not it clarifies everything in a factually adequate and systematically consequential fashion. As such, this critique can come to no definitive end for the simple reason that everything is inexhaustible in its distinction. In this regard, a philosophical principle that is supposed to have the certainty of self-evidence remains hypothetical within the totality of philosophical thought. Philosophy must be ever prepared for methodical rethinking, for thinking all over again from the start.

Nishida himself faced this point full consciously: "I would like to *try* to clarify everything. . . ." This does not mean, however that for Nishida the realization and upholding of the first principle of knowledge on Dimension B loses its footing. But Nishida knew that an elemental principle does not admit of being taken over directly onto the dimension of philosophy as a first principle, or more precisely put, that the content of a proposition may indeed remain the same while it may change from something unconditionally valid on Dimension B to something hypothetically valid on Dimension C. Zen is aware that it finds itself in a certain foreign element here. If in Nishida Zen succeeds in mediating a principle to the philosophical dimension, it is only hypothetical. In other words, in Nishida, the self-sufficiency of philosophical thought is not encroached upon by Zen. Seen from the standpoint of Zen, Nishida's philosophy *qua* philosophy is a second, indirect articulation of Zen through which Zen transforms itself into a non-Zen so as to make its way into a world that was previously foreign to it.

This threefold complex that unfolds in Nishida's philosophical position contains two different processes moving in opposing directions. *Starting from the standpoint of Zen*, A-B-C represents a movement of unfolding, in the process of which B and C are separated by a gap that Nishida, as a philosopher, was the first in the history of Zen to bridge. *Starting from the standpoint of philosophy*, C-B-A represents a movement of retreat back to the original. In this movement a certain affinity obtains between philosophical principles and

the elemental principles of knowledge, and this smoothes the way for philosophical thought into Dimension B, since both are already expressed in propositional form and can therefore be thought out in conceptual terms. In contrast, there is a gap between B and A in this reverse movement of philosophy back to the original, since A is unthinkable and unpreconceivable as an event. In the history of philosophy, Nishida was the first to bridge this gap, that is, to think the unthinkable by means of non-thinking and so to go all the way back to Dimension A in the quest for an original principle. This he did as one engaged in the practice of Zen.

As philosopher, Nishida was at the same time a practicer of Zen; and as practicer of Zen, at the same time a philosopher. In general, philosophy and Zen—crudely put, thinking and non-thinking—stand opposed to one another. This tension, however, became something creative in Nishida through Zen and philosophy bringing one another into question. In the light of Zen, philosophy was made into a question about the origination of principles. In the light of philosophy, Zen was made into a question about the possibility of the project of building a world and the possibility of cultivating a logic. The result of this encounter of East Asian Zen and Western philosophy was the complex, A-B-C, discussed above, with its double mobility in opposing directions. In the last analysis, it is absolute nothingness that for Zen Buddhism throws open a field for A-B-C and its interdimensional mobility. Because of the character of nothingness that belongs to the original event, it can be neutralized on Dimension B, relativized on Dimension C, and likewise be returned once again to Dimension A. And the relationship at work in this encounter is thus different from that which obtains between theology, grounded on its faith propositions, and philosophy.

NOTES

1. *Meister Eckhart*: *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, ed. and trans. by Josef Quint (Munich, 1955), p. 185 (hereafter abbreviated as Q).

2. For an extended treatment of this notion, see S. Ueda, *Die Gottesgeburt in der Seele und der Durchbruch zur Gottheit* (Gütersloh, 1965), pp. 27-97.

3. See Ueda, *Die Gottesgeburt*, pp. 99-139.

4. Q, p. 316.

5. On the relationship of these various statements to one another, see S. Ueda,

"Über den Sprachgebrauch Meister Eckharts: 'Gott muss . . .'—Ein Beispiel für die Gedankengänge der spekulativen Mystik," in *Glaube, Geist, Geschichte*, Festschrift for Ernst Benz (Leiden, 1967), pp. 266-77.

6. Q, p. 308.

7. Q, Predigt 28, pp. 280ff.; and *Meister Eckhart: Die deutsche Werke*, ed. by Josef Quint and commissioned by the German Research Society (Stuttgart), Vol. III, Predigt 86, pp. 472ff (hereafter abbreviated as DW).

8. See S. Ueda, "Der Zen-Buddhismus als 'Nicht-Mystik'—unter besonderer Berück-sichtigung des Vergleichs zur Mystik Meister Eckharts," in *Transparente Welt*, Festschrift for Jean Gebser (Bern and Stuttgart, 1965), pp. 291-313.

9. Published in English translation by M. H. Trevor as *The Ox and His Herdsman* (Tokyo, 1969). The work comprises a graphic presentation of the progress of man's self-becoming according to the way of Zen through ten stages. Here we are concerned only with the last three.

10. On the theme "nothingness = self," see S. Ueda, "Das Nichts und das Selbst im buddhistischen Denken—Zum west-östlichen Vergleich des Selbstverständnisses des Menschen," *Studia Philosophica*, Annual of the Swiss Philosophical Society, Vol. 34 (1974): 144-61.

11. Concerning this existential dynamic in the light of the three oxherding pictures treated here, see S. Ueda, "Das wahre Selbst—Zum west-östlichen Vergleich des Personbegriffs," in *Fernöstliche Kultur*, Festschrift for Wolf Haenisch (Marburg an der Lahn, 1975), pp. 1-10.

12. See here S. Ueda, "Das denkende Nicht-Denken—'Zen und Philosophie' bei Nishida unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Frühphilosophie der reinen Erfahrung," in *Denkender Glaube*, Festschrift for Carl Heinz Ratschow (Berlin, 1976), pp. 331-41.

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