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Meister Eckhart and *The Awakening of Faith Sutra*:
The Continuous Self-revelation of Buddha Nature

艾克哈特与《大乘起信论》：
佛性的持续自我启示

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Abstract

For Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), mysticism aims at the realization of the ongoing self-revelation of being, for which he uses the image of the ongoing birth of the son of God in the soul. This is compared with the distinction that is made in *The Awakening of Faith Sutra* between one's ever-present original enlightenment (benjue), and the process of actualizing or realizing that enlightenment (shijue). For such a mystical realization, the practice of “forgetting the self” is essential, in order to make room for the continual presencing of truth right before one's very eyes.

For the advancement of the field of comparative mysticism, a dialogical approach is necessary. This paper serves as a case study of the role that Eckhart's “Asian Christianity” can play in the development of such a dialogue between Christian and Buddhist scriptures.

Keywords: Eckhart, God, revelation, Buddha Nature, mysticism, hermeneutics, enlightenment

1. Introduction

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) is considered by some the quintessential mystic in the Western religious tradition. He has been invoked by scholars in comparative mysticism in both East and West. Meister Eckhart's "mysticism of unity" forms an excellent bridge reconciling Christianity and Asian religions.¹ It has been compared to Zen Buddhism by D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966) and the Kyoto School thinkers Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990) and Shizuteru Ueda (1926–).

In this paper, Eckhart's notion of the ongoing birth of the son of God in the soul will be compared to the Mahayana Buddhist notion of Buddha Nature, as presented in the well known Mahayana sutra, the *Dacheng Qixinlun* (*The Awakening of Faith Sutra*). This paper will explore the parallels between Eckhart's mystical project (illuminating the ongoing birth of the son of God in the soul) and the Mahayana Buddhist mystical project (realizing the continuous self-revelation of one's own inherent Buddha Nature). In this way, it will become apparent that Eckhart's "Asian Christianity" can play an important role in developing a dialogue between Christian and Buddhist scriptures.²

¹ Hee-Sung Keel, "Meister Eckhart's Asian Christianity: Mysticism as a Bridge between Christianity and Zen Buddhism", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 14 (2004) 1:75–94; Hee-Sung Keel, *Meister Eckhart: An Asian Perspective* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

² For a more extensive comparison between Eckhart and Buddhism, especially with regard to the Japanese Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253), see André van der Braak, "The Mystical Hermeneutics of Eckhart and Dōgen: The Continuous Self-revelation of Buddha Nature", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 21 (2011): 151–169.

2. Eckhart's mystical hermeneutics

Meister Eckhart was born in 1260 in Thuringia, Germany. He became a Dominican friar at a young age, and studied at the University of Paris. In 1294 he was appointed general vicar of Thuringia. From 1300–1302 and from 1311–1313 he taught as a professor at the University of Paris. After 1313 he served as the head of the Dominican convent of Strasbourg, and as a spiritual guide of the Dominican nunneries of Southern Germany. He regularly gave sermons which were written down by the nuns at these monasteries. Since these sermons contained various controversial passages, in 1326 the Catholic Church started inquisition proceedings against him. Eckhart appealed his case to the pope in 1327 but died soon afterwards. In 1329, some propositions of his doctrine were condemned by the pope.

For this reason, Eckhart has often been viewed as a mystic who was at odds with the Christian tradition of his time. However, Robert Dobie argues in a recent study, *Logos and Revelation*, that Eckhart's mysticism is not separate from the Christian tradition, but rather constitutes a “mystical” way or mode of appropriating that tradition, in order to further deepen and develop it.³ Mysticism is not a noun for Eckhart - it is not a system of thought or practice that is detached from his own religious tradition - it is only a “mystical” way to comprehend that tradition. As part of this comprehension, the notion of “revelation” is crucial for the medieval mystic as well as the medieval

³ Robert J. Dobie, *Logos & Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

theologian. As religion scholar Gershom Scholem has argued:

Revelation, for instance, is to the mystic not only a definite historical occurrence which, at a given moment in history, puts an end to any further direct relation between mankind and God. With no thought of denying Revelation as a fact of history, the mystic still conceives the source of religious knowledge and experience which bursts forth from his own heart as being of equal importance for the conception of religious truth. In other words, instead of the one act of Revelation, there is a constant repetition of this act.⁴

As Dobie comments, revelation is both the transcendent act that breaks through the finite categories of mental thought and simultaneously the immanent ground of the soul's self-understanding. It is tempting to distinguish between the experiential "inner revelation" of the mystic, and the "outer revelation" of the textual tradition, and to privilege the inner revelation over the outer. However, as Dobie notes, the "inner realization" of the mystic is not separate from or parallel to the revealed text: "In fact, the "inner" revelation is nothing but the "outer" or "textual" revelation become the living ground of the soul's being, thinking, and acting."⁵ The immanent revelation that springs from the soul can never be separated from revealed scripture. The modern separation between experience and doctrine, between mysticism and theology, would have been incomprehensible to

⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 9.

⁵ Robert J. Dobie, *Logos & Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics*, p. 7.

medieval men and women, also to Eckhart. As William Harmless notes,

Theology lies at the very heart of the mystical experience. Mystics often set forth their (or others') experiences as the experience of doctrine. This sets mystical theologies apart from other ways of doing theology. Mystical theologies work from the conviction that doctrine is not extrinsic, not some outer standard or mere verbal measure of the truth. Rather, doctrine itself lies within the realm of the experiential.⁶

3. The birth of God in the Soul

McGinn has suggested that it is more fruitful to approach mysticism as a process, not as an experience. In Eckhart's work, such a process consists of

thinking back, not to being as such, but to the primal *revelation of being*. [...] [P]rior to any concept we might have of "being" is the revelation of being, its "presencing" to us. [...] "Being" or "existence" as such cannot be captured by our finite minds, but rather our finite minds must be captured by it, conformed to it."⁷

Eckhart's mystical reflection, in its attempt to understand properly being or existence, can be seen as a spiritual practice in which one attempts to conform oneself to pure being or existence. In order to be

⁶ William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 233.

⁷ Robert J. Dobie, *Logos & Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics*, p. 2.

able to do so, one must be open completely to its revealed character. Mystical reflection attempts to bring being into the light of consciousness; in this process, being is unveiled (revealed) to the mind, thereby realizing truth in the Greek sense of *aletheia* (literally: the state of not being hidden; the state of being evident).⁸ Truth as *aletheia* refers to what first appears when something is seen or revealed. Allowing something to appear is the first act of truth. One must give attention to something before it can be a candidate for any further understanding. Mystical reflection could be seen as the attempt to participate in the ongoing self-revelation of being, the ongoing presencing of truth.⁹

For this ongoing self-revelation of being, Eckhart uses the image of the birth of God in the soul. For Eckhart, when the soul becomes completely empty and free of all images through detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*), and recovers her original purity, she can hear the word of God and is born as the son of God. This birth of the son of God in the soul is not a one-time event but an ongoing one. But as long as we remain unaware of it, it cannot transform us existentially. Therefore, the goal of Eckhart's mystical project is to come to a personal and

⁸ Truth as *aletheia*, instead of as correspondence or coherence, represents a clear departure from nearly every philosophical tradition since the Ancient period. Martin Heidegger renewed attention in *aletheia*.

⁹ This presencing, however, also includes absence. As McGinn notes, mystics have never confined themselves to the positive language of presence: "the paradoxical necessity of both presence and absence is one of the most important of all the verbal strategies by means of which of which mystical transformation has been symbolized". See Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), p. xviii.

inward participation in this ongoing illumination.

4. The continuous self-revelation of Buddha Nature

Eckhart's formulation of our existential predicament bears some resemblance to the distinction in Mahayana Buddhism between inherent Buddha Nature and the realization of Buddha Nature. In the *Dacheng Qixinlun* (*The Awakening of Faith Sutra*), a very influential 6th-century Mahayana Buddhist sutra, a distinction is made between one's ever-present original enlightenment (*benjue*), and the process of actualization of that enlightenment (*shijue*). Original enlightenment is described as follows in the sutra:

The essence of the Mind is free from thoughts. The characteristic of that which is free from thoughts is analogous to that of the sphere of empty space that pervades everywhere. The one aspect of the World of Reality (*dharmadhatu*) is none other than the undifferentiated Dharmakāya, the "Essence-body" of the Tathāgata. Grounded on the Dharmakāya, it is to be called the original enlightenment.¹⁰

However, this ever-present original enlightenment is often absent in our experience. Man is alienated from his true nature; there is a discrepancy between his essence and his existence.¹¹ He therefore needs to awaken to the fundamental truth of his original Buddhahood. As the sutra

¹⁰ Yoshito S. Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 43.

¹¹ Hee-Sung Keel, *Meister Eckhart: An Asian Perspective*, p. 232.

continues:

Grounded on the original enlightenment is nonenlightenment.

And because of non-enlightenment, the process of actualization of enlightenment can be spoken of.¹²

As Hakeda comments, man's alienated state is the unactualized state of his original enlightenment. Man is originally enlightened, but suffers because he does not realize that he is enlightened.

This led to a redefinition of Buddhist meditation practice as not aimed at the attainment of a future state of enlightenment, but at the ongoing verification of one's original enlightenment, interpreted as the continuous illumination or unveiling of reality. In Mahayana Buddhism, enlightenment is not a static mystical experience, but constitutes an awakening to the truth that is always already presencing. Both Mahayana Buddhism and Eckhart see reality as a process of ongoing revelation, a presencing of truth seen as *aletheia*. For both, mystical experience is not so much a pure intuition of an ineffable realm, but rather the ongoing affirmation and verification of this presencing of truth.

5. Forgetting the self

Therefore, the essential religious task for Eckhart as well as for Mahayana Buddhism is how to realize our essential divine nature and actualize a perfect divine-human unity within ourselves. How can we overcome our alienation from our own essential nature, and be born as

¹² Yoshito S Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, p. 44.

the Son of God, or realize our original enlightenment?

For both Eckhart and Mahayana Buddhism, the mystical process involves leaving behind, even forgetting, the self, in order for the presencing of truth to take place without obstruction. As Dobie notes, we tend to become enclosed in and attached to our own finite subjectivity, and in this way become closed off to the revealed nature of being. We become stuck on the being itself, or, even worse, on our created concepts about being or beings, rather than on the act of revelation itself. From a mystical perspective, true religion consists of continually breaking through a blind adherence to static conceptions of being: what we call “reality” needs to be continually “made real” or “made true”. This is only possible by letting go of the limited personal self, and allowing oneself to be conformed to revealed truth. For this, we need to fall silent and allow ourselves to not speak, but to be spoken to:

self-understanding begins not with any immediate reflection upon oneself. To make oneself an object of reflection is to lose oneself, for, as soon as one tries to grasp oneself in any concept or image, one's “I” has retreated “behind” the reflection.[...] That is why, for the medieval mystic, all authentic self-knowledge must begin and end with a complete letting-go of the self, a radical [...] *abgeschiedenheit* or *gelassenheit* (a detachment or letting-be) from the finite, created self so that one may live and abide in and through the divine Logos.¹³

¹³ Robert J. Dobie, *Logos & Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics*, p. 4.

For the presencing of truth to be able to occur, the self needs to be destabilized and decentered. The very knower of truth with his or her limitations and preconditions must be left behind, forgotten. In this way, the ongoing birth of God in the soul can be fully experienced without obstructions:

How is God all the time born in that man [a detached person]? Pay attention: Whenever that man lays bare and discloses the divine image which God has created in him by nature, then God's image in him stands revealed. Birth must be understood in the sense of revelation of God, for when the Son is said to be born of the father, that means that the father paternally reveals to him his mysteries. Accordingly, the more, and the more clearly, God's image is revealed in a man, the more evidently God is born in him.¹⁴

When the self has been forgotten, the ongoing universal expression of truth by the myriad things, the continuous self-revelation of Buddha Nature, can take place in oneself without any hindrance.

For Eckhart, this self-forgetting in detachment culminates in a breakthrough that enables us to get in touch with the ground of our souls and experience the ongoing birth of God in the soul. Such a breakthrough is expressed in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and especially in Chan, through the notion of *dun* (sudden, unmediated). In his article "Dun: A Chinese concept as a Key to 'Mysticism' in East and

¹⁴ Eckhart, Sermons II, 118. Quoted in Hee-Sung Keel, *Meister Eckhart: An Asian Perspective*, p. 243.

West”, Urs App compares Eckhart’s notion of breakthrough with the Chan notion of *dunwu*, sudden realization.¹⁵

6. Discussion

Many discussions on mysticism in East and West so far have assumed the existence of a timeless, universal mystical experience that can be found in the mystics from East and West. McGinn calls attention to the ways in which such a “timeless” mystical experience is always conditioned by changes and developments in the church and society at large.¹⁶ There is no such thing as “universal mysticism”: mystical reflection is always part of a specific religious tradition, as formed by its core texts and their interpretation. This means that, rather than presupposing a universal mystical experience across traditions, the mystical experience should be studied in its historical and traditional context. According to McGinn, the emphasis on mystical experience in the study of mysticism, and especially in comparative mysticism, has so far blocked a careful analysis of the special hermeneutics of mystical texts.¹⁷

Therefore, a cross-cultural hermeneutical approach to the comparison between Eckhart and Mahayana Buddhism needs to be

¹⁵ Urs App, “Dun: A Chinese concept as a Key to ‘Mysticism’ in East and West”, in *The Eastern Buddhist* 26/2 (1993): 31–72.

¹⁶ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), p. xv. See also Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

¹⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origin to the Fifth Century*, p. xiii.

dialogical in character. Rather than serving to show the superiority of either East or West, such a dialogical exchange can be interesting and enlightening in its own right. It can help to not only shed new light on the existing images of both Eckhart and Mahayana Buddhism that have been formed in the Western imagination, but also to create new images.¹⁸

As far as Eckhart is concerned, the aim in this would not be to come closer to the “true” Eckhart, but to find new and creative ways of reading that can bring Eckhart’s texts to life in new ways in our time, and let them do their work. The aim of intercultural philosophy and interreligious dialogue is not so much to get closer to “the truth” about our own thinkers, but to provide the texts from our own and other mystical traditions with a new affectivity.

Rather than claiming that mystics from various traditions meet each other by breaking through the linguistic and perspectival stances of their tradition, it might be precisely in entering into the depths of their traditions that we find points of convergence. In such a way, comparative mysticism and interreligious dialogue can open up new vistas of mutual clarification, and stimulate the proliferation of a wider range of perspectives and horizons. We can make our “own” Eckhart more foreign (but not by making him Buddhist though).

So far, most comparisons between mystics from various traditions have interpreted the commonalities in their writings to mean that these mystics somehow rose above their own religious traditions and taught a

¹⁸ I have attempted such a cross-cultural hermeneutical dialogue in my book on Nietzsche and Zen. André van der Braak, *Nietzsche and Zen: Self-Overcoming Without a Self* (Lenham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

universal religion.¹⁹ From the perspective of mystical hermeneutics, however, Eckhart did not rise above Christianity, but, to the contrary, entered very deeply into it. The same can be said about the Buddhist tradition. Rather than concluding that mystics from various traditions are fundamentally incommensurable, it might be precisely in entering into the depths of their traditions that we find points of convergence. As Dobie puts it: “If one is to find a common core to mystical thought and experience, it can only be found in and *through* the religious traditions that give life to it, and not outside of them”.²⁰ Both Eckhart and Mahayana Buddhism point beyond their traditions, not to some universal religion, but to the continual presencing of truth right before one’s very eyes. Perhaps this presencing of truth can form the ground for a new understanding between religious traditions, and a new way of practicing comparative scripture.

¹⁹ See Fritjhof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (New York: Harper, 1975).

²⁰ Robert J. Dobie, *Logos & Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics*, p. 2.

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摘 要

艾克哈特的神秘主义的目的在于实现存在的持续自我启示，他比喻这是上帝之子在灵魂中的持续降生。这可以与《大乘起信论》所区分的“本觉”（即一直在场的原初觉醒）与“始觉”（即原初觉醒的不断实现的过程）相比较。对那样的一个神秘主义的实现来说，“不断遗忘自我”的实践至关重要，因为这样才能为就在眼前的真理的持续在场留出空间。

要推进东西方神秘主义之间的比较，必须采用一种对话的方法。本文采取一个个案研究的方式，来探讨在基督教与佛教经典的对话中，艾克哈特式的“亚洲基督教”可以扮演的角色。

关键词：艾克哈特、上帝、启示、佛性、神秘主义、诠释学、启蒙