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Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and Its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

Charlotte Radler
Loyola Marymount University

The purpose of this article is to probe Meister Eckhart's concepts of self—or, rather, no-self—detachment, and indistinct union, and their positive implications for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. I will examine potential affinities between Eckhart and Buddhist thought with the modest hope of identifying areas in Eckhart's mysticism that may present themselves as particularly ripe for Buddhist-Christian conversations.

On April 15, 1329, Pope John XXII issued the bull "In agro dominico" that condemned tenets of Meister Eckhart's teaching. Pope John XXII, who had also dealt harshly with the spiritual Franciscans, was truly concerned about Eckhart's seductive impact on the uneducated in the pews.¹ Eckhart's claim that every human's true identity, attainable through detachment, is divine must have created dreams in some of an unmediated experience of and union with the divine, and nightmares in others of the bypassing of the Church's structures, sacraments, and hierarchies.

Eckhart, a University of Paris teacher and a preacher, bases his mysticism in part on Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite. Similarly to Proclus, Eckhart proposes that the soul's circular journey runs from the nothingness of the God beyond God, the God beyond the Trinity, into the somethingness of the world, and back to the nothingness of the God beyond the God. There is a firm ontological link between the One, the Trinity, and creation, which means that creation in its core is Trinitarian and One. In his interpretations of Job 22:14 and Ps. 61:12, Eckhart demonstrates that God is never static as One or Three or creation, but God is at once dialectically One *and* flowing out into the persons of the Trinity *and* flowing over into creation.² This continuity between the Creator and creature, time and eternity, sanctifies creation and transience in all its grittiness and overcomes a duality between Creator and creature similar to the interpretation of *samsara* and *nirvana* (conditioned reality is Boundless Openness in Mahayana thought). Furthermore, Eckhart maintains that the One, as transparent and transcendent nothingness, encompasses and penetrates all. The wondrous truth, for Eckhart, is that we are truly all in all, just like the center of the circle is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.³

To his audience, Eckhart repeatedly underscores that the soul is ontologically rooted in the nothingness of the divine unity and is thus in its deepest essence divine. In fact—and here we find profound resonances with tenets of Buddhist thought such as the concept of no-self (*anatta* or *anatma*)—the self's only true existence is the divine nothingness. Contrary to such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart focuses on the principal existence of things in the godhead and maintains that the human being does not possess a true substantial existence or "I" apart from God.⁴ Hence, the "I" or self can never constitute the foundation of reality. Because of the human being's absolute ontological dependence on God, Eckhart can assert that "where God is, there is the soul, and where the soul is, there is God."⁵ In his writings, Eckhart therefore differentiates between the true existence that creatures have in their original cause, the *esse virtuale*, and the particular and ephemeral existence that creatures possess in themselves, the *esse formale*.⁶ Thus, instead of autonomy and possessive individualism, "theonomy" implies the realization of the human being's full potential.

While the autonomous, individual self is a form of negative nothingness or no-self, it paradoxically constitutes the greatest attachment for the human being. The clinging to the self causes what David Tracy refers to as an individual and cultural terror of transience.⁷ In the journey toward union, the soul must carefully release itself from all its attachments and detach itself from all its possessiveness. Eckhart's existential letting-go and letting-be imply the profoundest respect for existence itself as well as recognition of the ontological interconnectedness of all life.

One of the foremost representatives of the apophatic tradition, Eckhart hooks up the praxis of *apophasis* to the notion of detachment, the stripping away of all layers in order to disclose Ultimate Reality. *Apophasis* provides a sound and necessary critique of the theistic concept of God as well as of self. For the possessiveness of the no-self also includes possessiveness of "God," since "God" is ultimately a projection of the human being's wishes, desires, and needs, and, thus, is an idol. The best way to honor "God" is, thus, to dive into "a-theism" and not to have a "God," that is, to let God be nothing and exist in the same nothingness. In sermon 52, Eckhart poignantly writes: "Therefore I pray to God that he makes me free of God, for my real being is above God if we take God as the beginning of creatures."⁸ The Dominican Master, hence, fractures the hegemony of theism and embraces an "atheism," which unmasks the golden calf, which humans call "God."

Still, Eckhart is very concerned about the limitations of both *kataphasis* and *apophasis*, i.e., the limits of all language. The human being must, therefore, dialectically move beyond both cataphatic and apophatic theology into the negation of the negation, which is the highest form of affirmation of transparent existence itself. The movement beyond affirmations and negations is part of a pervasive dialectical motion, which constitutes the very sinew of the Dominican's mysticism. Dialectics, for Eckhart, is as much a linguistic strategy as it is a spiritual exercise, which overcomes dualism while upholding otherness and sameness, and leads to releasement and openness.⁹ The deconstructionists' important critique of dialectic misses the mark with Eckhart's use of dialectic, since his pulsating dialectical motion balances

between the swamps of static fusion and static dualism. Dialectic as existence, as praxis, as exercise, preserves both the stillness and the motion, celebrates both fusion and difference.

Eckhart, hence, presents his readers with a dialectical mystical infrastructure: God—and reciprocally the soul—is never statically frozen or enclosed as nothingness or One or Three or creation, but the Ultimate Reality is dynamically nothingness, One, Three, and creation. This dynamic, dialectical movement, therefore, goes from absolute openness and liberation beyond being and nonbeing to an experience of openness and liberation in history and in creation, and back again.¹⁰ Now, in comparing Eckhart's nothingness with the Buddhist concepts of nothingness (*sunyata*), several thinkers, Shizuteru Ueda most famously, have claimed that the Meister's nothingness is not an absolute nothingness. Ueda claims that, owing to Eckhart's avowal of Christian theism, his notion of nothingness remains, at best, an apophatic strategy to express the simplicity of Ultimate Reality.¹¹ Yet, importantly, Beverly Lanzetta warns us against such an interpretation. In her article "Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart," Lanzetta writes: "The problem with the absolutizing of contingent historical interpretations is that scholars risk implying that absolute nothingness logically can be assigned only one normative description, or be one thing [. . .]."¹² She convincingly argues that Eckhart integrates his Christian theistic metaphysics with his notion of nothingness, because the soul follows Christ's kenotic motion as it flows back through creation, Trinity, and Godhead, and breaks through and *unbecomes* in the nothingness of the ground. Lanzetta sums up her conclusion in the following statement, which may help facilitate the wider goal of inter-religious conversation: "I believe it accurate to say that Eckhart broke through into what might be loosely called a Buddhist perspective, and he did so in a manner that is intrinsic to Christianity itself. What is more remarkable is that he not only succeeds but also offers us a profoundly provocative hermeneutic for comparative study."¹³

Eckhart's notion of detachment unearths the apophatic and kenotic veins of his mysticism. Through detachment, the human being changes its perspective from a human to a divine perspective. Echoing Mahayana Buddhist thought, the Dominican Master maintains that such a human being wants nothing, knows nothing, and has nothing, and becomes as free as when it did not exist.¹⁴ Consequently, detachment, for Eckhart, implies a refusal to limit being and reality, as well as an affirmation of boundless openness. Indeed, a detached human being removes layer after layer of its constructed pseudo-self until it uncovers the true core of itself, that is, the transcendent nothingness which is also God, and only then can it become this same transcendent nothingness. At the end of sermon 12, we find one of Eckhart's most well-known illustrations of the fusion of identities and the ensuing transparency, which occurs via detachment: "The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye and one seeing, one knowing and one loving."¹⁵

As mentioned above, the central problem is the self because it interrupts transparency. Consequently the important thing is to abandon the self truly rather than

the obvious culprits, such as riches, vanity, or sexual lusts. The Dominican Master maintains that one has not understood the profundity of the problem of obstruction if one tinkers with fasts, bodily mortification, abstinence, and penance and ignores the obstacle of the self. The body and its exercises are in themselves morally neutral for Eckhart; it is when they become objects of concern that overshadow God and become “ways” to barter with God that Eckhart cautions his readers and listeners to overcome them.¹⁶ He does not believe that ascetic “athleticism” can serve a purpose in itself. Having years of experience as a spiritual counselor to both women and men, Eckhart knew how easy it was for works to become an end in themselves, and he realized how seductive these ostensibly good deeds and exercises (fasting, going barefoot, keeping vigil, and conducting other forms of penitence, etc.) could be. In fact, in *Counsels of Discernment*, Eckhart encourages the young friars to skip the exterior works if these are where their hopes are, for, he says, God will not reward a person for these works since God is not their intention.¹⁷ These statements should not be seen as encouraging laxness or passive interiority. Rather, Eckhart is concerned that we will find ways and lose God, as he cautions in sermon 5b.¹⁸ Consequently, the soul even has to release its hold around the hope of nothingness as a way to God and set out on a wayless way. If a human being is properly detached and directed toward God, then this person truly has God wherever he or she is, be it in the bustling streets or in the quiet of a monk’s cell.¹⁹ This statement points to the inclusiveness of Eckhart’s spirituality. Herein lies the paradox: while it is a very radical mysticism in its theological and philosophical content, it is not a particularly “muscular” mysticism. The “prerequisite” is not physical or mental athleticism, but *Gelassenheit* and an inner, fecund desert. The Church may have viewed these Eckhartian statements as subversive attempts to forego ecclesiastical institutions and practices in the encounter with God, thus contributing to his condemnation.

For Eckhart, the radical inner poverty attained through detachment always bears external fruits in an active life of pure love, and all external acts and practices are rooted in the inner disposition. Detachment is, hence, fulfilled in imitation of Christ’s earthly life and becomes a spiritual exercise in the truest form. Several scholars²⁰ affirm the continuity between inner detachment and outer detached activity, which, similar to the continuity between the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, insightfully captures Eckhart’s dynamic idea of detachment as praxis.

A striking feature of Eckhart’s mysticism is its almost complete lack of detailed ethical direction. Amy Hollywood describes his nonprescriptive ethics as an “apophatic ethics,” which nicely points to its link to detachment.²¹ According to Eckhart’s apophatic ethics, it is out of the inner ground that the detached human being performs works without a why (*sunder warumbe*), not for the sake of something but for the sake of no purpose and nothing, that is, God. The only option for a detached person, who rests content in the emptiness of the divine, is to live and work a wayless and why-less life toward God as the final goal. In living this way the detached human being does not totalize or fracture the integrity of the neighbor, by instrumentalizing him or her, but truly recognizes and acknowledges the communal identity of being.

Moreover, Eckhart's remarkable reading of the Mary and Martha story in sermon 86 discloses the release *to*, not *from*, quotidian activities.²² Eckhart's exegetical imagination breaks in dramatic fashion with the preceding tradition and inverts the classic Mary and Martha story, in which Mary is normally portrayed as the example to be emulated. In Eckhart's sermon, not Mary (traditionally the model for the contemplative life) but Martha (traditionally the model for the active life) is hailed as the example to follow. On Eckhart's reading, Martha better exemplifies spiritual maturity, because Martha, perfectly detached and acting out of her ground, actually had *practiced life* and by doing so she attained the most noble knowing analogous to the wisdom and detachment of the Bodhisattva ideal.²³ The reversal of the traditional Christian Mary-Martha paradigm poignantly illustrates the "living union" between the active and the contemplative life in Eckhart's mysticism. It thus reveals the interconnectedness between deep-rooted interiority and praxis. In fact, for Eckhart detached activity, joyously overflowing and abounding from the inner divine source, *is* a spiritual exercise. Eckhart does not set apart experience of God and union from quotidian life as, for example, some of his contemporaries did, compartmentalizing the experience of God to "special occasions" of ecstasy, visions, and elevations; rather he claims that experiences of God and union are intrinsic to quotidian life. Eckhart's refusal to elevate and separate the religious life from everyday life has been characterized as Eckhart's "this-worldliness."²⁴

Meister Eckhart's dialectical understanding of indistinct union invites dialogue with Buddhist thought: in the fusion of identities, the noble soul enters into the innermost ground of the divine nothingness and all subject-object distinction collapses. This fusion of identities, however, is dynamic, dialectical, and continuous, because indistinction is never static. The soul is always indistinct *insofar as* it is distinct, just like God is One *insofar as* God is Three, or nothing *insofar as* God is everything. The full motion of the dialectic is present at all times, thus, imploding static duality between otherness and sameness. Eckhart's dialectical mysticism thus proposes a naked intimacy and transparency between human and divine, *while* safeguarding otherness and distinction.

Finally, Eckhart is sanguine about the agility of reason and the exoteric nature of revelation, which can be investigated by reason. Opening up another fruitful avenue for Christian-Buddhist dialogue, Eckhart does not distinguish between reason and revelation, and hence does not create a "superstructure" to nature. He is absolutely convinced about the conformity between reason and revelation, philosophy and theology. Eckhart did in fact believe that the content of teaching was the same in philosophy and theology, though there were distinct modes of operation in the two disciplines. Through this claim, he went beyond the common assumption of scholastic theologians regarding the harmony between faith and reason. Eckhart also does not distinguish between Christian and non-Christian sources of philosophical and theological truth, as is evidenced in his defense when he attempts to show that his teaching has the backing of tradition by pointing to Cicero (a non-Christian), Seneca (a non-Christian), and Origen (a heretic).²⁵ I hold that Eckhart's hermeneutical openness, which identifies fluidity between theological and philosophical truths, as well

as between Christian and non-Christian truths, provides rich soil for Buddhist-Christian conversations. If we remain responsive to this dialogue and the presence of the “other,” we may risk our preconceived understandings of existence, union, reason, and revelation in this inquiry and come to a productive appreciation of transformative being and knowing.

NOTES

1. The Bull “In agro dominico,” in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, eds. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 80.

2. Cf. for example Meister Eckhart, LW 1, “Expositio libri Genesis,” no. 7, ed. Konrad Weiß, In *Meister Eckhart: Die lateinischen Werke. Vols. 1–5*, edited by Josef Koch, et al. (Stuttgart: Verlag, 1936), 190–191. In this article, I base my analysis on the critical edition of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. I refer to the German works as DW and the Latin works as LW.

3. See for example Meister Eckhart, LW 2, “Expositio libri Exodi,” nn. 91, 94–95, 143, 163, ed. Konrad Weiß; LW 2, “Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici,” nn. 24, 248, ed. Joseph Koch; “Expositio libri Sapientiae,” nn. 96, 430–431; LW 4, sermon XXX, 1, “Diligens dominum deum tuum ex toto corde tuo,” nn. 275, 312, ed. Ernst Benz. Cf. also Klaus Kremer, *Gott und Welt in der klassischen Metaphysik*, 82–83.

4. See for example Meister Eckhart, LW 2, “Expositio libri Exodi,” nn. 40, 45, ed. Konrad Weiß. Cf. also Klaus Kremer, *Die Neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin*, 249–250. Also cf. the Zen Buddhist notion of relatedness and nothingness in Ueda Shizuteru, “‘Nothingness’ in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism With Particular Reference to the Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology,” in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, ed. Frederick Franck (New York, Crossroad), 161.

5. Meister Eckhart, DW 1, “In diebus suis,” sermon 10, in *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen Werke. Vols 1–5*. Edited by Josef Quint, et al. (Stuttgart: Verlag, 1936), 173: “swā got ist, dā ist diu sēle, und swā diu sēle ist dā ist got.”

6. See Meister Eckhart, LW 1, “Liber parabolarum Genesis,” nn. 25, 35, 494–496, 502, ed. Konrad Weiß; LW 2, “Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici,” nn. 61, 290, ed. Joseph Koch; DW 1 sermon 4, “Omne datum optimum,” 69–70, ed. Josef Quint; sermon 15, “Homo quidam nobilis,” 248. See also Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, 48.

7. David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 76, 78.

8. Meister Eckhart, DW 2, “Beati pauperes spiritu,” sermon 52 in Quint, *Meister Eckhart*, 502.

9. See Meister Eckhart, LW 2, “Expositio libri Sapientiae,” nn. 52, 60, 154, 379, 388, 490, ed. Konrad Weiß; LW3, “Expositio Sancti Evagelii Secundum Iohannem,” nn. 7, 8, ed. Josef Koch.

10. Beverly Lanzetta. “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” *The Journal of Religion* 72 (1992): 264.

11. Ueda Shizuteru, “‘Nothingness’ in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism With Particular Reference to the Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology,” in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, ed. Frederick Franck (New York, Crossroad), 159–163.

12. Beverly Lanzetta. “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” *The Journal of Religion* 72 (1992): 255.

13. *Ibid.*, 256.

14. Eckhart, DW 2, “Beati pauperes spiritu,” sermon 52 in Quint, *Meister Eckhart*, 491–492.

15. Eckhart, DW 1, "Qui auudit me," sermon 12 in Quint, *Meister Eckhart*, 201: "Daz ouge, dā inne ich got sibe, daz ist daz selbe ouge, dā inne mich got sibet; mīn ouge und gotes ouge daz ist ein ouge und ein gesiht und ein bekennen und ein minnen."

16. See Amy Hollywood, "Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Problem of Women's Spirituality," in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), 108–109. See for example Meister Eckhart, DW 1, sermon 1, "Intravit Iesus intemplum," 9, ed. Josef Quint; LW 2, "Expositio libri Exodi," n. 246, 200–201, ed. Konrad Weiß; LW 4, sermon IV, 7, "Ex ipso, per ipsum, et in ipso," n. 21, 23, ed. Ernst Benz.

17. For example, Meister Eckhart, DW 5, "Die rede der underscheidung," in Quint, *Meister Eckhart*, 247–248. Cf. The Bull "In agro dominico," articles 16–17, in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, eds. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 79.

18. Meister Eckhart, DW 1, "In hoc apparuit," sermon 5b in Quint, *Meister Eckhart*, 90–92.

19. Eckhart, DW 5, "Die rede der underscheidung" in Quint, *Meister Eckhart*, 203.

20. For example, Philip E. Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic," in *Spiritus 3* (2003): 19–37. Ueda Shizuteru, "'Nothingness' in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism With Particular Reference to the Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology," in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, ed. Frederick Franck, 159.

21. Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2001), 193.

22. Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 88.

23. Meister Eckhart, DW 3, "Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum etc.," sermon 86 in Quint, *Meister Eckhart*, 482–483.

24. Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 47.

25. Meister Eckhart, LW 5, "Acta Echardiana: Secunda Pars, 48" in *Mag. Echardi Responso ad articulos sibi impositos II*, n. 150, ed. Loris Sturlese, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000), 353.