

Eckhart's Image of the Eye and the Wood

An analogy which explains 'all that I have ever preached about'

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This is the text of a lecture given at the Eckhart Society Annual Conference, Plater College, Oxford, August 23. It summarises some of the essential important points made in the chapter on Eckhart in *Paths to Transcendence*.

To speak about Meister Eckhart is to speak about spiritual realization. Almost every single sermon of this master of Christian metaphysics and spirituality is 'realizational': each one of them issues an imperative summons to realize—to 'make real'—the 'one thing needful'. Now this 'one thing' is difficult to grasp, impossible to define, but the need for it enters into the very definition of human consciousness. How then to express it, and to express it in a way which heightens our sense of need for it, at the same time as pointing the way to the fulfilment of this need? Eckhart provides a particularly compelling model of how to express the inexpressible, and is certainly one of the most successful 'preachers' known to us, if our criterion of 'success' be this: rendering the imperative of spiritual realization not just intelligible but irresistible. One of the central aspects of this success lies in Eckhart's use of images, analogies, metaphors, symbols—all of which, in different ways, do not so much express an ingenious use of language, as elicit the spiritual move required of all of us: just as the image is one step removed from that of which it is an image, so our consciousness is called to move from its outer surface to its own inner depth.

Eckhart's communication of spiritual realities through verbal means, whether this be through images, analogies or doctrinal expositions, arises from this inner depth, and does not merely point to it:

'Whatever can be truly put into words must come from within, moved by its inner form: it must not come in from without, but out from within. It truly lives in the inmost part of the soul.' (I:283)

Every image that is most 'moving', then, should be seen as a surging up, from within, of the reality expressed by the image; it is a living reality, within the inmost part of the soul, that calls out to be communicated, rather than just a mode of speech that

reaches out for a goal as yet unconsummated. Hence for Eckhart, inner realization must come first, and then its verbal expression will effectively convey, if not the intrinsic reality of the experience itself, then at least that aspect of the realization which is communicable.

But it is not just communication which is dependent on realization: comprehension by the hearer is also proportioned to realization; this is made clear by Eckhart in his discussion of the deepest meaning of poverty. He pleads with his listeners:

‘I beg you to be like this in order that you may understand this sermon: for by the eternal truth I tell you that unless you are like this truth we are about to speak of, it is not possible for you to follow me.’ (II:269)⁶⁸

In other words, a particular mode of being is an essential component of understanding. Something ‘like’ the poverty of which he is to speak is thus a kind of opening through which the meaning of profound poverty may enter the soul, and help bring to fruition that partial mode of poverty that is already existent and which prefigures, by its very intention, the complete or integral poverty in question here. In other words, one has to be poor, already, in order to understand poverty; one has to abandon one’s apparent richness, one’s self-sufficiency, one’s own will:

‘He who has abandoned all his will savours my teaching and hears my words.’ (II:144)

With this as our background, let us turn to the sermon (number 60) containing the eye-wood image:

‘As I was coming here today I considered how to preach to you clearly so that you would understand me properly, and I hit upon an analogy. If you can understand it, you will be able to grasp my meaning and get to the bottom of all that I have ever preached about. The analogy is with my eye and wood. When my eye is open it is an eye: when it is shut it is the same eye; and the wood is neither more nor less by reason of my seeing it. Now mark me well: Suppose my eye, being one and single in itself, falls on the wood with vision, then though each thing stays as it is, yet in the very act of seeing they are so much at one that we can really say ‘eye-wood’, and the wood *is* my eye. Now, if the wood were free from matter and wholly immaterial like my eyesight is, then we could truly say that, in the act of seeing, the wood and my eye were of one essence. If this is true for material things, it is all the more true of spiritual.’ (II:103-4)

It is useful to dwell on these striking words; to try to imagine the effect they

⁶⁸ All sermon references are to *Meister Eckhart—Sermons and Treatises*, (vols I-III) Translated and Edited by M. O’C. Walshe (Longmead: Element Books, 1987,1989).

would have upon Eckhart's listeners. It is a simple image, and yet it is said to contain the essence of everything he ever preached about. We do not think he is exaggerating in making this bold claim. For in this image we discern, first and foremost, an intimation of the principle of union, for which Eckhart is of course renowned; but we also find an indication of the path to that union, that is intellective perception of the transcendent truth, a perception which implies self-effacement and methodic concentration; a concentration which is transformed, by grace, into realization of identity with the transcendent truth; a truth which is thereby revealed as one's own deepest being. Transcendent truth is thus transfigured into immanent reality by the grace that is both elicited and constituted by intellective perception of, and pure concentration upon, the Absolute. This is the core of my interpretation of the image. Now I have to substantiate this interpretation, and the best way to do so is to refer, of course, to other parts of his teachings.

First, though, let us make the following observations. The eye remains quite distinct from the wood when considered apart from the vision wherein the two are united; and the wood does not change by virtue of being seen by the eye. We can interpret this to mean that the Absolute, as the ultimate spiritual object of the intellective vision, is not affected in its transcendent essence either by being 'perceived' or not perceived; the change in question relates to the eye which so completely enters the wood in the act of vision that it becomes one with it; while a complete identity of essence on the level of matter is precluded due to the principle of separativity inherent in matter, such is not the case in the spiritual domain, where the lower is assimilable by the higher. For material multiplicity veils spiritual unity, spiritual unity contains all possible material things in eternal, perfect and infinite mode: to say 'spiritual' is to say 'universal', the more spiritual a thing is the more inclusive and thus universal it becomes:

'[A]ll spiritual things are raised above material: the higher they are raised, the more they expand and embrace material things. (II:10)

Now we have to ask: what is the object that the intellect focusses upon, and how does it do so, and with what part of the intellect? As regards the question of the object, the Absolute, we appear to be faced with a contradiction. For, again and again, Eckhart

reminds us that the pure Absolute, the essence of God, the Godhead, beyond all being, cannot be conceived—how, then, can it be perceived? Human conceptions of the essence of the Divine constitute so many veils over it, for ‘it is its nature to be without nature. To think of goodness or wisdom or power dissembles the essence and dims it in thought. The mere thought obscures essence.’ (II:32)

‘... goodness and wisdom and whatever may be attributed to God are all admixtures to God’s naked essence: for all admixture causes alienation from essence.’ (II:39)

All human conceptions of the essence are thus creaturely and imperfect. What *can* be conceived of God is His being *qua* Creator, Judge, and so on. In other words, one can conceive of Him as the uncreated correlate of the created universe; but his Essence, the Godhead, is not exhausted by this dimension of His being:

‘God, inasmuch as He is “God”, is not the supreme goal of creatures ... if a fly had reason and could intellectually plumb the eternal abyss of God’s being out of which it came, we would have to say that God, with all that makes Him “God” would be unable to fulfill and satisfy that fly!’ (II:271)

The intellect can plumb the ‘eternal abyss’ out of which God, *qua* Creator, arose; in other words the intellect is intrinsically capable of discerning that there is, beyond God, a truly transcendent reality, a pure absolute that is not relativized by contact with any created realm. It is not enough to say that God is pure being, because being is itself a relativity, albeit the most indeterminate of all relativities.

‘Masters of little subtlety say God is pure being. He is as high above being as the highest angel is above a midge ... when I have said God is not a being and is above being, I have not thereby denied Him being: rather I have exalted it in Him. If I get copper in gold, it is there ... in a nobler mode than it is in itself.’ (II:150-151)

So we can conceive of being and its relativity, together with the fact that being is exalted in God, while God is relativised by association with being; but the very conception of being as a limitation bears within itself the *implication* of that which goes beyond this limitation: the truly Infinite, the Godhead beyond Being. The pure Absolute is thus implied within our conception of the relativity of God, or in Hindu terms, the *para Brahman* (the ‘supreme’ Absolute) is implied within the conception we have of the *apara Brahman* (the ‘non-supreme’ Absolute). But this only pushes further back the problem with which we began: if that which is conceivable is by that very token, relative, is this

Godhead—ultimate object of intellectual vision—not relativized by the very fact that the intellect can indeed conceive of it, even if this conception pertains to that which is beyond all conception? No, because one can answer, with Eckhart, that if the intellect is capable of conceiving of this transcendent Essence, it is because, in its essence, it is not other than It:

‘There is a power in the soul ... If the whole soul were like it, she would be uncreated and uncreatable, but this is not so. In its other part it has a regard for and a dependence on time, and there it touches on creation and is created. To this power, the intellect, nothing is distant or external... This power seizes God naked in His essential being. It is one in unity, not like in likeness.’ (I:190)

We have here a metaphysical version of the classical ontological proof of God: whereas for St. Anselm, the reality of God is proven by the human capacity for conceiving Him, for Eckhart, the relativity of God as Creator is proven by the intellectual capacity to conceive of the Essence which surpasses this relative dimension of the divine nature; and this intellectual capacity, in turn, proves or expresses the spiritual capacity for realizing identity with that Essence.

It is important to note Eckhart’s distinction between the two parts of the soul mentioned in the above citation. That part of the soul that ‘has a regard for time’ and that ‘touches on creation’ is created. The uncreated part, however, the intellect, transcends time and space, and is directed to the transcendent realm. Elsewhere, he distinguishes between two degrees or levels within the intellect itself; he describes the lower powers in terms of the lower intellect, anger, desire and the senses. The higher powers are: the higher intellect, memory and will. Now when one is concerned with ‘seizing God naked in His essential being’, all cognitive contents of the intellect, all the images stored in the memory, all exercise of one’s own will, must be transcended. What then remains is but the ground or essence of the soul, the imageless silent centre ‘for no creature ever entered there, nor has the soul there either activity or understanding ... this part is receptive to nothing save only the divine essence without mediation. There God enters with His all, not merely with a part’. (I:3)

The intellect, then, while being one in itself, is nonetheless extrinsically differentiated in accordance with the ontological plane of its operation: when focusing on

the created order it is itself endowed with a created aspect and is moreover individualized in proportion to its contact with that order; but when reposing within itself, having been re-absorbed back into its source, it is wholly uncreated, and it is universalized to the extent that its one-ness with the ‘naked being’ is realized. However, to make contact with this uncreated substance of the intellect, grace is indispensable:

‘A master who has spoken best of all about the soul says that no human wit can ever come to know what the soul is in her ground ... What we can know of it must be supernatural: it must be by grace.’ (I:190)

The natural resources of the personal intellect are insufficient to grasp the source of the intellect, the ‘spark’ of the soul which transcends the soul itself even while mysteriously residing within it. This co-occurrence of presence and transcendence can only be understood if the notion of depth comes to denote height: the spark in the depths of the soul **is** that transcendent source whence flow the powers of the intellect. That which flows cannot turn back and grasp the source of its own flow—therefore the natural functions of the intellect must be stilled as the condition for that miraculous re-flux or ‘inflowing’ back to the source; and this can only be a supernatural operation, an act of divine grace, the result of which is that the point of actual consciousness is transported into the immanent depth that the ground of the soul is.

We can therefore assert that the essential preliminary function of the intellect in Eckhartian terms is to establish the distinction between itself—consciousness—and that of which it is conscious—outward things—and to be dissatisfied with all such objects of consciousness in the very measure that they can be conceived of in distinctive fashion. This involves the ruthless rejection of all ideas and images, traces in the mind of external existents which all imply and entrench the nothingness of alterity. In other words, one’s concentration on the Absolute must be absolute; it must not be tainted with any distraction by the relative. In cognitive terms this means that one must unknow, or strip away, all contents of thought:

‘There must be a stillness and a silence for this Word to make itself heard. We cannot serve this Word better than in stillness and silence: there we can hear it and there too we will understand it aright—in the unknowing. To him who knows nothing, it appears and reveals itself.’ (I:20)

To thus ‘unknow’ means in concrete terms to in-gather all the powers of the soul,

interiorizing them for the sake of unitive concentration; concentration, not on this or that image, but on the Truth itself in the inmost depths of silent stillness:

‘(we must) concentrate all our powers on perceiving and knowing the one, infinite, uncreated, eternal truth. To this end, assemble all your powers, all your senses, your entire mind and memory; direct them into the ground where your treasure lies buried.’ (I:19)

The ‘unknowing’ thus pertains to all modes of the individual powers of the soul: pure concentration is an ignorance, so far as the individual is concerned, for it subsumes within itself in undifferentiated mode all aspects of the soul’s functioning, resulting in a ‘modeless mode’ of ignorance, a void, a virginal receptivity, which accepts only the influx of the divine Being, Truth and Blessedness. This is the ‘treasure’ that lies buried deep beneath the superficial layers of cognition which are so many veils over it.⁶⁹

As regards images, not one, however exalted, is to remain. Even the image of Christ is to be resisted and excluded. Eckhart quotes the words from the Gospel of St John, chapter 16, verse 7:‘

It is expedient for you that I should go away from you, for if I do not go away, the Holy Spirit cannot come to you’.

And comments:

‘This is just as if he had said: “You rejoice too much in my present form, and therefore the joy of the Holy Ghost cannot be yours.” So leave all images and unite with the formless essence.’ (III:128)

Eckhart’s position becomes more intelligible when the notion of ‘image’ is understood, along with the corresponding state of freedom from all images. In the Birth of the Word in the soul, all things are attained, not as phenomena in the transient realm but as noumena, in their objective reality within God; as phenomena they are perceived as images refracted through the limited and hence distorting prisms of creaturely consciousness, but as noumena within the divine principle, they are grasped as they really are. It is for this reason that Eckhart maintains that we must be free of all images in our quest for the reality of God. If any image—whether noble or base—is present in the mind, God must necessarily be absent:

‘The least creaturely image that takes place in you is as big as God. How is that? It deprives you of

⁶⁹ This evokes for us the Islamic etymology of *kufir*, disbelief: the primary meaning of the word refers to the idea of ‘covering over’. The *kafir* is not just the disbeliever but also the farmer who ‘covers’ the seed with earth. Faith and, at a deeper level, gnosis, can be likened to treasure, buried within the earth of forgetfulness.

the whole of God. As soon as the image comes in, God has to leave with all His Godhead ... Go right out of yourself for God's sake, and God will go right out of Himself for your sake! When these two have gone out what is left is one and simple. In this One the Father bears His Son in the inmost source.' (I:118)

Now it is important to bring in at this point the following crucial principle, for which Eckhart was accused of coming close to heresy, that of the nothingness of the creature:

'All creatures are pure nothing. I do not say that they are a little something, or anything at all, but that they are pure nothing.' (I: Note C, No. 26)

The creature is nothing because in itself it is an implicit negation of all that which is excluded by its own limitations: to negate that which is unconditionally Real is to be negated by it, hence to be reduced to nothingness. God alone, or Oneness alone, is pure affirmation, for:

'One is the negation of the negation and a denial of the denial. All creatures have a negation in themselves: one negates by not being the other ... but God negates the negation: He is one and negates all else, for outside of God nothing is.' (II:339)

So just as the creature as such is a pure nothing, and must be negated, if the pure positivity of the One is to be affirmed, so the image of creaturely objects is a pure nothing, and must be excluded from consciousness if spiritual concentration is to be perfect. One observes here a cognitive reflection, in the domain of spiritual method, of an ontological process, in the realm of metaphysical reality: the abstention from all images is the negative aspect of unitive concentration, and this reflects and prefigures that self-effacement which is the negative aspect of unitive realization: no sooner is the self effaced—'gone right out of itself'—than the immanent Godhead is realized, in a union which precludes all exclusive affirmation of either of the self or of God: the Godhead alone abides in this union:

'Where two are to become one, one of them must lose its being. So it is: and if God and your soul are to become one, your soul must lose her being and her life. As far as anything remained, they would indeed be united, but for them to become one, the one must lose its identity and the other must keep its identity.' (I:52)

As regards the positive aspect of unitive concentration, the uncreated essence of the intellect—the 'citadel of the soul', the 'spark', the inmost light of consciousness—this seeks, not some object apart from itself, but its own inner infinity. To the essence of the

intellect ‘nothing is distant or external’. In other words, in true intellection or spiritual vision, the object and the subject are identical. If there is a certain interdependence, a certain correlation or even a mutually imposed shared relativity, between the created soul as subject and the Creator as object, there is, as between the ground of the soul or the essence of the intellect, and the absolute Godhead, not so much a correspondence as a total identity. In Sermon 60, after mention of the eye-wood image, Eckhart states that the soul’s inmost consciousness, its ‘spark’ does not seek God as Father, Son or Holy Ghost, nor is it satisfied with divine being; rather,

‘it seeks to know whence this being comes, it wants to get into its simple ground, into the silent desert into which no distinction ever peeped, of Father, Son or Holy Ghost. In the inmost part, where none is at home, there that light finds satisfaction, and there it is more one than it is itself.’ (II:105)

This inmost part of the soul is thus more one than it is itself; it is somehow in the soul, but absolutely not *of* it.⁷⁰ Its true identity is thus not even located within itself: it is more *one* than it is itself. Total selflessness is thus integral to true oneness; or let us say, selflessness is the shadow cast by oneness, a oneness that brooks no otherness. This oneness, being absolute, cannot therefore be anything but the supreme Godhead, the One. Thus the oneness within the unfathomable depth of the soul is only truly ‘satisfied’ in the ‘One’ that utterly transcends the God of the Persons—the ‘multiple’ God, we might even say: ‘The infinite God who is in the soul, He grasps the God who is infinite.’ (II:259)

The object of concentration is therefore not some separate entity ‘out there’; it is the subject’s own deepest reality: the object of vision—the ‘wood’ of the Absolute, immanent within the soul—is thus to be understood not as some fixed object, but as an infinite process, something which has a beginning but not an end; it is a centre which unfolds in infinitude. Thus the passage from the created to the uncreated part of the soul is an inverse reflection—in depth and subjectively—of the passage from God to the Godhead—in height and objectively; transcendent height is thus identical with interiorization in depth. This principle, which is so important in understanding Eckhart’s perspective, is established in the following sentence:

‘The deeper the well, the higher it is; height and depth are one’ (III:53).

And also in this passage:

⁷⁰ The Sufis describe themselves as being in the world but not of it.

‘God is brought down, not absolutely but inwardly, that we may be raised up. What was above has become inward. You must be internalised, from yourself and within yourself, so that He is in you. It is not that we should take anything from what is above us, but we should take it into ourselves, and take it from ourselves, and take it from ourselves into ourselves.’ (II:46)

We interpret this as follows: The ‘highest’ is revealed as the ‘inmost’ only when consciousness is most fully interiorized; it is thus that the highest is taken ‘into ourselves’; taking it ‘from ourselves’ means understanding that our inner substance is itself the ‘highest’ inasmuch as this is immanent in all that exists; and finally taking it ‘from ourselves into ourselves’ means sublimating the outer personal consciousness—an exteriority which implies alterity—within the inner unitive dimension, wherein no differentiation subsists. The notion of not taking ‘anything from what is above us’ can mean, in this perspective, not attempting to appropriate to one’s outer being any properties relating to the transcendent aspect of God: one observes the crucial principle that the transcendent is realizable only by way of immanence, an interiorization to a point in consciousness which transcends by way of depth the empirical consciousness of the outer ego. In another description of the state of union between the soul and the uncreate, Eckhart says:

‘When the soul has got so far it loses its name and is drawn into God, so that in itself it becomes nothing, just as the sun draws the dawn into itself and annihilates it.’ (III:126)

The dawn experiences a loss of identity as dawn, but this loss is infinitely compensated by the brilliance of the rising sun, before which no ‘dawn’ can subsist; the dim light of dawn must be annulled, but only by a light infinitely more radiant, and so it is with the soul: the limited light of its intellect must give way to the infinite light of the Absolute.

In another sermon Eckhart says that the light by which the intellect sees must be the light of the Absolute if it is to see the Absolute as It is in Itself:

‘Supposing my eye were a light, and strong enough to absorb the full force of the sun’s light and unite with it, then it would see not only by its own power, but it would see with the light of the sun in all its strength. So it is with the intellect. The intellect is a light, and if I turn it away from all things and in the direction of God, then, since God is continually overflowing with grace, my intellect becomes illumined and united with love, and therein knows and loves God as He is in

Himself.’ (II:281)⁷¹

This extract also helps to underline the methodic necessity of unitive concentration: the intellect, stripped bare of all contingent content, must concentrate on the exclusive reality of God so that, by virtue of its own uncreated substance, it may be sublimated within the uncreated light of God; one observes here a useful clarification of the point made earlier about the implication of the intellect’s capacity to conceive the supra-ontological essence: the eye of the intellect can only gaze on the light of God because of the affinity—and, in the final analysis, identity—between its own uncreated substance and the uncreated reality of God.

This analogy is useful in elucidating the nature of pure, unitive concentration which may be envisaged as the methodic counterpart to this transcendent intellectual vision: what, a priori, is a focussing of attention on the supreme object that transcends the personal intellect, becomes, through methodic concentration, a realization of identity with that object, but not as object, rather as immanent subject, the very word ‘concentration’ suggesting this process of assimilation within one’s own centre, a ‘taking from oneself into oneself’.

This is also implicit in Eckhart’s insistence that ‘whatever a man draws into himself or receives from without is wrong’; one must not consider God as outside oneself, ‘but as one’s own and as what is within oneself’. (II:136) In other words, it is one’s deepest oneself which in reality furnishes the transcendent object of that intellection which pertains to a relatively more outward mode of one’s own being: that upon which one concentrates is one’s own deepest self, even if the subjective starting point of concentration is necessarily located on the relative plane of one’s being, whence the innermost subjectivity must at first be envisaged as the transcendent object. But only ‘at first’, for in reality, ‘The hearer is the same as the heard in the eternal Word’. (II:83)

This total or pure concentration is thus an essential condition for the process whereby the object of concentration ‘digests’ the concentrating subject; whereas in

⁷¹ One is reminded here of the verse of the Qur’an which speaks of ‘light upon light’: *God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. A similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass; the glass is as it were a shining star, [the lamp] is kindled from [the oil] of a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it. Light upon Light. God guideth to His light whom He will. And God striketh similitudes for men. And God knoweth all things.* (“The Light”, XXIV: 35)

material terms, food consumed is assimilated to the individual, in spiritual terms, this is reversed: that which the individual takes into himself changes him into it:

‘The bodily food we take is changed into us, but the spiritual food we receive changes us into itself’. (I:50)

This idea is well expressed, with a nuance that opens up the principle of identity, in terms of another analogy using wood; this time, wood symbolizes the relative soul, in relation to the ‘fire’ of the Absolute:

‘Fire changes into itself what is added to it, which becomes its own nature. The wood does not change the fire into itself, but the fire changes the wood into itself. Thus we are changed into God that we may know Him as He is.’ (II:137)

The wood can only be changed into fire to the extent that it has within its nature a profound affinity with fire; and this, despite the outwardly tangible differences between their respective natures that render them incommensurable in the very measure that they are physically kept apart from each other. One can see the relevance of this image to the relationship between the soul and God: to the extent that the soul subsists in its created awareness, it is remote from God, and there is a strict incommensurability between the soul as such and God as such; but on contact between the wood and fire—the awakening of the soul to the divine reality—an unsuspected affinity is revealed, and, eventually, a total union is consummated. Going back to what Eckhart said above about union, the one agent is reduced to nothing, while the other remains what it is. The drop is reduced to nothing insofar as it is a drop, while the ocean into which it is plunged remains what it is:

‘If you were to cast a drop into the ocean, the drop would become the ocean, and not the ocean the drop. Thus it is with the soul: when she imbibes God, she is turned into God, so that the soul becomes divine, but God does not become the soul.’ (II:323)

To recapitulate: the intellect’s powers of conception function, in the first instance, in a negative manner, excluding all that which can form the basis for determinate—hence limited—conception; therefore, one may say that, in its purely conceptual mode, the intellect is only ‘satisfied’ by that which surpasses its own power of conception—the properly limitless, infinite, transcendent One. To say that the intellect ‘conceives’ of the Absolute—upon which it then concentrates—means that it can conceive of a ‘somewhat’ which is intelligible only by way of negation: as was stated earlier, one can conceive of

something which transcends the limits imposed by determinate conception as such; thus it is a conception of the intrinsically inconceivable. But this something that is intrinsically inconceivable is nonetheless still a conception since it is present to the mind in some way. In other words, it is possible to conceive *that* it is, but impossible to conceive *what* it is.

These points might be made clearer by means of Eckhart's notion of what it means to speak the Word. The Father eternally 'speaks' the Word which is the Son. What this means is that 'The object of the Father's thought is the eternal Word'. (II:300) The Son as Word is therefore the determinate object of the intellection of the Father. For the intellect to unite with the formless essence can then be seen as the inverse of this process. While the first is a downward movement intending manifestation, determination and hence limitation, the second is an upward movement intending the non-manifest, indeterminate and limitless.

This upward movement is described in another sermon in terms of a 'breakthrough':

'This spirit must transcend number and break through multiplicity, and God will break through him: and just as He breaks through into me, so I break through in turn into Him.' (I:136)

The act of pure transcendence by which the uncreated intellect realizes the essence—the act of vision that unites the eye to the wood—is thus only conceivable as the counterpart of the divine breakthrough into the soul's essence, so that it would be more accurate to say that it is the Absolute as transcendent object that breaks through and assimilates to itself the uncreated element residing within the depths of the relative subject, rather than to assert baldly that the uncreated intellect 'attains' or breaks through into the essence. In other words, the wood absorbs the eye into itself; the eye does not assimilate the wood to itself. The food digests the one who eats it, and not the other way around. The drop becomes the ocean; the ocean does not become the drop.

Now there are some who might object to our use of the term 'spiritual method', arguing that Eckhart, in many places appears to reject any idea of a method. For example:

'[I]f a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies ... than by the fireside or in the stable—that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak round His head and shoving Him under the bench.' (I:117)

We would argue however that this is not a rejection of meditation and ecstasies as such; rather, it is a rejection of a point of view which would absolutise these relativities. Eckhart appears to saying that one must relate to God according to *His* measures and not according to ours; one should not set up a formal or deterministic relationship between one's own effort—as cause—and His reality—as effect—for if God is posited as the 'achievement' of a particular 'way', initiated by the creature, then He, as effect, depends on the creature, as cause, whereas in reality it is the opposite that is true. It is as if Eckhart is saying: you impose on Him your own measures, bringing Him down to your level—'shoving His head under the bench'—and this, after having veiled His true nature—'wrapping a cloak round His head'—by smothering Him with your particular 'ways', which thus arrogate to themselves the status properly belonging to the ostensible object of devotion. Thus, to 'shove' God beneath the bench can be understood as the human reduction of the Divine to the level of a horizontally determined chain of conventional causality: on the other hand, to give God His due, is to be perpetually—and 'vertically'—aware of Him as the omni-present and inalienable Reality towards which man must ever gravitate. This interpretation is supported by the following statement of Eckhart on the meaning of 'equality', the notion that God is equally present in all things, at all times:

'[W]hen we speak of "equality", this does not mean that one should regard all works as equal, or all places or people. That would be quite wrong, for praying is a better task than spinning, and the church is a nobler place than the street. But in your acts you should have an equal mind and equal faith and equal love for your God ...' (III:17)

As quoted earlier, he said also 'We cannot serve this Word better than in stillness and silence'; this clearly implies what we have called a spiritual method. Likewise, in another sermon, he puts to himself the question: is it always necessary to be so 'barren and estranged from everything, outward and inward'—can one not pray, listen to sermons, and so on, to help oneself? He answers: 'No, be sure of this. Absolute stillness for as long as possible is best of all for you. You cannot exchange this state for any other without harm.' (I:43) Let me repeat: 'Absolute stillness for as long as possible': this sounds very much like a method, the passive or negative aspect of that positive concentration by the inmost intellect on the pure Absolute.

Elsewhere he says:

‘If you could naught yourself for an instant, indeed I say less than an instant, you would possess all that this is in itself. But as long as you mind anything at all, you know no more of God than my mouth knows of colour or my eye of taste.’(I:144)

As regards this self-naughting, it is important to distinguish two types of ‘nothingness’ that pertain to the soul: the first is when the soul is affirmed as such apart from God, and which may be called its negative nothingness, inasmuch as it negates the unique reality of God; and the second is a methodically precipitated nothingness which is, on the contrary, positive, inasmuch as it is a deliberate and conscious negation of the soul’s own apparent ‘somewhat’, and is thus a nothingness which is receptive to the Divine ‘somewhat’. To attain to the ‘somewhat’ of God, His Reality, that is, as it were, on the thither side of the Void, the soul must first fall into her own nothingness, here implying the concrete and ‘upward’ or ‘inward’ negation of her own apparent ‘something-ness’; then God ‘with His uncreatedness upholds her Nothingness and preserves her in His Something’. (I:59)

Now what is the reality of this union which is hinted at in these rich images: the eye-wood phenomenon, the burning of the wood in the fire, the return of the drop to the ocean, the annihilation of the dawn in the sunrise? Even though this question takes us into a vast, indeed, infinite realm, we cannot avoid it if we are to substantiate the claim that this image explains *everything* that Eckhart ever preached about. The following is an attempt to summarise, as succinctly as the time and space of this lecture permits, what Eckhart says about union. To begin with, he claims that the soul’s ‘whole beatitude’ lies in this union:

‘God the Father gives birth to the Son in the ground and essence of the soul, and thus unites Himself with her ... and in that real union lies the soul’s whole beatitude.’ (I:5)

But as regards the phenomenal state in which this union is realized, we have precious little to go by. As has been noted by many scholars, Eckhart does not give many descriptions of the phenomenon of unitive experience, the highest raptus, *gezucket*, or ‘ecstasy’. This has led many to assert that this experience is not fundamental to Eckhart’s teaching; but even if it is true that the metaphysical principle of oneness takes precedence over the phenomenal experience of unity, this does not mean that the experience is of little importance. For, as we saw at the beginning, the only true, and ‘moving’ statement

of principles arises from a prior realization thereof, even if that realization itself is to some degree the final result of a previous process of thought, reflection and concentration. But there is no common measure between the cognitive activity preceding union and that union itself. To quote Shankara:

‘The two active causes of the fruit of liberation—the preliminary mental activity and the ensuing cognition in its empirical aspect—are not of the nature of the fruit ...’⁷²

The paucity of descriptions of union in Eckhart’s doubtless derives from the ineffability of the experience and thus its intrinsic incommunicability. But in one important sermon, he does give us an extrinsic description, in speaking of St. Paul’s raptus, to which Eckhart clearly attributes the highest status in regard to the experience of union. In the context of exhorting his listeners again to abandon all powers, images and works so that the Word be spoken in them, he says:

‘If only you could suddenly be unaware of all things, then you could pass into an oblivion of your own body as St. Paul did, when he said: “Whether in the body I cannot tell or out of the body I cannot tell: God knows it.” (2 Cor. 12:2) In this case the spirit had so entirely absorbed the powers that it had forgotten the body: memory no longer functioned, nor understanding, nor the senses, nor the powers that should govern and grace the body, vital warmth and body-heat were suspended, so that the body did not waste during the three days when he neither ate nor drank.’ (I:7)

He commends the listener likewise to ‘flee his senses, turn his powers inward and sink into an oblivion of all things and himself.’

One way of understanding what Eckhart means by union is to reflect upon the esoteric significance of the relationship between the Father and the Son in Eckhart’s mystical theology. He portrays this relationship in a variety of ways. The following strikes us as one of the most significant aspects of the nexus of relationships subsisting between the Father and the Son, the Son and humanity, and humanity and the individual human being. Taking first the relationship of Divine Paternity, Eckhart quotes the scriptural principle: No man knows the Father but the Son (Matt. 11, 27) and adds:

‘if you would know God, you must not merely be like the Son, you must be the Son yourself’. (I:127)

⁷² *The Thousand Teachings (Upadesa Sahasri)* (London: Shanti Sadan, 1990) Tr. A.J. Alston, II, 18.108.

To thus 'be' the Son means to be the Word eternally spoken by the Father, as opposed to being the man Jesus who was begotten by the Father in a particular time and place. To distinguish between the eternal Birth and the temporal birth makes clear the necessity of realizing within oneself the reality of this ceaseless Birth, of which the temporal Birth is but an extrinsic effect. Herein lies the crux of Eckhart's teachings, which he expresses by quoting St. Augustine:

'What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters.' (I:1)

The assumption by the Word of human nature is the key to the individual human being's realization of the Birth of the Word within the soul, and thus union with the source of the Word:

'God took on human nature and united it with His own Person. Then human nature became God, for He put on bare human nature and not any man. Therefore, if you want to *be* the same Christ and God, go out of all that which the eternal Word did *not* assume ... then you will be the same to the eternal Word as human nature is to Him. For between your human nature and His there is no difference: it is one, for it is in Christ what it is in you.' (II:313-4; emphasis added)

In other words, when the accidents of individuality are eliminated, universal human nature is revealed: not such and such a human being, but humanity as such. This 'such-ness', having constituted the existential container of Divinity, is absorbed by its divine content: becoming one with humanity is thus a stage on the path of ascending to become one with Divinity, describing thereby the inverse of the movement whereby the Divinity descended to become humanity:

'Why did God become man? That I might be born God Himself'. (I:138)

Therefore, the true or transcendent meaning of humanity is Divinity, which amounts to saying that man is only true to his deepest nature to the extent that he transcends himself, which he does, in the first instance, by purifying himself from 'all of that which the eternal Word did *not* assume'. It is clear that Eckhart is here stressing the necessity of the divinization of the human and not the humanization of the Divine: the lower must extinguish itself in the face of the higher and only then be re-absorbed by it, rather than bring down the higher to its own level and assimilate it crudely to one's personal actuality.

These considerations are reinforced by an alchemical analogy employed by

Eckhart:

‘By being poured into the body, the soul is darkened ... the soul cannot be pure unless she is reduced to her original purity, as God made her, just as gold cannot be made from copper by two or three roastings: it must be reduced to its primary nature ... Iron can be compared to silver, and copper to gold: but the more we equate it without subtraction, the more false it is. It is the same with the soul.’ (I:202-3)

The essence of the soul is darkened and enshrouded by the body: the alchemical ‘reduction’ or ‘dissolution’ required is evidently not aimed at the body *qua* material, but rather at the soul insofar as it has taken on itself the darkness of its covering: the psychic traces of matter and corporeality, passion for the perishable, attachment to the transient material that is ‘created after nothing’ (I:203). The more the natural, fallen and actual state of the soul—the unrefined copper—is taken for the essence of its being and consciousness, the more false it becomes, the more susceptible to pride, which here means deifying the creature as such, taking darkness for light. One should recall here the idea of copper being more exalted in gold than it is in itself: earlier this image was used in regard to the distinction between Being and Beyond-Being, but it applies with equal relevance to the soul and God: the soul realizes a plenitude in God that is strictly excluded on the plane of its separative affirmation as soul.

If this reduction to pure humanity constitutes the aim and limit of the human being’s capacity and renders him at one with the Word, the question now arises: what is it that the Son ‘knows’ of the Father, and that now the individual, reduced to ‘bare humanity’ and thus the Word, also knows, and *is*? In what does this knowledge and being consist?

‘What does the Son hear from his Father? The Father can only give birth, the Son can only be born. All that the Father has and is, the profundity of the divine being and the divine nature, He brings forth all at once in His only- begotten Son.’ (I:138)

The content of this knowledge is inseparable from the Being of the Absolute; the ontological distinction between the Son as Person and the Godhead *qua* Essence is not operative in this supra-ontological dimension of essential identity, for, as we saw earlier, ‘The hearer is the same as the heard in the eternal Word’. (II:83)

Just as the Son *is* the Father in this unitive dimension, so, if the individual man has become born as the Son by virtue of his effective reduction to pure humanity, it

follows that he, too, cannot be other than the One. To say ‘Birth’ is to say ‘Union’:

‘God the Father gives birth to the Son in the ground and essence of the soul, and thus unites Himself with her ... and in that real union lies the soul’s whole beatitude.’ (I:5)

Here then, we have one absolutely inalienable feature of union: total beatitude. In another description Eckhart speaks as if paraphrasing the Vedantin ternary *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Being-Consciousness-Bliss); for there are said to be three aspects of the Word as spoken in the soul: ‘immeasurable power’, ‘infinite wisdom’ and ‘infinite sweetness’ (I:60-61).⁷³

Now these ‘contents’ of the supreme reality of union can not of course be conveyed by the simple image of the eye and the wood. The image can point to the reality of union, but that which flows forth from union can only be experienced, and cannot be conveyed by any image. Even these words used by Eckhart to describe the Word are to be understood in a provisional sense: there are not three distinct elements, each being somehow akin to our empirical awareness of power, knowledge and joy. Rather, they refer to one undifferentiated reality, each element being absolutely identical with the other two, in a mode which utterly transcends all creaturely understanding of power, wisdom or sweetness. These three elements, on the human plane, are images of the archetypes, shadows of realities, conveying something of the character of those realities, but unable to capture their absoluteness. For that absoluteness to be realized, all relativity is to be eliminated; the ‘wood’ of the soul qua soul is to be burnt up in the fire of the Absolute; the drop is to return to the ocean; the dawn is annihilated in the rising sun. But then, one might ask, to what does consciousness return once this union is consummated? For it is a union that strictly requires that one agent of the union must ‘lose its being’, as we heard earlier.

‘If God and your soul are to become one, your soul must lose her being and her life. As far as anything remained, they would indeed be united, but for them to become one, the one must lose its identity and the other must keep its identity.’ (I:52)

That is a question to be pondered—or rather a mystery to be contemplated—on another occasion. The answer relates closely to what the Sufis refer to as ‘subsistence

⁷³ This characterisation of the Word also recalls one of Ibn Arabi’s descriptions of Being (*wujud*): it is the finding of the Real in ecstasy (*wujud wijdan al-haqq fi’l-wajd*). See W.C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), p.212. We have commented on this remarkable parallel between the three mystics in the forthcoming work cited above.

after annihilation' (*al-baqa' ba'd al-fana'*). It is summed up in Eckhart's statement that, once the soul has realized its own nothingness, God in His uncreatedness 'upholds her Nothingness and preserves her in His Something'. This same mystery is expressed in Ibn Arabi's words: 'The final end and ultimate return of the gnostics ... is that the Real is identical with them, while they do not exist.'⁷⁴

Some concluding words: Eckhart's whole teaching points to the need to go from the image to That of which it is an image, from the shadow to That which casts the shadow. One must use the image as an icon, and not as an idol. Eckhart uses images—marvellously and convincingly—to demonstrate how we must finally leave behind all images. But to sacrifice is to sacralize: everything which one sacrifices for the sake of the silence required by the Word is regained in absolute plenitude in the source of the Word: virginal receptivity is transformed into infinite fecundity.

'He who has thus abandoned all things on the lower plane where they are mortal, will recover them in God, where they are reality.' (I:137)

But none of this will make any sense unless one of those abandoned things be one's own self, for, as we saw at the outset:

'He who has abandoned all his will savours my teaching and hears my words.'

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.375