

Through Meister Eckhart

A short handbook on becoming God's somethingness

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Intro

On the road of seeking closer understanding of God, there always seems to be an infinite number of ways. Through Eckhart's sermons, one can extract certain transformations that can happen to a spiritual seeker. His goal, if there is any, seems to be taking the reader's perception or belief in any external-bound illusions back to one's heart-felt inner states. Ultimately, his more radical claim that we are essentially God and God is us tells what the union with God means. In no way does he emphasize a leap of faith that instantly brings one to this union, but due to one's created nature, there is a process that one inevitably needs to go through for a more and more conscious, or enlightened state. From Eckhart, I take that there are three stages in this process, which may be seen from this quote:

'When the soul enters the light that is pure, she falls so far from her own created somethingness into her nothingness that in this nothingness she can no longer return to that created somethingness by her own power. But God places himself with his uncreatedness beneath her nothingness and contains the soul in his somethingness. The soul has dared to become nothing and cannot return to herself by her own power—so far has she gone out of herself before God catches her'(DW1, 156).

The first stage is our detachment from our own somethingness. The second stage is to go through the process of nothingness. The third stage is to be one with God's somethingness.

Stage 1: Detachment

The first stage in attaining unity with God is detachment. As created beings in our own somethingnesses, we tend to seek limited things and may fall into the trap of taking these things as truth. So detachment is a necessary step. It is usually understood as denouncing worldly, material pleasures, which Eckhart also touches upon, saying that one should detach from outside things, like possessions, for things that are in heaven('heaven' not only as a place above, but also a place within, a state of being that has all the qualities pleasing to God). But for Eckhart, more importantly, it is understood to be detached from our external concerns.

‘...true detachment is nothing else than for the spirit to stand as immovable whatever may chance to it of joy and sorrow, honor, shame and disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands before a little breath of wind’(On detachment, 288).

This perspective shifts us out of the personal and into the universal, reminding us that there is something that remains what it is throughout whatever mood or trial. This gets us closer to God’s purity, simplicity, and immutability. The reason that God is all these qualities is that God is unmoved, for if God is moved God will be tainted by changeability. Attaching ourselves to capricious feelings or circumstances is being attached to multiplicities and losing sight of the essence of ourselves. Yet to be closer to God one should be like God, having an eternal space within in the face of the external and the temporal.

Simply detaching oneself from material objects like good food, clothes, etc, or doing other ascetic practices, does not bring one closer to God if they are done for the wrong reasons. The trick with Eckhart is that one shouldn’t detach for ‘God’s sake, although one is detaching for God’s sake. One shouldn’t expect a reward, avoid a punishment, or force oneself to do something that does not flow from one’s inner nature, either in detachment or in our normal works. Detachment isn’t a stoic principle to be adhered to strictly, nor does detachment look down on earthly things, but it is more of an awareness of our immovable nature, and the tranquility of faith that remains despite what circumstances. It isn’t about forsaking specific things, but about keeping one’s essence intact and at all times.

So contrary to the stoics, for Eckhart, a detached person can still enjoy material things or being in emotional states, but just in a detached manner. As one still needs to act according to how our limited self usually acts, it is only natural that one engages with materialism or faces our emotions. Yet this is done with the understanding that we are innerly anchored beings, so that we may neither take outer things as idols nor be wrecked by our emotions. The outer man still exists with certain outer expressions, yet is always sustained by the inner man.

As opposed to many Greek tragedies, where characters cannot reign in their emotions and make decisions sometimes based on these emotions, for better or for worse, Christian figures remain with an inner steadfastness that will not get one to run into unredeemable consequences. Even when they grieve, their grief has a limit. Eckhart mentions when Christ says that he is 'sorrowful to death' or when Our Lady Mary stands under the cross and laments, they are acting according to their outer natures, which is only human and natural, yet they remain in detachment. How comes this detachment amidst the storm? Maybe out of trust for God, a trust in whatever God places in our lives, and take that to be the best in God's understanding, however they may be difficult for us. Yet when one doesn't realize one's inner nature, it is easy for the outer nature's reactions to life's trials or temptations to become the only things one can see.

The question that follows is how does one tap into this inner nature, and know when one is acting from this inner nature, and when one isn't. The simple answer that we just know does not suffice. Analogies work well in the New Testament, and in Eckhart as well. He compares the soul to a spring of water, and if the earth is thrown upon it, the water will be blocked. Yet the soul still springs water once the earth gets removed from it. This spring is like this innermost part of the soul, or the stronghold('citadel'), or the most peaceful place('town') in the soul. This is the part of oneself that prompts one to be detached or prompts one to do certain works, but not out of other parts of oneself, like one's thinking. It must be this internal, invisible, and intuitive force that does this prompting, and not any external, visible, or even 'thought' forces.

This part is also what is most alive in us, and the 'command from God' for us to do this or that is not higher than this inner nature's command. When talking about detachment, we are also talking about the congruence between our outer nature and our inner nature, in which the outer nature is directed, navigated, and regulated by our inner nature. So if we think of a 'command from

God' solely, it is still out of a place of externality, and not our inner nature, which is truly connected to God.

Detachment inevitably leads to nothingness. As much as we speak of detachment as an inner state, it is also, at least at first perceived, as objectively hollow. For it cannot be filled with things, or it wouldn't be detachment. If we are to give this detachment an attitude, it will be an attitude even better than any specific attitude, take humility for example. Humility is a state of placing oneself below all things, but detachment is neither above nor below anything, but remaining within oneself. It means the self does not perceive any duality between what's higher or what's lower. It is not even Aristotle's golden mean, for this remaining within is not a result of being a mean, but the only recognition there is of an essence within. Yet is this nothingness nothing? What does this nothingness entail? As much as one may be detached at outward circumstances, the encounter with the nothingness itself brings one to a more central stage in the union with God, in which one enters into a purifying and dying phase of oneself.

Stage 2: The process of nothingness

Eckhart talks a lot about aligning our wills and desires with that of God's will and desire. In doing this one not only comes out of a single createdness, but also tries to dissolve this createdness into nothingness. Yet to do this one must first be aware of one's wills and desires, what they are about, how do they manifest, in what ways are they further or nearer to God. The process of this reflection entails a struggle between the self's will and God's will, so it brings conflicts, confusion, pain, and examination of oneself. One cannot assume that reaching nothingness after one has first tried detachment, comes easily. The gap between the divine and the self, even just an illusional gap, exists at this stage, which is characterized by a place of nothingness.

Paraphrasing Augustine, Eckhart says that there are six stages to become a noble man in the spiritual sense. The first stage is living according to examples. The second, turning inward to

wisdom. The third, desire to do good despite the ability to do evil. The fourth, being so rooted in love to be willing to take upon difficult circumstances gladly. The fifth, achieving inner peace. The sixth, transformed by God's eternity, changed into a divine image and become God's son.

One can understand these stages as climbing up a hill, reaching higher and higher ground, seeing wider and wider perspective, but that upwardness or forwardness doesn't seem to apply so accurately here. As in Augustine's stages, the noble man turns into him or herself more and more inwardly, from 'clutch at chairs and lean against the walls' to 'clamber off our mother's lap' to 'increasingly withdraw from our mother'(On the noble man, 101). Especially at the fifth stage, the description of living altogether at peace in oneself implies a static, innerly fulfilled state; so if we were to think of this 'ascension' as an ascending consciousness about God, the will is doing drudgery similar to doing ascetic practices, the 'appearance' job. Too much willful intention of ascension leads one to an outward exploration when the end is inward, both as a realization of the essence(spoken as a 'spark' or 'light' in Eckhart) and as an illumined incorporation of all of one's faculties. This 'light' is in the soul, 'uncreated and uncreatable' and it 'apprehends God without medium, without concealment and nakedly, just as he is in himself'(Sermon 7, 135). We get this first cause 'light' within us, and we get a mirroring view of God in the human through this 'light' in the sense that one can directly connect to God's reality and be changed into God by this 'light'.

Moreover, Eckhart says,

'Therefore the more the soul departs from all this multiplicity, the more the kingdom of God is uncovered in her. This can only happen through grace and not by the soul's own powers... here the soul receives nothing from God nor from creatures, since she it is who contains herself and receives all things from herself. Here the soul and the God-head are one, and here the soul has discovered that she herself is the kingdom of God'(Sermon 30, 249).

This grace is not necessarily bestowed from above, but something that already inheres within, according to Eckhart; the soul merely has to 'discover' or 'uncover' her true nature that is always there. Thus instead of being an outward motion in the stages of reaching enlightenment, it is more akin to downward motion, a going deeper into the spirals of the nothingness from a search of truth to the embodiment of it. God is in us and not high above. Besides being a downward examination into our souls, the process of immersion in the nothingness can also be thought of as a circle, the awareness of God is in the center while many other awarenesses are at the periphery. Yet returning to God does not mean that one tightens one's consciousness or stations oneself in the center only, while making distance with other kinds of awarenesses. Instead it means that by being transformed by God, the whole circle is renewed and refreshed at its boundary to its center. The point is not to terminate the lower forms of awareness, but to encompass, 'supervise', and observe them by this new overall divine awareness.

The divine awareness happens when one has evolved through the nothingness. Yet the process involves the death of ourselves, which is accompanied, naturally, by suffering. Eckhart compares the nothingness to an 'abyss'. As much as an abyss is like a void, it is more than a void. It implies forlornness and darkness, in which a pervading sense of 'unbornness' exists. Eckhart talks about an eventual 'birth of the unborn' in this nothingness, in which the unborn is the uncreated self, but by birth God has endowed the uncreated self a spiritual realization, along with being, intellect, will, etc. So the process of being in nothingness is not empty, but always a becoming and returning to this uncreated reality. The nothingness is a potential niche for the birth, or rebirth of the believer to the recollection that the soul has divine qualities. The abyss is a cyclical reality and goes in a circle of eternity that affirms the understanding again and again that God is not far off there, but in here, and has always been from the beginning — only our createdness blinds this truth and only can detachment and nothingness bring about this truth again.

Following the cyclical or circular model of ascension, suffering comes from the 'grief and resistance accompanying change and movement'(Verse 14, 172). The previous self must die and expand more into this new self that is one with God, yet any release of old hold-on, including an attachment to a possibly objectified 'God', comes without struggle. Eventually one has to learn that the personal will has no place in this and to let the spiritual will take over. The process is similar to when the heat comes out of the fire, or birth comes from pain. God wishes that from the suffering and restlessness that inevitably results from the created self's longing for God yet 'unlikeness' to God, it may finally be 'at rest' and 'content'. Yet what comes after this purgatory-like nothingness? In what ways is the integration with God's somethingness manifest? What is God's somethingness made up of besides being a simple oneness?

Stage 3: One with the Godhead

When one has come out of the painful process of nothingness and integrated with God's somethingness both by their willingness and God's grace, it is time to utilize consciously the God-given faculties that are discovered in God's somethingness, both for one's own wisdom and for the love of God. Eckhart's elaborations on certain three-fold faculties align with the trinity perfectly and relates its human meaning to us. Through exercising and propagating these triune faculties, one can serve oneself and others better. Without a honed skill, the craftsman cannot excel by his or her love for the craft alone. After the abyss of faith comes an activated practice with multiple aspects in one's consciousness.

Although the primary stress here is that the Trinity in the traditional Christian sense need not obstruct our immediate understanding of the One God, who is 'a simple oneness, without mode or individual nature... neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit'(Sermon 13, 164), Eckhart is more against thinking of God as in a limited nature(this or that) than against the Trinity. The point of tran-

scending the three-fold God is to recognize God as something more than the word 'God' or any words that describe him, but not to get away with the Trinity altogether. If one already has the correct understanding of God's Oneness, the meaning of the Trinity only elucidates the equation: 'just as God is threefold in the Persons, he is one in his essence'(Sermon 6, 132).

The Godhead is commonly understood as the triune God, through which we have the divine in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. Together they are one but separately also get the divine across to us in different ways. The Godhead also represents an uncreated reality before 'God'. Pre-existence, the three spiritual entities weaved into the Godhead are spiritual grounds in human beings that can now be excavated, since we have reached union with our uncreated natures during nothingness. One of these threefold faculties that Eckhart speaks of is the three powers on the golden ring, first called a retentive power, second called reason, third called the will. The retentive is likened to the Father, the reason is likened to the Son, and the will is likened to the Holy Spirit.

The retentive power is likened to the Father who is the unembodied objective creator that is in the universe, from which our existence contains the many eternal things that the Father laid out and we only have to remember or rediscover them. This is akin to inspirational moments, or a *deja vu*, that pulls one into feeling the vastness of the source of all creation and smallness of ourselves. It is a reminder to us when we are lost in the hustle-bustle that there is something quiet and sacred present inside of us. We recall that that thing is our origin and foundation.

The reason that is likened to Christ speaks to one's rational understanding of the many wisdom of God and how best to use our actions according to them. Our actions should be prompted from the inner nature that flows from God, yet reason is important since we are often not at a stage where we may discern whether it is the inner nature that prompts us or something else. Reason gives a solid test and through the process of thinking brings about a sustained understanding, so that 'the higher we ascend with our knowledge, the more we are one in him'(Sermon 5, 129). Yet this

reason is not Aristotelian in which we differentiate species and genus, but a mystical reason that recognizes all these multiplicities of images, objects, or creatures as One. Only reason can recognize this kind of totality and ultimum. Reason is likened to Christ in the way that unlike the Father who is too omnipotent for us to humanly understand, Christ's partly-human presence can have an encounter with us on the pragmatic and mind level, in which our consciousness recognizes Christ's consciousness to be able to exist in us. As Christ is God's son, each human is also God's children. Thus what Christ's actions entail can be applied to ourselves as well. Here the merge happens, and God is delivered to us through Christ (without mediation, since the divine is directly present through the three-fold identity).

The will is likened to the Holy Spirit and speaks to our voluntary desire to love God. The Holy Spirit is what flows from the Godhead to individual souls for grace to come in. This voluntary choice to love God is not an exchange with God for God's love for us since God does not 'win our love: he transcends love and the prompting of love' (Sermon 28, 238). This love is the love for the absolute and infinite, so it does not look for a 'limited' return from the beloved. It must not involve any complexity, but be simple, pure and devoid of any content, even virtue. Initially understood, our love for God is like a love for what is good; yet it transcends that, since to become one with God, our love for God should be like God's love for us: for its own sake and not for the sake of virtue. The willingness to love becomes a single transparent clarity that is within the self and makes up the self's efforts.

Besides the golden ring example, Eckhart gives another example of the 'threes' for our actions, which are orderliness, insight, perspicacity. Orderliness corresponds to 'the highest in all its aspects', insight is that which 'for the time being we know nothing better', and perspicacity is 'sensing in good works the joyful presence of the living truth' (Sermon 21, 199). Again they correspond to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively, with the Father's highest ordering of the universe to

each kind of creatures, the Son's embodied temporal arrival among us with the truth he brings, and the free flow of the Holy Spirit throughout our living works.

These threefold words not only let us understand the divine's objectively existent aspects but also speaks to how they relate with our specific capacities or faculties, bringing us closer in God's somethingness through these threefold ways that work together to have a higher integration. The Godhead bestows on humanity three light strings for understanding, guidance, and strength. Through their development in us, we are able to go out of ourselves to do works that return to God what God gives us. There is the giving of the way, truth, and life from God to us, and a returning of that to the world from us, always a cyclical flowing force in the universe between humans and the divine. Since we are creatures attuned to multiplicities, God has made itself clear to us through the threefold way, so we may be and live according to the categorized wisdom that makes sense to us. In the end, the threes, transcending the duality of two, make up the oneness. Through the threefold natures, one has opened the door and sat within God's somethingness.

Ending

As 'ego' and 'vos', 'I' and 'you', 'God' and 'man' come into unity, the divine-human relationship takes one out of the limited createdness into vaster realms. The supernal relationship is such that at some stage the relationship itself becomes part of the self's being. God works through us while we align ourselves with that work to become God's somethingness. This flowing dynamic transforms us anew, again and again. It is both never-ceasing and ever-present, and all one has to do is to follow its inevitable call when it does call. If God has a single aim across history and underlying all creations, it may well be that the children can manifest the Grace of God's somethingness abundantly on earth. May God's presence save us in both our inner and outer works. May we find God in both our contemplations and our actions. May the within become without, and the above the below.

Works Cited

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