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Emptiness, Bodhisattvas, and Meister Eckhart

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ABSTRACT

In assessing the Mahāyāna bodhisattva tradition, the author argues that the bodhisattva vow ought to be understood not typically as a singular heroic aim to serve all beings until all have attained Nirvana first. Rather it is universally necessary, and that there is no Nirvana without it. Further, the vow to become a buddha is necessary because the transcendental underlying structure of all reality is Buddha-nature, a quality or reality that is defined as compassionate service to all sentient beings. Addressing such central Mahāyāna themes as emptiness (*śūnyatā*), thusness (*tātbhata*), Buddhahood, and Buddha-fields (*Buddhakṣetra*), the author describes the bodhisattva path and the development of Awakened Mind (*bodhicitta*) culminating in becoming a buddha for the purpose of limitless service to all beings. The author then compares both the path and the metaphysics underlying this Mahāyāna vision to the path and metaphysics in the writings of Meister Eckhart. Eckhart's ultimate project is one of the soul's returning to the divine ground (*grunt*) and a virtual if not absolute identity with God. The radical emptiness required for this divine union aligns with the radical emptiness demanded by Mahāyāna. This emptiness corresponds to God's "pure nothingness," for Eckhart, which paradoxically represents the divine fullness. Both paths require utter compassionate service. According to David Tracy, if Eckhart can be understood as truly orthodox in his theology, then he anticipates the emphasis on absolute divine mystery that can be found in modern Christian authors, such as Rahner, Metz, Schillebeeckx, Dupré, Gutiérrez, and Tracy himself. Drawing on John Hick's depiction of the Real as personal, impersonal, and beyond these categories, the author suggests that what we find in Mahāyāna is an impersonal expression of theism that, even here, suggests some kind of personal engagement. Why, the author asks, is Buddha-nature the Absolute compassionate? And to what or whom is it compassionate? He concludes with the provocative question: Do Mahāyāna Buddhists think that Buddha-nature *caritas est*?

KEYWORDS: bodhisattva, Buddhahood, Buddha-nature, divine ground, Eckhart, emptiness, Mahāyāna, Nirvana, *Prajñāpāramitā*, Suchness.

FROM ARHAT TO BODHISATTVA

Pouring through the massive Pāli canon, one sees virtually no interest in the Buddha's ministry of encouraging others to become a buddha like himself. Nirvana, the highest and singular aim of his preaching, was available to anyone karmically ready and willing to enter deeply into the threefold practice of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. To realize utterly the three qualities of existence (impermanence, non-self, and dissatisfaction) was to be free from karmic production and thus liberated from samsara. This is the arhat (P. *arabanti*). In *this* sense, there is no difference between a buddha and an arhat; buddhas and arhats are emancipated. Both have eliminated all defilements, destroyed the possibilities of more fabrications, are free, and upon death will attain Final-Nirvana. All this is not to suggest, however, that buddhas and arhats are equivalent. In the *Mahāśīhanāda Sutta*, we learn that buddhas carry ten additional powers. These include knowing their past lives, the kinds of actions that lead to various rebirths, extraordinary clairvoyance, and all knowledge of causal connections between actions and their karmic fruits, past, present, and future.¹

If Nirvana is the singular goal and *summum bonum* of existence, why would one place oneself on the bodhisattva path? One might say that a buddha's enlightenment is actually higher or more exquisite. This became known as *apratisthita nirvāṇa* (unrestricted Nirvana). Some Mahāyāna texts argue along these lines.² The *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā Sūtra*, for example, is devoted to comparing the superiority of buddhas and their Nirvanas to arhats and their Nirvanas, and argues for the imperative to seek the bodhisattva path.³ One famous sūtra, the Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā (*Śrīmālādevīsīmhanāda*), even claims that arhats do not, in fact, attain any kind of Nirvana, but will need to be reborn to continue the path.⁴

Typical to many college textbooks as well as popularizations of the bodhisattva is the depiction that a bodhisattva renounces Nirvana in order to spend eons upon eons of rebirths serving the needs of all sentient beings and vowing to withhold one's own attainment of Nirvana until all other beings attain it first. There are numerous Mahāyāna sūtra passages that suggest this. Consider the crucial *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*: "Great compassion . . . takes hold of him. He surveys countless beings with his heavenly eye, and what he sees fills him with great agitation. . . . And he attends to them with the thought that: 'I shall become a saviour to all those beings, I shall release them from all their sufferings!'"⁵

In these beautiful aspirations, one certainly sees overwhelming compassion, inexhaustible love, and an unending hero's journey. Such sentiments wholly do reflect the bodhisattva way. But the depiction of bodhisattvas renouncing Nirvana for the sake of all others, and *only* attaining it after all have been liberated is simply not cogent. For example, if numerous beings have taken the bodhisattva vow, how would any, save one, achieve it? One could imagine something like a great entrance into Nirvana many eons from now with only bodhisattvas on the other side, each insisting that the others enter first and refusing to enter until the rest do. Or consider this odd scenario: Everyone who has *not* become a bodhisattva would attain Nirvana, before bodhisattvas. This is particularly an issue as the theology of the bodhisattva devel-

oped in Mahāyāna where the *lesser* Nirvanas had come to be seen as not Nirvana at all. A second real problem is how one *could* hold off Nirvana. This would be a question for the Theravādin commitment of bodhisattvas as well. Once one fully recognizes the three qualities of phenomenal reality and stops clinging, then karma is simply not created anymore. There would be no karmic energy to the next rebirth. Once you see/realize this, you cannot unsee/unrealize it. A further problem would be what to make of buddhas who have indeed attained Nirvana. Were they less compassionate than bodhisattvas?

The best way to understand the Mahāyāna vow is to see it as the desire for full Buddhahood. In short, a bodhisattva is a *mahāsattva* (great being) who has taken the vow to be reborn again and again through the eons so as to attain complete and perfect Buddhahood. This singular quest understands that the very nature of Buddhahood is to exist for the benefit of all sentient beings.

SUCHNESS, BUDDHA-FIELDS, AND BUDDHA-NATURE

We simply have to get our Mahāyāna bearings if we are to make sense of the bodhisattva. Nāgārjuna's understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) dominates Mahāyāna metaphysics. All phenomena, he taught, are empty, reality is empty. Even Nirvana is empty, and emptiness is empty. This is not some form of nihilism or quietism, but rather a kind of mysticism that insists on nonduality in all things. There is a *Suchness* (*tāthata*), Nāgārjuna taught, that lies outside of delusion, but it cannot be rarified as some "thing." Nirvana and samsara are one, according to Nāgārjuna, because Nirvana is not somewhere *out there*. Rather, it is realized in the context and perhaps in the content of the mundane. We see in Nāgārjuna and other early *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras that terms such as *empriness*, *Suchness*, *nonduality*, *unconditioned*, *Nirvana*, *Buddhahood*, and *true nature of Dharma* are used often as synonyms or otherwise conceptually conflated.

Understood this way, Final-Nirvana does not consist in exiting the universe (Nirvana and samsara are one). The Buddha continues to be present, and thus taking refuge in the Buddha is taking a real refuge in an actual reality, however conceived. Gautama did not disappear from or leave behind his saving ministry. He continues to be a *nātha*, a protector in his own Buddha-field (*Buddhaḥsetra*), the realm where a Buddha ministers. The *Lotus Sūtra* assures us: "In order to save living beings, as an expedient means I [Buddha] appear to enter Nirvana but in truth I do not pass into extinction. I am always here, preaching the law. I am always here, but through my transcendental powers I make it so that living beings in their befuddlement do not see when close by. . . . I tell all living beings that I am always here."⁶ Thus, the Buddha's mission essentially never ends. Due to his infinite compassion, he remains always leading us in the Dharma way.

There are many such Buddha-fields, an infinite number, all with buddhas guiding sentient beings there along the path of Dharma. And these other fields are accessible as well for those sufficiently trained or filled with sufficient faith. Nāgārjuna's *Stanzas on the Middle Path* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) regularly conflates time and space.⁷ If everything is empty, and if time and space are not solid, then movement through

various universes and various Buddha-fields is most possible. There are simply no hard edges in a universe (multiverse?) that is recognized as empty.

There is yet one more layer to add to this vertiginous cosmology. Mahāyāna sūtras began to wrestle with an additional question: What creates the condition of possibility for becoming a buddha? If everything is *empty* and yet has a *Suchness* to it, what constitutes our ability to recognize this? The answer, according to the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* (third century) and the famous *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (fourth century) is that all sentient beings have a Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). This is a challenging term to define. *Tathāgata* means “thus gone,” and referred to one who has attained Nirvana, particularly a buddha. *Garbha* is more complicated. According to Michael Zimmerman, *garbha* could mean “womb” or “seed” as well as the “innermost part” of something. Together we have a noun that refers to *seeds of awakening* or *awakening essence* or *awakening core*.⁸ According to the Chinese version of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* the Buddha teaches that “All living beings . . . have the Buddha’s wisdom, the Buddha’s eye, Buddha’s body sitting firmly in the form of meditation.”⁹

According to the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, all beings have within them a Tathāgata-awareness (*tathāgatajñāna*). The point of enlightenment is to remove the defilements (*kleśas*) to see the eternally and inherently pure Buddha-nature shine forth.¹⁰ The doctrine of the Buddha-nature gets even more developed in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. Here we are taught that the Buddha-nature is nothing other than the *self*. The *self* is the meaning of *tathāgatagarbha*, this element (?) that exists in all beings. Of course, the Buddha taught non-self, but this refers to the egoistic self, that self that clings or craves. But the *tathāgatagarbha* is that absolute truth of sentient beings. This sūtra makes the most interesting juxtaposition. We find in many Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts that the Buddha challenged his hearers not to imagine permanence where there is no permanence, or self where there is no self. Now in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* we are exhorted to not imagine impermanence where there is permanence, and non-self where there is self. This *self* is the immaculate *Suchness*, the Buddha-nature, the *Dharmakāya* (Buddha-body). In the *Ratnagotravibhāga Sūtra* we even learn that this reality is “unchangeable by nature, sublime, and perfectly pure. It is the *Dharmakāya* that pervades all, an unchanging reality.”¹¹

BECOMING A BODHISATTVA

According to the great eleventh-century Indian scholar Atiśa in his classic *Bodhipathapradīpa* (A lamp for the path to awakening), the difference between the Theravāda goal of arhatship and the Mahāyāna goal of achieving the bodhisattva path is not one of gaining the greatest Nirvana, but has everything to do with the very motivation for attaining enlightenment. Arhatship is self-concerned, while full Buddhahood represents both inexhaustible wisdom and inexhaustible compassion. The difference is the development of *bodhicitta* (Awakened Mind), which is generated by the bodhisattva aspirant. *Bodhicitta* certainly includes the aspiration of wisdom, but its emphasis is compassion. Kamalaśīla, the great eighth-century Indian Buddhist scholar describes buddhas as those who attained their omniscience by their

development of compassion, and that they remain in service of their Buddha-fields because of their compassion.¹²

Bodhicitta is the foundation for bodhisattva aspirants to pursue the arduous path to full Buddhahood, and it must be generated before one can even begin. Kamalaśīla's second *Bhāvanākrama* (Stages of meditation) describes how *bodhicitta* can emerge for the aspirant in a series of meditations whose end is to become positively determined to serve others in their suffering. It is called the *Six Causes and One Effect*. One meditates on the fact that, given that we have all endured an infinite number of lifetimes, any of our friends were at some point an enemy and all our enemies were themselves our friends in some past life. None is intrinsically friend or enemy. Infinite lifetimes also assure that all beings were at one time also our mother. The six causes are then: 1) Realizing that every sentient being was once my mother; 2) Realizing that as mothers they suffered for my sake and were immensely kind to me; 3) Realizing that right now my past mothers are undergoing great suffering themselves and I have an obligation to them; 4) Realizing that if I do not attend to their suffering, I myself am guilty of conscience; 5) Generating great love and compassion for my mothers, I desire to free them from suffering and its causes; and 6) I decide to take upon myself the responsibility for alleviating their suffering, and to do this I must become a fully enlightened buddha. These are the six causes. The one effect is *bodhicitta*, the aspiration for full enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.¹³

Once *bodhicitta* is generated deeply, the bodhisattva aspirant then actively pursues the bodhisattva path to full Buddhahood. There is no shortage in Indian, Tibetan, or Chinese texts that outline the bodhisattva path. Perhaps the most important is the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* (Ten stages), which appears alone as well as embedded in both the *Avatamsaka* and *Laṅkāvatāra* sūtras. The ten stages are technically called *bhūmis*, which literally translates as "place" or "region," and thus implies a firm place to stand or perhaps even a condition of life.¹⁴ The completion of the path, the tenth stage, is known as *Cloud of Dharma*. By mastering all states and knowledge, the bodhisattva enters the Cloud of Dharma (*dharmameghā*) and resides with a glorious body, one that can emit rays that destroy the pain and misery of others.

The difference between a buddha and a bodhisattva by the tenth stage is essentially nil. In a review of the literature, classical commentators, and the sūtras themselves, one finds their qualities and ministries quite blurred. Avalokiteśvara (Bodhisattva of Compassion) takes on the ministries of a buddha and the epithets of the Hindu divine Śiva, who for Saivites is the very face of Absolute Brahman (*saṁgha-brahman*). Mañjuśrī (Bodhisattva of Wisdom) is also widely known as a Tathāgata, and apparently (and oddly) has not entered full-Buddhahood because he understands emptiness so well that he realizes there is no full-Buddhahood, as even this is empty. However, he has actually attained full-Buddhahood in light of the emptiness doctrine. In the Tibetan tradition, Tārā is also a Bodhisattva of Compassion who either acts as a compassionate companion to Avalokiteśvara or acts as the singular Bodhisattva of Compassion. In the *Tārā Tantra*, she is said to be the "Mother of all the Buddhas" and is regarded by many Tibetans as a fully enlightened female Buddha, even if she is still called a bodhisattva.¹⁵ Buddhas and bodhisattvas are beyond being affected, yet

attend to the suffering of all beings. They are transcendent, and this allows them to be anywhere, anytime. They are within samsara because they have transcended samsara. They ultimately attain full, unrestricted Nirvana, realizing that it is empty, as are they, perfectly and happily.

MEISTER ECKHART

The central axis of our comparative project is not the role or the training of the bodhisattva. Rather, here our focus is on the Mahāyāna worldview out of which emptiness, Buddha-nature, and bodhisattvas make sense. We have here a world of paradox where endless wisdom and compassion come with recognizing the emptiness of all things as well as positing something (Buddha-nature and/or *Suchness*) eternal, all-pervading, unchanging, and nondual underlying all sentiency, even as this too is said to be empty. It is a worldview where we find paradoxes such as the ultimate goal of full-Buddhahood is realized by Mañjuśrī precisely by realizing there is no full-Buddhahood.

Given that these claims are widely made by a venerable tradition with innumerable members who are of goodwill, intelligence, and presumably spiritual excellence, what ought one to do with them? Is the conceptually confusing language of Nāgārjuna and the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras merely designed to take us out of conceptuality? Is it the problem of language itself? Perhaps these texts take us to the limit of logical discourse and then throw us off the edge to where we can see what simply cannot be spoken of. One can see the limits of language and conceptuality in many Christian works, such as those of Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, and John of the Cross.

In this essay, I intend to go even further with the pioneering witness of Meister Eckhart,¹⁶ whom Bernard McGinn has suggested to be possibly the most influential as well as most controversial mystic in the history of Christianity. Born John (possibly) Eckhart von Hochheim around 1260 near the German city of Erfurt, he joined the Dominicans in late adolescence or early adulthood, where he went through formation and early studies at Erfurt and Cologne. Ordained in the early 1280s, he was sent to Paris for higher studies. While a brilliant student and teacher, he spent much of his ministry administrating priories and provinces for the Dominican Order throughout Germany. In 1311, he was sent back to Paris as *magister*, his second two-year stint there and an honor only given previously to Thomas Aquinas. In 1313, he was called to Stasbourg as special vicar for the Dominican Master General. It is here that he particularly plunged into the life of preacher and spiritual counselor. Around 1323, Eckhart left Strasbourg for the Dominican house at Cologne. Here the powerful archbishop, Henry II of Virneburg, who was striving to rid his diocese of *free spirit* thinkers, set his eyes on Eckhart's works. With the help of some Dominicans suspicious of Eckhart's theology, he drew up two lists (and eventually a third) of passages from Eckhart's treatises and sermons, and in 1326 required Eckhart to appear before an inquisitorial commission. The Dominicans were free of episcopal control and argued that the case could only be adjudicated by the papacy. Eckhart was sixty-seven or sixty-eight at this time, when he and his Dominican delegation walked the

five hundred miles to Avignon and yet to another formal inquiry under the authority of Pope John XXII. The resulting papal bull, *In argo dominico*, lists a number of propositions Eckhart was said to have preached. The first fifteen were deemed heretical, two of which he denied ever having preached, and the final eleven were deemed to have had an offensive ring but could “with many explanations and additions” be given or already have a Catholic sense. *In argo dominico* ends by assuring the Archbishop of Cologne that Eckhart had “revoked and also deplored the twenty-six articles which he admitted that he had preached . . . *insofar* as they could generate in the minds of the faithful a heretical opinion, or one erroneous or hostile to the truth.”¹⁷ Eckhart died in Avignon shortly after his recantation. It should be noted that he did not agree that these propositions were themselves heretical, but only recanted that which could be misunderstood as heresy.

Eckhart’s writings continued to have influence after his death. His sermons and short treatises were copied and widely disseminated. His legacy also lived among some of his famous pupils, including John Tauler and Henry Suso. Why were his writings challenged? Consider just a few of his more provocative claims:

- God’s being is my life; since my life is God’s being, God’s essence is my essence;
- God’s ground and the soul’s ground are one ground;
- All creatures are one pure nothing. I do not say that they are a little something or anything, but that they are pure nothing;
- As long as the soul has God, knows God, and is aware of God, she is far from God. . . . The greatest honor the soul can pay to God [is] to leave God himself and to be free of him;
- 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;¹⁸
- Man’s last and highest parting occurs when, for God’s sake, he takes leave of God. St. Paul took leave of God for God’s sake and gave up all that he might get from God. . . . In parting from these, he parted with God for God’s sake and yet God remained in him as God in his own nature . . . but more as an *is-ness* as God really is. Then he neither gave to God nor received anything from him, for he and God are a unit, that is, pure unity.¹⁹

God and Not God

One can see in some of these citations a dramatic witness to union with God as something by which there appears literally no difference between God and oneself. To say that the person is “pure nothing,” that there is no difference between God’s essence and one’s own, and so on, strikes many readers as pantheistic. This charge is denied by most of his serious interpreters.²⁰ Certainly, however, Eckhart goes much further than the typical framing of divinization in the Christian mystical tradition. John of the Cross, for example, makes it clear that the soul in union is divinized, that is, lives the divine life as God lives the divine life, *while still remaining a creature*. By grace and not by nature we find union, St. John assures us.²¹ Bernard of Clairvaux likewise insists that the substance of the person in union (*mane quidem substantia*) always retains its

creaturely distinction from the Divine.²² Further, while the mystical tradition speaks dramatically of a *kind* of indistinct union, it also holds this in a creative tension with a love mysticism where there is a bona fide I-Thou relationship. Such a tension seems to break down in Eckhart.

It is difficult to make perfect sense of Eckhart. He does not always seem to use technical terms, for example, *esse* (being or existence) consistently. It is sometimes difficult to know when he is using analogy or making direct propositional claims. And his dialectical style of logic is used often for different ends—sometimes to conclude that which goes beyond linear thought, sometimes to draw the reader beyond language,²³ sometimes to assert a technical philosophical position, and sometimes to draw the conclusion that can only be solved by some sort of coincidence of opposites. Some have even called it a philosophy of paradox.²⁴ I think, however, that if we were to survey his work *in toto*, rather than choosing random citations or focusing too much on any given Eckhartian argument, there are golden threads that can lead us to a provisional but responsible interpretation, one that can further our interfaith dialogue with Mahāyāna.

One of the most important terms Eckhart uses throughout his writings is *grunt* (ground). McGinn describes this protean term as what is inmost or most proper to a being—its essence. Among other things, *grunt* references the hidden depths of God.²⁵ The *grunt* represents the Divine *as* Divine. There is absolute unity in *grunt*; it represents “the indistinct nonrelative ‘aspect’ of God which is *absolutely* One.”²⁶ As such, *grunt* lies deeper than the Trinity. Eckhart will also assert that God is nothing but one pure Being. God is Being itself.²⁷ This is something that technically lies deeper than the Trinity itself.²⁸ In and of itself, Divinity has no attributes other than itself. This will lead Eckhart to describe the “nothingness of God beyond God.”²⁹

The God beyond God is never static,³⁰ but necessarily outflowing. God’s initial outflowing Eckhart calls *bullitio*, or “inner boiling.” This boiling is an emanation that produces “pure nature” within, one that is equal to its source. God’s *bullitio* emanates or is foundation for the Trinity. It is only here that “Father” makes any sense as the emanation represents itself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Following Christian dogma, the Trinity is said to be eternal, where there was “never a Father without a Son (or Holy Spirit).” Presumably Eckhart does not deviate from this dogma. But he also wants us to understand that one can speak technically of a primal indistinct ground from which to make sense of the very fact of the Trinity.

From the initial and eternal *bullitio* comes *ebullitio*, the “boiling over” of divinity into creation. Unlike the emanation of the Trinity that is one with its source, Eckhart describes creation “in the manner of an efficient cause and with a view toward an end [final cause], by which something produces something else that is from itself, but not out of itself.”³¹

Thus far, there is little innovation between Meister Eckhart and many other Christian Neo-Platonists, who saw creation as a form of divine emanation. It is the nature of creation, particularly humanity, which has intellect, and how humanity returns to the Divine, that sets Eckhart off from most of his contemporaries. Eckhart sees the initial *bullitio* of the Trinity as an image of the *abullitio* of creation in key ways. *Esse*

or existence in its proper sense (*esse simpliciter*) can only be predicated to God, not to creatures. This means that Being is the actuality of all things. We exist only in the sense that we participate in divine existence and divine being. "God is nothing but one pure Being," Eckhart writes, "and the creature is from nothing and also has one being from the same Being."³² Does he mean that we are God? Not exactly. Eckhart distinguishes the *esse hoc et hoc* (being this or that) of created reality and the pure *esse indistinctum* of God. God is absolute existence (*esse absolutum*) and creatures represent "formally inherent existence (*esse formaliter inhaerens*), but the reliance on God and the necessary activity of God as Being dominates his ontology."³³

God does not merely create existence for us or hold us in being but impresses on us an emanation of the whole of the divine image. Eckhart writes, "Every created being radically and positively possesses existence, life, and wisdom from and in God and not in itself."³⁴ The difference between the divine *grunt* giving birth to the Trinity and God giving birth to humans is that the Trinity is God's essence properly, while human creation is God's essence by participation. This whole of God's being impressing or birthing humanity is the divine image. This is literally God in us. Eckhart asserts, "You should know that the simple divine image which is pressed onto the soul in its innermost nature acts without a medium, and the innermost and the noblest that is in [the divine] nature takes form in a most proper sense in the image of the soul."³⁵ McGinn notes, "Since there is no medium between God and the soul, their relation is one of formal emanation, not creation."³⁶ Eckhart again, "Here the image does not take God insofar as he is Creator; it takes him, rather, insofar as he is a being endowed with intellect, and what is noblest in [the divine] nature takes its most proper image in this image."³⁷

Returning to the Source

It appears that humans are ontologically drenched in the Divine, and indeed have something of the Divine within us. McGinn notes that while Eckhart denied that there was something in the soul that is uncreated and literally divine, we see it asserted in many of his sermons.³⁸ The divine image impressed on the human soul parallels and is effected by the image of the Son. Eckhart writes, "The eternal birth occurs in the soul precisely as it does in eternity, no more and no less, for it is one birth, and this birth occurs in the essence and ground of the soul."³⁹ The eternal birth of the Son represents the foundation of our *exitus* or emanation from God. The task of humanity is the *reditus* or return back to the *grunt* that is the core of the Divine. The Son, in this sense, is not a distinct category, a divine Person. On the one hand, the human soul is distinguished from God, the Trinity, or even the Son. We are *esse hoc et hoc*, existence of this and that, while the Son represents something of the pure *esse indistinctum* of God. And Eckhart will also say that from the perspective of created beings we are sons by adoption and participation. But these categories are fluid, as he also says in the same breath that there is only one Sonship. Insofar as there is only one Son of God, if we are sons, we are indeed identically the same Son.⁴⁰ "Since I am an only son whom the heavenly Father has eternally born, if then I have eternally been a

son in God then I say: 'Yes and no.' Yes, a son, as the Father has eternally borne me, and not a son, as to being unborn. . . . Out of the purity he everlastingly bore me, his only-born Son, into the same image of his eternal Fatherhood, that I may be Father and give birth to him of whom I am born."⁴¹

Eckhart's sermons and treatises are dominated by the idea of returning to that original *grunt* of God. This divine ground also represents the very ground of the soul that emanated from God. "Man is created to the image of the entire divine substance, and thus not to what is similar, but to what is one; hence it must return to the One from which it came forth and this alone satisfies it."⁴² Thus, his mysticism is not one of raptures of divine love, but a new kind of awareness or consciousness of being indistinct from God in God's very ground. This is certainly one of the most uncompromised or purest form of mystical identity in the Christian tradition, one that seeks a place where all duality vanishes and "there is a *unitas indistinctionis* in which there is no difference between God and human."⁴³ This is a place where Eckhart argues, "God's ground and the soul's ground is one ground."⁴⁴

His fundamental strategy to allow God's grace to draw the soul into the divine *grunt* is detachment to the utter limit so as to dis-identify with any quality of the human person at every level. "Now know," he writes, "all our perfection and our holiness rest in this: that a person must penetrate and transcend everything created and temporal and all being and go into the ground that has no ground. We pray our dear Lord God that we may become one and indwelling, and may God help us into the same ground. Amen."⁴⁵ Detachment is a deconstruction project.⁴⁶ His synonyms for detachment include cutting off, leaving, resigning, un-forming, dis-imagining, and un-becoming. And the soul successfully free is one imagined as empty, naked, dispossessed.⁴⁷ The soul even dispossesses herself of the Persons of the Trinity: "As long as the soul has God, knows God, and is aware of God, she is far from God. . . . [T]he greatest honor the soul can pay to God [is] to leave God himself and to be free from him."⁴⁸ Here there is an absolute union and identity with the One in the one *grunt* of God.

Seeing, knowing, and loving all become of a piece here. Most scholarship focuses on Eckhart's "intellectual" way to God. But love also plays a central role. On the surface, this would seem like an impediment to the radical indistinction between God and the soul. Love presumes some kind of distinction for an I-Thou relationship. How can there be a love relationship with perfect unicity? Charlotte Radler has shown that Eckhart often taught the necessity of loving God, even as this is the "God beyond God," and even if there must also be unicity in the divine *grunt*.

In his German Sermon 41, Eckhart rhetorically asks "What is God's love?" and he answers that it is God's nature and being. Clearly love, being, and nature are united in God in such a way that they can be commensurate in their simplicity.⁴⁹ In fact, Eckhart understood the Holy Spirit's role as that which melts the soul that it might be absorbed in God. "The Holy Spirit's being is that I become burnt in him and become wholly melted in him and become wholly love."⁵⁰ This kind of love, like Eckhart's whole vision of going beyond God unto God, has a radical *apophatic* quality to it that extended beyond the love mysticism of his day. "You should love God

apart from his lovable, that is: not because he is lovable for God is unlovable as he is One not-god, One not-spirit; One not-person, One not-image, further: as he is a simple, pure, clear One, separated from all duality, and in the One we should eternally sink down out of something into nothing."⁵¹ What we see here is that, for Eckhart, even love ultimately dissolves into some kind of unicity.

Paradoxically, Eckhart's mysticism expresses itself in very practical ways. Living in and through the divine *grunt*, in the freedom that has left the chains of any distinct ego to protect and advance, one lives not in isolation but in full communion with the created world, just as God does. For Eckhart, the radical detachment and deconstruction of the self, the merging into the divine ground, will necessarily bear external fruits in an active life of loving service. In Eckhart's *Book of Divine Consolation*, he describes God as pure Love. God loves because of loving and works because of working. As he famously articulated in his Latin Sermon 40: authentic love lacks a *why*.⁵² This kind of love is universal and makes no distinctions. The logic here is that if Christ took on universal human nature, and if we are fused to Christ and identified with him in union, then we must love all humans universally, loving without distinction.⁵³

Eckhart scholars regularly note that he gave particular emphasis on addressing those most in need. Richard Woods writes that "Eckhart was consistent in his ethical commitment to the primacy of mercy. . . . It is in our acts of mercy that we come to reveal our closest likeness to God. For, as Eckhart says in Sermon 39. . . . 'The just man is like God because God *is* justice.' True justice realizes itself in perfect friendship, an equality of persons that finds expression in works of mercy."⁵⁴

Is there a divine reality beyond the Trinity? Does the human being have something *essential* that is eternal and divine? Are we ultimately fused with the One in utter indistinction? Eckhart will regularly defend his mystical agenda philosophically by arguing such things as God is indistinct from all reality, making him actually distinct (unique) from all reality; God's Triune reality is God *as* God, but only in indistinct distinctions, which paradoxically make the divine *grunt* both indistinct and distinct; the human being is *formally* distinct from God but not in essence, or that one is indistinct from God *only insofar* as one is just or one is the Son. And so on, and so on. He becomes a torturous read in many places. If he has retained Christian orthodoxy, he has done so with the use of language games, sometimes fair and sometimes seemingly out of bounds. What is clear is that he taught it was possible and even necessary to see that we are utterly one with God whose divine presence and life drives the human being in all its authenticity and truth—this to the core. The call for humans is to recognize this oneness, return to the eternal ground of God that can be paradoxically understood as the only thing that really exists (as Being and Existence and beyond "being" and "existence"). And one achieves this recognition, this new consciousness, through radical deconstruction of both the self and God. Rising out of or living through that consciousness is that of perfect freedom, love, and union, particularly marked by compassionate action and an awareness of the intrinsic presence of the Divine everywhere (and nowhere).

MAHĀYĀNA AND ECKHART IN DIALOGUE

It is not the interest of this essay to create a unified vision between Christianity and Buddhism. It is also not my interest to advance a pluralistic theology that imagines all or most religions are about the same thing. Still, one cannot help but look at the generally agreed-upon metaphysics of Mahāyāna and see stunning affinities with the thought of Meister Eckhart. These affinities are surely why Buddhist thinkers like D. T. Suzuki and Masao Abe have latched on to Eckhart so enthusiastically. Hee-Sung Keel notes that Eckhart bridges the dividing line between Asian religio-philosophical traditions and those of the West: "Eckhart's spiritual thought . . . is remarkably free from the 'dualistic' mode of thinking that has dominated Christian theology."⁵⁵ Compare the following two representative notions between Eckhart and Buddhism: "The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me," and "Enlightenment is the act of Buddha-nature seeing itself."⁵⁶

A (the?) central aim of Buddhism, in all of its forms, is a deconstruction project of radical non-attachment. All things, beings, and persons lack any substantial or *essential* reality in themselves. This too is Eckhart's insistence. It is not that we ought to merely consider ourselves as "nothing," he asserts, but that we really are "pure nothing." His point is twofold. Absolute non-attachment radically dis-identifies the "I" from everything it might imagine as the essential self. There is only God. And, indeed, this is his second point: Everything must return to its source, his *reditus* project, to recognize that the soul's only reality is that source.

In both Mahāyāna and Eckhart, humans are grounded in an Absolute. Mahāyāna imagines this to be Buddha-nature or *Suchness* or Mind.⁵⁷ This is what is ultimately Real, and what conditions the possibility for enlightenment or full-Buddhahood. What again is Buddha-nature or *Suchness*? Answering this becomes as elusive as the language games we find in Nāgārjuna. As Bragt notes regarding Buddhism, "[T]he transcendence of the Absolute tends to become tenuous or ambiguous, and the Transcendent tends to lose all its contours."⁵⁸ This should not surprise us, as the Absolute cannot be objectified. It is *Śūnyatā* that is empty and empty of emptiness, eternal and absolute, and knowable only in unknowability. Such depictions are strikingly similar to Eckhart's insistence of finding God beyond God. This is God in God's absolute *grunt*, as "pure nothingness," that is exactly the all. In short, for Buddhists, Buddha-nature grounds all beings and indwells as part of the ontology of all beings; for Eckhart, God grounds all beings and indwells as part of the ontology of all beings.

Both the image of the bodhisattva as well as other representatives of enlightenment act in the universe in the very same way as Eckhart suggests the one who has truly attained the divine *grunt*. In both cases the "saint" is deeply invested in the mundane world in a wholly transcendent way, as one who is indiscriminately compassionate, where mercy moves to the forefront.

IS MAHĀYĀNA THEISTIC?

In discussing the debate between Western theists and atheists, Jan van Bragt notes "a polarization where both sides act as if they clearly knew that they were affirming or

negating, as if they could tell you, at any given moment, precisely what 'God' is."⁵⁹ What most Buddhists challenge is a "personal" God, a being distinct and outside of the universe. This is clearly what they seem to reject in Nirvana. And thus, both East and West have imagined Buddhism to be atheistic. Bragt argues, however, that Buddhism "stands nearer to theism than atheism."⁶⁰ This is certainly the case in my mind. In reading commentaries on the sūtras, both classical and modern, as well as a plethora of Mahāyāna literature, I cannot imagine Buddha-nature/Mind/*Suchness as described by Buddhists* is anything but an affirmation of theism. What else would one make of these terms that are also posited to be eternal, unchanging, the core of reality, the Ultimate, the Absolute? This sounds like God!

Certainly classical theism could be a problem. David Tracy has argued that typical twentieth-century Thomism understood God's relationship to the world as conceptually external and, while God's transcendence was affirmed, God's immanence was affirmed "in muted tones."⁶¹ Tracy goes on to argue that, "Insofar as classic theism is largely determined by categories of 'substance' rather than 'event' and 'relationality' (as it was and is), I believe there is no good philosophical defense."⁶² This *kind* of theism is certainly not necessary, at least not in the Catholic tradition. Tracy argues that in Rahner's last years he shifted his understanding of God to pure transcendent "Mystery," a mystogocial term Tracy also aligns with Lonergan, as well as "Metz, Schillebeeckx, Dupré, Gutiérrez, and many others—including myself."⁶³

Was then Eckhart a Buddhist in Dominican robes? Tracy is not convinced. He reminds us that Eckhart from start to finish was a "God obsessed thinker."⁶⁴ We can also remember that, while radical unity was Eckhart's goal, it was a unity of love as well as knowledge. Lover and beloved merge, but there is indeed still love. There is *that* to be loved. Eckhart was a Christian. Certainly, he pushes us to the utter edge of language, concepts, and logic to point us to that which necessarily goes beyond; and he does so more radically than any other mystic in the Christian tradition.

If Eckhart's mystical theology can remain within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, and let us imagine that it can, then this suggests to me that his theology could provide for Mahāyāna a way to consider its own religio-philosophical underpinnings to be theistic. They might believe in God after all! In my mind, the greatest distinction between an Eckhartian framework and a Mayāyānan framework is the question of personal versus impersonal in their respective traditions. If Mahāyāna could legitimately be understood as theistic, it seems to have a take on the Absolute that is wholly impersonal. John Hick, in his *An Interpretation of Religion*, has argued that the Real (i.e., God) is both personal and impersonal and beyond both *as* the Real.⁶⁵ That Christian mysticism is personal (in some sense) and Buddhist mysticism is impersonal (in some sense) may be an answer to the distinction between Eckhart and Mahāyāna on this score. However, I have often wondered this about Buddhism: *Why* is Buddha-nature (or Mind or *Suchness*), compassionate? Why would this characterize Buddha-nature as the Absolute? In teaching Buddhism and its understanding that there is non-self, but all things are impersonal, my students often ask me questions such as, "What is being compassionate to what, and for what reason?" My short answer is that, while our aggregates are impersonal, their collectivity does indeed represent a sentient being who suffers. That is an incomplete answer. The real answer begs a deeper

question: Why is the Absolute understood as compassion? Do Mahāyāna Buddhists think that Buddha-nature *caritas est*?

NOTES

1. For the full list, see *Majjhima Nikāya*, 12.9–21.
2. See Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 142–144.
3. Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 33.
4. *Ibid.*, 105.
5. Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (Bollinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), 238–239.
6. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 230–231.
7. See, for example, that Nāgārjuna denies the hard edges of past, future, and now (11:1–2) and space has no defining characteristic (5:12). I am relying on a translation of the Stanzas of the Middle Way as preserved in Candrakīrti's *Prasamnapadā* and as provided by Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study of Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 183–220.
8. Michael Zimmerman, *The Buddha Within: The Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra—The Earliest Exposition of the Buddha-Nature Teaching in India* (Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, 2002), 39–46.
9. Cited in Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 56.
10. Cited in *ibid.*, 105.
11. *Ibid.*, 108–110.
12. *Ibid.*, 195.
13. *Ibid.*, 197.
14. Karl Olson, *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 156.
15. *Ibid.*, 221–229.
16. Unless specifically cited, all of the following represent general, well-known biographical details of Eckhart.
17. Emphasis mine. See Edmund Colledge, “Historical Data,” in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. and ed. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 13–14.
18. Cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 104, 120, 137, 179, and 183, respectively.
19. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond Blakney (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), 204.
20. See, for example, Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogy, Univocity and Unity*, trans. Orrin Summerell (Amsterdam: B. R. Gruner, 2001), 154, and McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 148.
21. See, for example, *Living Flame of Love*, 2.33–34.
22. Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo* 10.28, as cited by McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 33.
23. McGinn writes, “His mystical language explores and sometimes explodes ordinary speech.” See *Harvest of Mysticism*, 116.
24. See, for example, Zbigniew Kazmierczak, “A Trial of Interpretation of Meister Eckhart’s Thought on God and Man through the Analysis of its Paradoxes,” *Annals of Philosophy* 65, no. 1 (2017): 5–22.
25. McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 41.
26. *Ibid.*, 81.
27. Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart*, 51.
28. *Ibid.*, 46.

29. Charlotte Radler, "Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and Its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 111.
30. Ibid.
31. Cited in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 72–74.
32. Cited in *ibid.*, 98.
33. See McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 137; McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 120; McGinn, "Introduction," in *Meister Eckhart*, 33; and Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogy, Univocity and Unity*, 49.
34. Cited in McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 137.
35. Cited in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 109.
36. *Ibid.*, 108–109.
37. *Ibid.*, 109.
38. McGinn, "Introduction," *Meister Eckhart*, 42.
39. Cited in McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 60.
40. *Ibid.*, 118.
41. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 194.
42. *Ibid.*, 108.
43. McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 120.
44. Cited in *ibid.*, 120.
45. Cited in *ibid.*, 118.
46. McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 139.
47. McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 166.
48. Cited in *ibid.*, 179.
49. Cited in Radler, "Losing the Self," 183.
50. Cited in *ibid.*
51. Cited in *ibid.*, 188.
52. *Ibid.*, 189.
53. McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, 127.
54. Richard Woods, *Meister Eckhart: Master of Mystics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 91.
55. Hee-Sung Keel, *Meister Eckhart: An Asian Perspective* (Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 295.
56. *Ibid.*, 300.
57. Regarding Zen, John Blofeld writes, "Zen followers (who have much in common with mystics of other faiths) do not use the term 'God', being wary of its dualistic and anthropomorphic implications. They prefer to talk of 'the Absolute' or 'the One Mind'." See "Translator's Introduction," *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind*, trans. John Blofeld (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958), 16.
58. Paul Mommaers and Jan van Bragt, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 82.
59. *Ibid.*, 70.
60. *Ibid.*, 71.
61. David Tracy, "Kenosis, Sunyata, and Trinity: A Dialogue with Maseo Abe," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John Cobb and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 137.
62. *Ibid.*, 138–139.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*, 148.
65. See John Hick, *Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).