

# Letting Go of God for Nothing

## Ueda Shizuteru's Non-Mysticism and the Question of Ethics in Zen Buddhism

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The highest and final letting go, of which humans are capable, is letting go of God for the sake of God.

—Meister Eckhart (ECKHART 1963, 214)<sup>1</sup>

If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.

—Linji (IRIYA 1989, 96–97)

Shed deluded passions, and empty yourself also of thoughts of holiness. There is no need to linger where the Buddha is; and pass quickly over where the Buddha is not.

—Kuoan, *The Ten Ox Pictures* (AKIZUKI 1989, 101)<sup>2</sup>

Do not dwell in dualism.... No sooner do we have “right” and “wrong” than the mind is lost in confusion.... In the ultimate state, the farthest extreme, there are no fixed rules.

—Sengcan, *Record of Trust in the Mind* (AKIZUKI 1991, 40, 71)

Ueda Shizuteru (1926–), the central contemporary figure in the Kyoto School tradition of Japanese philosophy, is best known for his

1. Unless other translations are cited, all translations in this paper from German, Japanese, and Chinese are my own.

2. These are the opening lines of Kuoan (Kakuan)'s comments on the eighth picture, the empty circle. Akizuki refers us to an earlier, almost identical saying by Zhaozhou (Jōshū): “Don't dwell where the Buddha is, and run quickly past where the Buddha is not.”

original interpretive developments of the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), of the radical mystical thought of Meister Eckhart, and of what he calls the thoroughgoing “non-mysticism” of Zen Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> His interpretations of Eckhart and Zen, and specifically his thought of non-mysticism, will be the topic of this paper.<sup>4</sup>

What Ueda means by non-mysticism (*Nicht-Mystik* or *hi-shinpi-shugi* 非神秘主義) is not a simple rejection of, but rather a movement *through and out of* mysticism. It is both a fulfillment of the genuine thrust of mysticism and a breakthrough beyond mystical union. I have suggested that this dynamic movement through and out of mysticism may be more appropriately referred to as “de-mysticism” (*Ent-Mystik* or *datsu-shinpi-shugi* 脱神秘主義), and in this paper I will use this term interchangeably with “non-mysticism.”<sup>5</sup> Non- or de-mysticism involves a double negation, a release from the ego and then from God. God is let go of for

3. In 2001–2003 Ueda published a revised and thematically rearranged edition of his Japanese works as *Ueda Shizuteru shū* 上田閑照集 [Ueda Shizuteru Collection, hereafter USS] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten). For an illuminating review article, see James W. Heisig, “Approaching the Ueda Shizuteru collection,” *Eastern Buddhist* 37: 254–74 (2005). Also see the first monograph to appear on Ueda’s thought, Steffen Döll’s *Wozu also suchen? Zur Einführung in das Denken von Ueda Shizuteru* (Munich: Iudicium, 2005). Both contain useful bibliographies of Ueda’s works (the latter includes works in Japanese as well as in Western languages).

4. Ueda’s first extensive treatment of Eckhart and Zen can be found in the final chapter of his German dissertation, UEDA 1965, 145–169. His Japanese texts on this topic have now been collected in volume eight of *Ueda Shizuteru shū*, which is entitled *Hisbinpi-shugi: Ekkuharuto to zen* 非神秘主義——エックハルトと禅 [Non-Mysticism: Eckhart and Zen]. In the afterword to this volume Ueda tells us that although he initially coined the German term “Nicht-Mystik” in order to distinguish Zen from Eckhart’s “Mystik,” he later came to apply the new term to the most radical element in Eckhart’s thought as well (USS 8: 330). As we shall see, however, Zen remains for him the paradigmatic form of non-mysticism.

5. In a conversation at his home in July of 2006, Professor Ueda agreed with my preference for this way of putting it. I now think that the manifold senses of the German prefix *Ent-* may be particularly appropriate here, since they can signify an actualization and development of a potential (as in *entflammen* and *entwickeln*), as well as an undoing and removal of a burden (as in *entfesseln*, *entladen* and *entgiften*). An *Ent-Mystik* could thus be understood both, on the one hand, as a *commencement and development* of mysticism, and, on the other, as a *shedding of and release from* mysticism.

the sake of nothing, that is, for an experience of absolute nothingness, which in turn returns us to a direct engagement in the here and now of everyday activity.

The aim of the first half of this paper will be to explicate and elaborate on Ueda's account of this dynamic movement of non- or de-mysticism. In doing so, I will not only refer specifically to Ueda's works, but will also look through the lens of his thought at the writings of Eckhart and Zen. In the second half of this paper, I will raise, and attempt to respond to, what I see as potentially the most vexing question for this philosophy of radical reaffirmation of the here and now: When one breaks through the transcendent being of God to an absolute nothingness, to an open expanse wherein all things can manifest themselves in the immediacy of their suchness, what principle is left for distinguishing right from wrong or good from evil? If God, as a transcendent foundation of values, is let go of for the sake of an enveloping or pervasive "nothing," what principle grounds or at least guides our ethical decisions?

#### NON-MYSTICISM AS A MOVEMENT OF DE-MYSTICISM

Before looking at how Ueda develops his thought of non-mysticism through his interpretations of Eckhart and Zen, let me begin with a schematic overview of the idea. Non-mysticism or de-mysticism is not a static state of being, but rather a movement through negation to affirmation, then on to a second negation, and finally back to a radical reaffirmation. It is thus a movement made up of the following four moments:

- 1 An ecstatic transcendence of the ego;
- 2 A mystical union with God or the One;
- 3 An ecstatic breakthrough beyond God or the One into an absolute nothingness;
- 4 A return to an ecstatic/instatic engagement in the here and now.<sup>6</sup>

6. The exact formulation of this four-part schema reflects my interpretation; however, on the occasion of a presentation of an earlier Japanese version of this paper to

Despite this analysis into four apparently discrete moments, these ideally make up a single fluid movement from one to four. Yet what Ueda calls “mysticism,” in the narrow sense, stops short at the second moment. In other words, mysticism consists of a conjunction of the first and second moments only. What is distinctive of non-mysticism is the addition to these first two moments of the third and fourth moments.

The first and third moments of this complete movement of non-mysticism together make up a double negation; one must let go not only of habitual identification with the self-encapsulated ego, but also of the mystical experience of union with the divine. The first moment, the transcendence of the ego, is perhaps common to all forms of religion. The second moment, the experience of union with God, is often considered to be the hallmark of mystical experience. The third moment, the breakthrough beyond mystical union to an absolute nothingness, can be understood as a self-overcoming of mysticism. And the fourth moment, the return to an ecstatic/instatic activity in the midst of the everyday world, completes this self-overcoming process of de-mysticism.

We can understand this entire movement of non-mysticism in terms of a series of “ecstasies.” Ecstasy—in the strict sense of *ek-stasis*, literally a “standing outside oneself,” which implies, as the Japanese term *datsuji* 脱自 literally means, a “shedding of the [ego] self”—is an initial prerequisite for the mystical union. Yet, as mysticism intensifies towards de-mysticism, beyond this initial *ekstasis*, beyond this letting go of the ego for the sake of union with God, we find a second *ekstasis*, a letting go of God for the sake of nothing, that is, for the sake of an experience of “absolute nothingness.” This absolute nothingness is not an apophatic indicator of an ineffably transcendent Godhead beyond God; it is not a negative theological sign for something “wholly Other” that lies “beyond Being.” Rather, Ueda understands absolute nothingness

the Kyoto Philosophy Research Group in October of 2003, Professor Ueda made no objections to it, and indeed he expressed a general appreciation for my interpretive summary of his conception of non-mysticism. While I have taken some further liberties of interpretation and elaboration in the present paper, I have attempted throughout to remain faithful to the gist of his thought.

*dynamically* as “the activity of emptying out” (*kūkai no hataraki* 空開の働き), that is, as the ecstatic movement of de-mysticism itself. He also understands absolute nothingness *topologically* as the “open expanse” (*kokū* 虚空) wherein the true self is realized in and as an ecstatic engagement with the everyday world. The true self is realized as a “self that is not a self” (*jiko narazaru jiko* 自己ならざる自己) in the sense that it is itself only in not being itself; that is to say, the true self realizes itself as an “*ekstasis/instasis*,” a *standing outside* of itself and *into* a nondual engagement with other persons, things, and events.<sup>7</sup> In the process of non-mysticism, not only the ego, but God or Buddha too must be negated, let go of, or, in Dōgen’s terms, “dropped off.” Thus Ueda, following his teacher Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), speaks of Zen as a “mode of body-mind-dropped-off mysticism” (*shinpişugi no shinjin-datsurakutai* 神秘主義の身心脱落態) (NKC 7: 7).<sup>8</sup> The genuine thrust of mysticism finds fulfillment in its own self-abnegation. The movement of this thrust through and beyond mysticism is what is meant by non-mysticism or de-mysticism.

In Ueda’s own words:

If we provisionally divide the entire dynamic of “from union to *ekstasis*” into two segments, referring to the moment of union with the usual term mysticism, and naming the moment of *ekstasis* in particular as non-mysticism, then my intent is to attempt to clarify the relation and connection between these aspects.... I regard true mysticism as the entire movement “from union to *ekstasis*,” that is to say, the entire movement “from mysticism to non-mysticism,” hence up to the point of including the moment of “to non-mysticism.” In fact, in this case the expression mysticism ceases to be fitting; it is no longer appropriate. True mysticism is not mysticism. Rather, it is appropriate to call it non-mysticism. With mysticism as a springboard, to go beyond and shed mysticism by means of the ecstatic thrust inherent

7. On the notion of the “self that is not a self,” see USS 6: 230–44, and USS 10: 23–24 and throughout.

8. The work cited here, Nishitani’s 1948 book on Meister Eckhart, *Kami to zettai-mu* 神と絶対無 [God and Absolute Nothingness], exerted a significant influence on Ueda’s interest in and interpretation of Eckhart.

in mysticism itself, this is what we can speak of as the mode of body-mind-dropped-off mysticism. (USS 8: 38)

### THE NON-MYSTICISM OF MEISTER ECKHART

Ueda defines the core of “mysticism” as the *unio mystica*, the experience of union with God (USS 8: 304). It should be noted in passing that other religious experiences, such as that of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* or of a loving interpersonal rapture, so long as they remain dualistic, would be considered not (yet) perfectly mystical. For Ueda, such experiences of theophany or communion, however extraordinary, are still on the way to a nondual union with the divine.

In his interpretation of Meister Eckhart, Ueda subordinates the “birth motif” to the “breakthrough motif.” In the first, a union with God is brought about by way of the birth of Christ in the soul. In complete passivity, one receives the Son of God in and as one’s own soul. In the words of Paul, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Since the Son is in essence one with the Father, human persons thus become united with the Person of God.

The breakthrough motif is more radical still, demanding as it does an *ekstasis* not only of the soul, but also of the Person of God as the transcendent Creator. Here Eckhart speaks of “letting go of God for the sake of God.”<sup>9</sup> For example:

Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of “God,” for my real being is above God if we take God to be the beginning of created things.... [In] the breaking-through... I come to be free of my will and of God’s will and of all his works and of God himself. (ECKHART 1963, 308; translation by Colledge and McGinn from ECKHART 1981, 202–3)

Eckhart goes on to say that “in this breaking-through I receive that

9. In addition to the first epigraph to this paper, see also Bernard McGinn, who quotes Eckhart as writing that “the greatest honor the soul can pay to God [is] to leave God to himself and to be free of him” (MCGINN 2001, 145).

God and I are one.” But the God that is united with here is no longer the divine Person; it is rather the “Godhead” (*gottheit*) as the impersonal (trans- or prepersonal) essence of divinity. Moreover, elsewhere Eckhart makes clear that, beyond the passive reception of the birth of the Son in the soul, what he calls the “little spark” in the soul actively seeks to unite with the transpersonal Godhead beyond the Trinity, with the divine ground (*grunt*) beyond or before any personification and indeed any determination whatsoever of “God.” Eckhart’s radical mysticism aims not at a communion with an interpersonal Other, for “the spark in the soul... wants nothing but God, naked, just as He is... [It] wants to get into... its simple ground, into the silent desert into which no distinction ever gazed, of Father, Son, or Holy Ghost” (ECKHART 1963, 316). Eckhart indeed sometimes speaks of this “silent desert” of the Godhead in apophatic terms as a “nothingness” (*nicht*).<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Eckhart does not stop at a contemplative absorption in a mystical nothingness. In his account of the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42), Eckhart reverses the traditional interpretation—which uses the story to assert the preeminence of the *vita contemplativa* of Mary over the *vita activa* of Martha—to claim that Martha’s activity, “busy about many things,” is in fact a profounder expression of union with God than the passivity of Mary, who remains seated at Jesus’ feet (ECKHART 1963, 280ff). Martha’s business expresses the “pure activity” (*lüter wirken*) which comes directly out of God (ECKHART 1963, 306). More radically put, the life of this pure activity might be said to arise “without why” out of the silent desert of absolute nothingness.

If one were to ask Martha why she lives a life of good works, the answer could no longer refer to any outside reason or ground, not “for the sake of God” nor “for the sake of the moral law” and certainly not “for

10. In general, Eckhart speaks of “nothingness” in two distinct senses: that of creatures insofar as they are nothing without their Creator; and that of God or the Godhead insofar as He or It transcends all determinations of being. See ECKHART 1963, 328ff. and ECKHART 1978, 122ff. McGinn writes in this regard: “Poised between two forms of nothingness, the *nihil* by way of eminence that is God, and the *nihil* that marks the defect of creatures, Eckhart’s mystical way will be an invitation to the soul to give up the nothingness of its created self in order to become the divine Nothing that is also all things” (MCGINN 2001, 105).

the sake of salvation.” Eckhart writes: “If anyone were to ask a truthful man who works out of his own ground: ‘Why are you performing your works?’ and if he were to give a straight answer, he would say nothing else than: ‘I work, therefore I work’” (ECKHART 1958, 92). When one lives from out of the abyssal *grund* of indistinction, one no longer seeks an external reason for one’s works, for now “life lives out of its own ground and springs from its own source” (ECKHART 1958, 92). For this life of ecstatic engagement, having let go of the subjective inside, there can no longer be, nor is there any need for, an external objective answer to the question “why.” The life of blessedness and justice would be, at bottom, like Angelus Silesius’s rose, without why.<sup>11</sup>

### THE NON-MYSTICISM OF ZEN

Ueda finds profound resonances between Eckhart’s breakthrough beyond the *unio mystica* to an absolute nothingness and back into a pure activity without why (i.e., without explanatory reference to a transcendent ground) and the path of Zen Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> As is well known, Zen discourages reliance on an “Other-power” (*tariki* 他力); indeed, insofar as one is inclined to cling to the Buddha as a transcendent Other, one must “kill the Buddha” along with all other attachments and projections of the ego.<sup>13</sup> Rather than calling on an Other-power, Zen calls for Bodhidharma’s “direct pointing to the human mind, seeing into one’s true nature and becoming a Buddha.” Moreover, as Hakuin reminds us in his *Zazen wasan* 坐禪和讃 [Song of Zazen], this “Buddha-nature” or

11. This paragraph is adapted from a portion of “Releasement to and from God’s Will: Excursus on Meister Eckhart after Heidegger,” chapter six of my *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit* (DAVIS 2007, 135–36).

12. For a summary account in English, see UEDA 1982, 158–59.

13. Not only does Linji famously state, “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha,” but he also most strikingly expresses the Zen negation of dualistic otherworldly salvation as follows: “If you love what is holy and hate what is ordinary, you float and sink in the sea of birth and death.” Or again: “You seek the Buddha and you seek the Dharma. You seek liberation; you seek to leave the triple world. You fools, where do you want to go when you leave the triple world?” (IRIYA 1989, 52, 101); these are modified from the translations in CLEARY 1999, 21, 33–34.



“self-nature” (*jishō* 自性) is in truth “no-nature” (*mushō* 無性); it is not the essence of a substantial being but rather the activity of a spontaneous freedom and a compassionate openness. The Buddha-mind is in truth “no-mind” (*mushin* 無心), which refers not to a meditative absorption in Nothingness, but rather to the sincere “everyday mind” (*byōjōshin* 平常心) of an ecstatically intimate engagement in the activity of the here and now, whether it be washing your bowls, carrying firewood, or carrying a woman across a stream.

This everyday no-mind of total engagement in the here and now is both the nearest thing to and the farthest thing from our usual mental state of being. The “distinguishing feature of Buddhism,” writes Nishitani, “consists in its being a religion of the absolute near side [*zettai-teki shigan* 絶対的此岸].” But because this absolute near-side, like Meister Eckhart’s *Gottheit*, lies “nearer to the self than the self is to itself,” it is necessary to speak of it as a “transcendent near-side” (NKC IO: II2, IO2; NISHITANI 1982, 99, 90).<sup>14</sup> A “trans-descendence” to this absolute near side can be made only by way of radically “stepping back” (*taiho* 退歩) through a thoroughgoing process of negation or letting go.

This theme of “letting go” is pervasive in Zen. Even the thought (conceit) of having let everything go is to be let go of:

Yanyang (Gonyō) asked Zhaozhou (Jōshū): How about when one arrives carrying not a single thing [i.e., having let go of all attachments]? Zhaozhou (Jōshū) responded: Cast that down [i.e., let go of your attachment to the idea of having let go of all attachments]! (YASUTANI 1973, 321)

Dōgen, who also uses the expression “casting down the body-mind” (*shinjin-hōge* 身心放下), most famously speaks of the liberating experience of letting go in terms of a “dropping off the body-mind” (*shinjin-datsuraku* 身心脱落).<sup>15</sup> This casting off is not undertaken for the sake of taking

14. On “trans-descendence” in Nishitani’s philosophy of Zen, see my “The Step Back Through Nihilism: The Radical Orientation of Nishitani Keiji’s Philosophy of Zen,” *Synthesis Philosophica* 37: 139–59 (2004).

15. In the *Hōkyōki* 寶慶記 [Record of Treasury Salutations] Dōgen recounts his enlightenment experience upon hearing Rujing exclaim, “In *zazen* one should straightaway drop off the body-mind!” Dōgen frequently uses this key expression

leave of psycho-physical existence, but rather so that free and unattached use can be made of “the body-mind dropped off” (*datsuraku-shinjin* 脱落身心). In Dōgen’s double formulation, “dropping off the body-mind; the body-mind dropped off,” we find succinctly expressed the circular movement of non-mysticism whereby everyday human existence is radically negated (reifications and attachments dropped off) and then reaffirmed (freely and compassionately picked up again).

This movement of negation/reaffirmation is also succinctly formulated in the Heart Sūtra’s well-known lines, “form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” Emptiness negates attachment to a reification of forms, but is itself empty of independent substantiality. Although it is the identical essence to which all phenomena can be reduced, it is essentially nothing other than the interdependent origination of singular phenomenal events. Hence, as emptiness or absolute nothingness, the One—or rather, as Nishitani puts it, “the None beyond the One” (NKC II: 243)—does not dissolve but rather enables the distinct presencing of the Many.

A monk asked Zhaozhou (Jōshū), “All things are returned to the One; but where does the One return to?” Zhaozhou said, “When I was in Qingzhou (Seishū) I made a hempen shirt. It weighed seven pounds.” (*Hekiganroku* 碧巖錄 [Blue Cliff Record] Case 45; IRIYA 1992, 2: 141)

Following Ueda, we can interpret this dialogue as follows. The One is here the *unio mystica*, the Absolute which embraces the self and all things. In the parlance of Zen, this is expressed as “Heaven and earth and I are of the same root; all things and I are of one body.” But while this mystical absorption may be a necessary moment, it becomes a trap if one sets up a dwelling there. Nanquan (Nansen)’s response to a monk’s reiteration of the above statement was to point to a flower and say: “People these days see this flower as though in a dream” (*Hekiganroku* Case 40; IRIYA 1992, 2: 99–100).<sup>16</sup> To see a flower such as it presents

(for example in the *Genjōkōan* 現成公案 [The Presencing of Truth]), often pairing it with the inverse formulation, “the body-mind dropped off.”

16. See also Nishitani’s reflections on this kōan in NKC 13: 31ff.

itself, not as an object standing over against my ego, and not as a homogeneous part of the Self/Buddha, one must pass through and wake up from the profound yet precarious dream of the One. Ueda writes:

“All things are returned to the One.” To begin with, for Zen too, all is One; and it is necessary to directly stand at this standpoint of the “One” where all things lose their differences and distinctions and the “equality of one taste” is thoroughly apprehended. This experience is indispensable. However, Zen is found neither in the view that all things return to the One nor in the direct experience of that One. If we simply extract this moment, what we have is rather... one more common example of a standpoint of mysticism. Going beyond the standpoint of this provisional precondition, only when it is asked “Where does the One return to?” does a world open up wherein Zen can exhibit its original element... [According to Zen] the truth of the “One” is “None and yet Many” [*mu ni shite ta* 無にして多]. Here, the Many is the variety of the One, while the One is the oneness [*ichinyo* 一如] of the Many; and this dynamic relation itself is the concrete body of the None [i.e., of absolute nothingness]. (USS 8: 5–7)

Ueda is fond of making the seemingly abstract philosophy of this dynamic non-mysticism concrete by way of commenting on the Zen classic, *The Ten Ox Pictures*.<sup>17</sup> In the first six pictures, a boy searches for an ox (his true self), finds its traces, sees it directly, catches and tames it, leads and then rides it home. The seventh picture can be understood as representing both the peaceful power and the potential danger of the mystical union. Here the boy, having merged with and finally “forgotten” the ox (i.e., having overcome the duality between his ego and his true self), sits at peace with himself, or, as some versions have it, sings his praises to the moon (a traditional metaphor for enlightenment). He has realized his enlightened Buddha-Self. But the eighth picture, the empty circle, which Ueda understands as the experience of the place

17. See Ueda’s essay in Ueda Shizuteru and Yanagida Seizan’s 1992, *Jūgyūzu: Jiko no genshōgaku* 十牛図——自己の現象学 [The Ten Ox Pictures: A Phenomenology of the Self] (Tokyo: Chikuma), as well as his 2003 *Jūgyūzu o yomu* 十牛図を読む [Reading the Ten Ox Pictures] (Tokyo: Daihōrinkaku). Both of these texts are included in volume six of USS.

of absolute nothingness, radically breaks through the *unio mystica* and indeed through every possible attachment, every possible reification, every possible dwelling in sanctimonious Self-satisfaction (USS 6: 225ff).

Ueda then reads the last three pictures as a dynamic set: the empty circle of the eighth picture as the absolutely denuding experience of emptiness; the river and tree of the ninth picture as the egoless suchness of natural phenomena; and the sage returning to the marketplace and greeting a boy of the tenth picture as the compassionately engaged interpersonal encounter (USS 6: 208, 263). While the first seven pictures recount the necessary path toward ecstatic mysticism or self-realization, it is the “forgetting the self” (Dōgen) in the leap into a circling between the last three pictures that, for Ueda, portrays the ultimate dynamic of Zen’s de-mysticism.

#### ECKHART’S RESIDUAL MYSTICISM AND ZEN’S THOROUGHGOING NON-MYSTICISM

At the beginning and again near the end of his *Non-Mysticism: Eckhart and Zen*, Ueda tells us that he was inspired by the brief comments made by Rudolf Otto on Eckhart and Zen in an appendix to *Mysticism East and West* (USS 8: 1–2 and 322ff).<sup>18</sup> In reference to a presentation of *The Ten Ox Pictures* by D.T. Suzuki, Otto affirms that “we [Westerners] can at best only gain access to the strange world of experience in [this] mysticism of an entirely peculiar character by starting out from Eckhart, and only from a few of his rarest and deepest moments” (OTTO 1971, 269).

The main focus of Otto’s comparative study is the Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart and the Advaita Vedānta of Śāṅkara. Although in the first part of his book he explores a number of profound similarities between these two, when, in the latter part of his book, he investigates

18. Ueda’s reference is to the third edition of Otto’s *West-östliche Mystik* (OTTO 1971, 269–272; originally published in 1926). Unfortunately, the English edition of Otto’s work, *Mysticism East and West*, translated by Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne (OTTO 1960), does not contain this appendix.

their differences, Otto's preference for the ultimately world-reaffirming vitality of Eckhart's "dynamic mysticism," over against what he sees as the life-denying and static mysticism of Śāṅkara, is clear. In a crucial passage Otto writes:

The goal for Śāṅkara is the stilling of all *karmāni*, all works, all activity of will: it is quietism, *tyāga*, a surrender of the will and of doing, an abandonment of good as of evil works, for both bind man to the world of wandering. The real Being does not work. It would be possible to find even in Eckhart the most astonishingly parallel passages and to make him also into a quietist, and we ourselves have done it above. It would then be possible to find counter-passages, which show him to be the most zealous actualist. He could be drawn in this way into the most hopeless contradictions, but there would be no realization of the profound unity of his fundamental intuition. In some ways, this intuition reminds one of the paradoxical Mahāyāna doctrine: "Nirvāna is samsāra." Eckhart's position is neither mystical quietism nor secular activity, but an identity of the deepest unity and the most vivid multiplicity, and therefore of the most profound quiet and the most vital motion.... Both masters seek and behold unity and the Eternal One in contrast to multiplicity, but with this difference: the relationship of the One to the many is for Śāṅkara one of strict exclusion, but for Eckhart one of the most live polarity. Śāṅkara—in his *parā vidyā*—is a strict monist, but not like Eckhart, a philosopher of identity, as regards the One and the many. (OTTO 1960, 191–92)<sup>19</sup>

Eckhart's paradoxical coaffirmations of the One and the Many, and of profound stillness in the midst of vibrant activity, do indeed bear striking resemblances to the non-mysticism of Zen.

19. I will not attempt to examine here whether Otto does justice to Śāṅkara, other than to note that, when discussing the source of the world of multiplicity in Advaita Vedānta, he tends to downplay the more world-affirmative connotations of *māyā* as "appearance" in the sense of the "divine play" (*līlā*) of Brahman's self-manifestation, and instead emphasizes the more world-negating connotations of "illusion" based on human ignorance (*avidyā*). For Otto's passing yet emphatic contrast of the dynamism of "the Taoist and Zen schools of China" along with Mahāyāna Buddhism in general to Śāṅkara and "the massive substantiality of the Brahman idea," see OTTO 1960, 166–67.

But let us look further at Otto's account of the structure and orientation of Eckhart's thought. He explains the dynamism in Eckhart's mysticism along the same lines as what Bernard McGinn has more recently called the "metaphysics of flow," made up of a circular movement between a "flowing out" (*exitus, effluxus, uzvliezen*) from the indistinct Godhead and a "flowing back" (*reditus, refluxus, inganc*) to this ineffable Source (MCGINN 2001; ECKHART 1981, 30–31). In this regard Otto writes:

God is, in Himself, tremendous life movement. Out of undifferentiated unity He enters into the multiplicity of personal life and persons, in whom the world and therewith the multiplicity of the world is contained. Out of this He returns, back into the eternal original unity. "The river flows into itself." But it is not an error to be corrected by Him, that He is eternally going out from and entering "into" Himself; it is a fact that has meaning and value—as the expression of life manifesting its potentiality and fullness. The issuing forth becomes itself the goal again of that process enriched by the course of its circuit. (OTTO 1960, 188)

One might think that this "metaphysics of flow" bears striking resemblances to the circulation found in Zen's path of non-mysticism. And yet there remains, I think, a crucial difference in primary and ultimate orientation.

Despite the world-affirming character of Eckhart's thought, his metaphysics of flow begins and ends with the Godhead as a trans-worldly source and eschatological end of the created world.<sup>20</sup> The path of Zen, on the other hand, begins and ends with the everyday world. Life in the midst of the nondual multiplicity of the world is affirmatively engaged in by way of passing through and beyond the One, as opposed to the world being affirmed as an outflow of and pathway back to the Godhead. Whereas Eckhart's metaphysics of flow begins and ends with the

20. Otto admits that, despite the fact that "the whole idea of a 'beatific vision' which was the eschatological ideal of his time—of Thomas and Dante—is thoroughly alien to him," nevertheless, "Of course [Eckhart] would agree that what is begun here will later be fulfilled," in other words, that there is "the difference between complete actuality there and its partial achievement here" (OTTO 1960, 230).

Godhead beyond God in Heaven, Zen's non-mysticism begins and ends here on earth, with the oak tree in the garden, with three pounds of flax in our hands, or even with a shit-stick lying at our feet.

According to Ueda, Eckhart "comes to point to almost the same world as Zen" when, beyond the "death/rebirth" found in dying to the self for the sake of being reborn in the life of God, he intimates a thoroughgoing "great death" and a rebirth from out of an absolute nothingness (USS 6: 303). But after exploring their profound resonances, Ueda goes on to mark a number of critical distinctions between Eckhart and Zen, distinctions which imply that the latter offers in the end a more thoroughgoing path of non-mysticism.

To begin with, Eckhart's sole concern is said to be with the soul's relation to God, and he pays little attention to the world of nature (USS 8: 151), whereas, for Zen, natural phenomena express the very concreteness of the non-egoity of the true self (USS 8: 77). To be sure, Eckhart does not only denigrate "creatures" as nothing (in the negative sense of a privation of being) on their own, but also talks of learning to see all things "in God" (ECKHART 1963, 89–90). But unlike Zen he does not let go of God so as to simply affirm the suchness of natural phenomena, that is, things such as they present themselves as they are within nothing but the empty expanse of absolute nothingness. Quoting Eckhart as saying: "To one who looks at a stick in the divine light, the stick looks like an angel," Ueda writes: "Eckhart's affirmation of the stick is not an affirmation of the stick as stick, but of the stick as an angel in divine light. Zen Buddhism speaks more straightforwardly: 'Mountain as mountain, water as water?...' (UEDA 1982, 160).

Moreover, for Eckhart, the human interpersonal relation remains mediated by the soul's relation to God, whereas, for Zen, the place of interpersonal betweenness is ultimately nothing but the open expanse of the empty circle. Ueda illustrates this point by way of comparing two pictures: on the one hand, the tenth of the ox pictures, which shows the old recluse returning to the town and greeting a young boy within nothing but the empty circle; and, on the other hand, a painting of the Mary and Martha story, which shows Martha working in the kitchen in the foreground, and Mary kneeling before Jesus in the background. Even as Martha turns from contemplation (mysticism) to action (non-

mysticism), the significance of her activity appears to remain anchored by this withdrawing yet still present reference to transcendence (USS 8: 133–5; see also UEDA 1965, 146ff).

In the final analysis, Ueda concludes, Eckhart’s “nothingness” remains a negative theological sign pointing towards an inexpressibly higher Being: “In the case of Eckhart, because of the excellence of the supra-being (*Überwesen*) of God’s being, it is called nothingness” (USS 6: 304–5). When all is said and done, Eckhart’s nothingness of the absolute (*zettai no mu* 絶対の無) is an adjective modifying a substance. In contrast, Zen’s absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無) is a verb referring to “the activity of emptying out” (*kūkai no hataraki*) (USS 8: 147; see also UEDA 1965, 165). In short, despite Eckhart’s most radical moments of breaking through the strictures of mysticism into the freedom of non-mysticism, Ueda finds metaphysical residues in his thought which impede the realization of the suchness of things in absolute nothingness, and which inhibit the free and compassionate life without (the question) why.

Only in Zen does Ueda find the nothing pushed through to a transcendence of transcendence, a negation of negation that enables a profound and intimate reaffirmation of the everyday. He writes:

The negation of negation in Zen Buddhism is thus the “beyond negation” and, “at one with this,” a sheer affirmation, that is, an utter affirmation of the everyday as such. It is a matter of the unity of infinite negation and utter affirmation; the unity of the “thither of the thither [*jenseits des Jenseits*]” and the “hither of the hither [*diessaits des Diessaits*].” (UEDA 1965, 152)

Whereas in “Eckhart’s thought it is the category of ‘substance’ that is, in the last analysis, definitive,” Zen’s absolute nothingness “dissolves substance-thinking.”

Put in philosophical terms, [absolute nothingness] refers to the negation of negation, which entails a pure movement in two directions at the same time: (1) the negation of negation in the sense of a further denial of negation that does not come back around to affirmation but opens up into an endlessly open nothingness; and (2) the negation of negation in the sense of a return to affirmation without any trace of mediation. (UEDA 1982, 160–61)



## THE QUESTION OF ETHICS

According to Ueda, as we have seen, despite all its heretical radicality Eckhart's thought still harbors orthodox residues of divine transcendence and substantiality. But let us now ask: What is at stake in either, on the one hand, leaving a trace of transcendence in the picture, or, on the other hand, wiping away all such traces? To be sure, if it is a question of the reaffirmation of the here and now, a question of the immediacy of engagement with phenomena such as they are, then we may indeed conclude that Zen offers a more thoroughgoing path of non-mysticism. But what if it is a question of ethics? Does ethics require at least a background trace of substantial transcendence?

The problem for Zen would apparently be opposite of that for Advaita Vedānta. According to Otto, Śankara's mysticism is ethically deficient, not because it radically affirms life in this world, but rather because it totally negates it. Śankara's mysticism is too otherworldly; it abandons not only bad action, but all action. "The Mukta, the redeemed, who has attained *ekatā* or unity with the eternal Brahman, is removed from all works, whether good or evil"; whereas Eckhart's "wonderfully liberating ethic develops with greater strength from the ground of his... mysticism of the surrender of the personal will to the active and eternal will" (OTTO 1960, 225). According to Otto's interpretation at least, Eckhart's mysticism would then not completely let go of the divine Will of God as a referential ground for ethical activity.

According to divine law ethics, an action is good insofar as it accords with God's Will. This notion of God's Will not only preserves transcendence, it also connects it with immanence. And precisely here arises our question for Zen's non-mysticism: Does ethics require such an otherworldly reference? The answer might appear to be yes. After all, do not ethical judgments and decisions depend on making distinctions between good and evil; and do not such distinctions require a transcendent anchor, such as God as the source and measure of all goodness, or the Idea of Justice as the standard by which just and unjust actions are judged? It has been suggested that many Westerners might see emptiness (*śūnyatā*) or absolute nothingness as "ill-suited as a basis for a system of ethics. It does not offer a God or a divine Will that reveals the

good, gives laws, directs events, or persuades people in the direction of greater value” (IVES 1992, 39). Having let go of God and His Will for the sake of absolute nothingness, and for the sake of a radical affirmation of the suchness of “all beings whatsoever” (USS 8: 152), does the non-mysticism of Zen then not leave any grounds for making fundamental distinctions between good and evil?

We may learn to let go of attachment to the beauty of roses and of hate toward the repulsiveness of maggots, but would it not be clearly perverse to no longer evaluatively discriminate between beautiful natural scenery and a malicious scene of torture? From the standpoint of Zen, one could respond here that a metaphysical reification of Emptiness as a static One that simply obliterates the possibility of making evaluative distinctions is a case of what is called “bad equality” (*aku-byōdō* 悪平等). Wallowing in a disengaged affirmation of the suchness of all phenomena without distinction, including the scene of torture, would be just as pernicious a misunderstanding of emptiness as is the “emptiness sickness” (*kūbyō* 空病) that frees one from a reification of beings only to plunge one into a nihilistic annihilationism.

According to the basic teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, a bodhisattva must not abide in nirvāna (emptiness), or rather, true nirvāna must be found in the midst of saṃsāra (interdependent origination). Zen follows Nāgārjuna in thinking that the ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*) is but the clear recognition of, and unattached compassionate engagement with, conventional truth (*samvṛti satya*) understood as conventional truth. While good and evil, right and wrong, may ultimately be “empty” (i.e., interdependent and conditional) distinctions, they are nevertheless conventionally very real and very important.

Masao Abe makes this point by playing on Weixin’s famous three stages of insight, where a mountain is first seen as a mountain (i.e., as a conceptual reification), then not as a mountain (i.e., as empty of independent substantiality), then really as a mountain (i.e., in the suchness of its interdependent origination). In terms of ethical distinctions, Abe reformulates this to read:

Before Buddhist practice, I thought “good is good, evil is evil.” When I had an insight into Buddhist truth, I realized “good is not good,

evil is not evil.” But now, awakening to true Emptiness I say, “good is really good; evil is really evil.” (ABE 1995, 199)

The step from the first to the second stage does indeed entail a “thinking neither good nor evil,” a suspension of all reified dualisms along with all “picking and choosing,” for we discover that even our cherished ethical distinctions are habitually made from the standpoint of our egocentric (and ethnocentric) values. Nevertheless, in terms of the process of non-mysticism, while the breakthrough beyond the *unio mystica* (union with God as the Good) into the experience of absolute nothingness or emptiness may dissolve all reified distinctions, this breakthrough in turn returns us to the midst of everyday life. And everyday life certainly involves, once more, drawing distinctions and making ethical decisions.

Still, one may wonder, is an acceptance of the necessity of making ethical judgments as part and parcel of engaged living in a world of conventional truth all that Zen’s non-mysticism has to offer ethics? For it seems that we are still left with the question: What principle would guide such “non-discriminating discrimination” (*mufunbetsu no funbetsu* 無分別の分別)? Good and evil are interdependent contraries (such that it does not make sense to absolutize either one), and their sense depends on any number of situational variables. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there is a right and a wrong thing to do in many specific situations. The question is: How does one come to know what is right when and where?

## A ZEN PATH OF VIRTUE ETHICS

It could be said that there is in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition at least one cardinal rule to be followed in making ethical decisions, namely the first of the Four Great Vows: “However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to liberate them all” (*sbujō muhen seigando* 衆生無辺誓願度). Whether a particular act is good or not could be determined in terms of whether it helps or hinders the fulfillment of this vow.<sup>21</sup> Beyond

21. See Masao Abe’s attempts to correlate this “horizontal dimension” of compassion and teleology with the “vertical dimension” of wisdom and enlightenment in “Ethics and Social Responsibility in Buddhism,” in his *Zen and the Modern World*,

this general rule, however, I agree with a number of scholars that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a kind of “virtue ethics.” I also think that this is how the relation between Ueda’s non-mysticism and ethics is best understood. In order to make this point, it will be helpful to first review and comment on some highlights in the literature on ethics in (Zen) Buddhism.

According to Damien Keown, “the growing consensus among scholars is that Buddhist ethics bears a greater resemblance to virtue ethics than any other Western theory” (KEOWN 2005, 25).<sup>22</sup> Virtue ethics, as first developed in the West by Aristotle, focuses on developing the character of the moral agent through habituation, as opposed to developing intellectual formulas for decision-making based either on rational rules of categorical obligation (deontology) or on calculations of painful and pleasurable consequences (utilitarianism). According to virtue ethics, only a good person, equipped with a non-formalizable “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*), will be able to make good decisions in the concrete and complex situations of real life.

Although he does not employ the term, Christopher Ives implies that Zen is concerned with virtue ethics when he writes that “Zen promotes what might be called a ‘foundational’ ethic, for it concentrates on fundamental ways of being as opposed to principles of good and evil applied to extreme situations” (IVES 1992, 3). “The pivotal question,” he later adds, “is that of what one should be, not what one should do” (IVES 1992, 109). The point here is certainly not that what we do is unimportant, but rather that our actions are fundamentally determined by our way of being. The primary purpose of Zen practice is thus not to learn to obey rules for action, but rather, in the words of a modern Zen master, “the perfection of character.”<sup>23</sup> Robert Carter also agrees that we should understand Buddhist ethics in terms of virtue ethics, claiming

edited by Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 24–35.

22. Other noteworthy studies which compellingly interpret Buddhist ethics in terms of virtue ethics include Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004); and COOPER and JAMES 2005.

23. Attributed to Yamada Kōun by Robert Aitken in AITKEN 1984, 155; cited in CARTER 2001, 107.

that its central feature “is not prohibition, but transformation resulting in an incredibly strong compassionate identification with all other beings, and an intense desire to eliminate their suffering and to rejoice in their happiness.” Ethical behavior in Buddhism is ideally “occasioned from the inside of a person, rather than the result of external attempts at prohibition and enforcement” (CARTER 2001, 84–85).

Recent Zen teachers in the West, such as Robert Aitken and Philip Kapleau, have agreed that, while the Buddhist precepts are necessary guidelines for as-yet-unenlightened practitioners, they “are not moral commandments handed down by an omniscient or divine being” (KAPLEAU 1980, 231–32; quoted in CARTER 2001, 107), but rather codifications of the spontaneous acts of enlightened persons. “Precepts are useful for the Zen student, who seeks to internalize them, to find their source in the mind, and to make morality altogether familiar” (AITKEN 1984, 156; quoted in CARTER 2001, 107). The person found at the end of this process, however, “doesn’t imitate the precepts; they imitate him” (KAPLEAU 1980, 231–32; quoted in CARTER 2001, 107). This view has traditional moorings, notably in Dōgen’s treatment of the famous lines of the *Dhammapada*, which he says are first of all understood as a normative *injunction*, “Do no evil; do good,”<sup>24</sup> but which he says should ultimately be reread as an actual *description* of enlightened acts, “The nonproduction of evil; the performance of good” (DŌGEN 1990, vol. 2: 230–46).<sup>25</sup>

We should not of course overlook the fact that there does also exist a more radically antinomian element in Mahāyāna Buddhism. While the second of the ten stages (*bhūmi*) of the *bodhisattva* is morality (*śīla*), the seventh is “skillful means” (*upāya-kausalya*), which is often understood to allow and even require that a *bodhisattva* at this stage break the precepts whenever compassion (*karunā*) so demands. Indeed, “the doctrine of skillful means authorizes a *bodhisattva* to commit the ‘Ten Bad Actions,’ including killing, stealing and lying, in the service of com-

24. A recent translation of the whole verse from the Pali reads: “To shun evil; To do good; To purify one’s heart; This is the teaching of all Buddhas.” *The Dhammapada*, trans. Ananda Maitreya (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1995), 52.

25. For a clear and insightful commentary on this section of the *Shōbōgenzō*, see

passion.” Still, we should bear in mind that “the *bodhisattva* violates the precepts if, and only if, he believes that such a violation will be justified by the suffering it alleviates” (COOPER and JAMES 2005, 63–64) and that such transgressions are motivated by the virtue of compassion; it is for the sake of alleviating suffering that the legalism of the precepts is overridden, not for the sake of demonstrating a transcendence of good and evil altogether.<sup>26</sup>

### BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL, AND BACK AGAIN

However, as we have seen, does not the path of Zen quite explicitly lead one beyond good and evil? If, in a sense, it does, it also entails that one must not abide there. Let us now consider this crucial issue a bit more carefully. It is first of all necessary to understand the sense in which clinging to distinctions of good and evil is thought to be problematic. Sengcan tells us that “the ultimate Way is without difficulty, it just eschews picking and choosing. Only refrain from clinging, desire and hatred, and it will become clear and bright” (AKIZUKI 1991, 8). And Huineng famously prods: “Without thinking of good, without thinking of evil... what is [your] original face?” (*Mumonkan* 無門關 [Gateless Barrier] Case 23; NISHIMURA 1994, 98). In order to realize the ultimate Way or to awaken to one’s “original face,” even one’s cherished distinctions between good and evil must be let go, along with the ego that cherishes them. The zealous moralist who does not pass through this radical experience of letting go would remain driven by the three poisons of desirous attachment to whatever has been posited as categorically good, hate of whatever has been posited as categorically bad, and delusion with respect to the impossibility of categorically reifying reality into discrete entities on whose essences fundamentalistic ethi-

Thomas P. Kasulis, *Zen Action/Zen Person* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1981), 93ff.

26. Due to limitations not only of space but also of familiarity, I will forego a discussion of ethical transgressions in Tantric Buddhism. The question would be whether even these remain within the purview of cultivating and expressing the virtue of compassion.

cal judgments can be passed. There is a sense, then, in which the “great death” of Zen takes one into the uncharted and eternally unchartable region of “vast emptiness, nothing holy” (Bodhidharma), where there is “originally not a single thing” (Huineng) much less a table of commandments for judging things.

Nevertheless, we must also pay attention to Huineng’s more subtle statement: “*Although you see... evil and good, evil things and good things, you must not throw them aside, nor must you cling to them, nor must you be stained by them, but you must regard them as being just like the empty sky*” (YAMPOLSKY 1967, 146–47; my emphasis). Ives interprets this to mean that “although distinctions must be broken through to open up Awakening, they are said to be reestablished in their proper place: as pragmatically useful distinctions rather than as unchanging, metaphysically grounded essences” (IVES 1992, 48). The point would be to make distinctions, including ethical judgments, while remaining unattached to them and without reifying them. In this context Ives quotes Abe as stressing that the affirmation of things in their suchness is “not an uncritical affirmation of the given situation. On the contrary, it is a great and absolute affirmation beyond—and thus not excluding—any critical, objective, and analytical distinction” (ABE 1990, 32; quoted in IVES 1992, 44).

To be sure, the actual Zen tradition has hardly always lived up to this ideal potential of reestablishing critical ethical discernment. In fact, as “Ichikawa Hakugen, [Brian] Daizen Victoria and others have pointed out, the most conspicuous theme in this history is the close connection between Zen and the political status quo” (IVES 1992, 67).<sup>27</sup> In critical response to this history it must be clearly stressed today that the breakthrough to an experience of emptiness and the radical equality of things is never on its own sufficient for ethical deliberation on how to properly engage in the world of differences. D. T. Suzuki recog-

27. Along with chapters three and four of IVES 1992, for a chilling exposition of the uncritical support given by Zen masters and institutions to the Japanese war effort, see VICTORIA 1997. Also see James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo (eds.), *Rude Awakenings: Zen, The Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

nized this when, after the war, he amended his earlier view—according to which the enlightened person is like a “golden-haired lion” who is “autonomous,” “for he has nothing behind him, he is ‘the whole truth’” (SUZUKI 1959, 348–9; quoted in CARTER 2001, 116)—to say that “by itself satori is unable to judge the right and wrong of war. With regard to disputes in the ordinary world, it is necessary to employ intellectual discrimination” (SUZUKI 1970, 411; quoted in VICTORIA 1997, 148–49; also see CARTER 1992, 119). *The radical path of Zen can deconstruct and revitalize thoughtful discrimination and ethical deliberation, but it cannot replace them.* On the other hand, it could also be said that rational deliberation can clear a space for intuitive spontaneity and compassionate insight, but it cannot replace them. Both legs are needed to walk.

In any case, in order to understand the proper place of ethical deliberation in Zen, and in order to critically reform the actual role (or lack thereof) it has played, we need to be clear on how the transcendence of good and evil in Zen practice and enlightenment should ideally relate to a renewed ability to engage in ethical judgment. To summarize and supplement what has been said above in this regard, let me quote here a passage where Ives concisely addresses this issue:

Zen talk of overcoming good and evil thus signifies several things. First, Zen starts with the subjectivity that operates primarily in terms of the self-other split and sets up things in the world as objects of attraction or aversion, as good or evil. To liberate oneself from this subjectivity and the suffering it causes, and to enable oneself to function freely to eradicate “evil” without being hindered by certain forms of self-attachment, one must move beyond discriminating consciousness and its distinctions, including the distinction between good and evil. Second, in breaking beyond such consciousness to non-distinction, one awakens to the larger context of existence which has no inherent good or evil and which is will-less and spontaneous, but one does not linger there: one reemerges as a “self,” as subjectivity able to reflect and discriminate, yet grounded in the realization of the larger matrix. Third, one gains an understanding of normal distinctions between good and evil and right and wrong as pragmatically important though not indicative of essences. (IVES 1992, 49–50)



In order to act compassionately as a human in the world, as is portrayed in the tenth ox picture, it is necessary to first transcend the “all too human” egocentric manner of discrimination between good (attraction) and evil (aversion), and to pass through the “will-less and spontaneous” realm of the natural world depicted in the ninth ox picture. But just as we should not “linger where the Buddha is,” we must also “pass quickly over where the Buddha is not” and return to a non-egoistic ecstatic/instatic engagement in the everyday world of weighing “three pounds of flax” and making concrete ethical judgments of right and wrong.

It is in the sense of this circular process of transcending and reentering the conventional world of evaluative discrimination that I think we can best understand the ethical implications of Ueda’s non-mysticism. What is crucial, however, is that we first acknowledge here a meta-level distinction between, on the one hand, the ultimate value of maintaining the movement of the process of transcendence/descendence itself, and, on the other hand, the provisional values operative at the conventional level. In other words, in saying that all specific evaluative distinctions need to be repeatedly deconstructed and critically reevaluated by way of both transcending and returning to the conventional world of good and evil, what is implied is that *maintaining this dynamic process itself is a root source of goodness, while inhibiting it is a root source of badness.*

Putting this now in terms of Ueda’s thought, we could say that the *unhindered movement* of the process of non-mysticism is a wellspring of goodness, that is, of compassionate intention and skillful ethical judgment. An effect of this unhindered process would be that decision-making is performed from the empathetic perspective of the ecstatically engaged non-ego, the self that is attached neither to the ego, nor to a reified account of good/evil, nor to the experience of absolute indistinction. On the other hand, stopping either at the ego or at mystical union could be understood as a root source of badness.

Stopping before the process starts, namely at an attachment to the self-assertive ego, is more obviously a potential source of badness. But why would stopping at a union with the divine be ethically problematic? Ueda writes: “If one stops at the place where the accent is on the union, this becomes so-called mysticism. Here various perversions and deformations of mysticism frequently arise... [and] in extreme cases this

can lead to the origin of so-called cults” (USS 8: 39). In such cases, “the ‘union between God and me’ gets dragged in the direction of the ‘me’, and the danger of God serving as a means to inflate the ‘me’ arises” (USS 8: 330). The mystical union must in the end be seen as an expedient means for letting go of the ego; otherwise, it can all too easily end up serving to inflate it. And the only thing more powerfully pernicious than egoism is Egoism.

I have suggested that we can understand the unhindered movement through mysticism to de-mysticism as a radical source of goodness, that is, of wise and compassionate decision-making. To be sure, this principle of maintaining a dynamic process does not provide us with a list of specific ethical laws. Indeed, it remains antinomian in spirit, insofar as it cultivates a response-ability to the presence of unique singularities rather than a formula for subsuming particulars under universal rules. Yet if we think in terms of virtue ethics, it promises something much more vital. Precisely because of Zen’s abandonment of fixed transcendental norms, the character of the ethical agent becomes central. And non-mysticism does indeed provide a radical path for the cultivation of the pivotal virtue of ecstatic compassion, along with—as a condition for the cultivation and exercise of practical wisdom—an instatic engagement with the singular contingencies of the here and now.

#### EVERYDAY PRACTICES OF NON-MYSTICISM

One might be left here with the impression that Zen’s path of non-mysticism—while it may indeed also offer its practitioners a profound source of ethical virtue—is first of all a profoundly demanding religious endeavor. To be sure, to follow this path to the end demands the ultimate experience of what Zen calls the “great death”; the ego must completely perish, not, to be sure, by way of an escapist death to life, but rather by way of an unreserved dying into the nondual activity of engaged living. Yet, one may wonder, is the pathway to this utter reengagement in life then only open to the very few who are capable, not just of becoming mystics, but furthermore of breaking through and beyond mysticism?

In fact, however, Ueda often brings this apparently lofty path of non-mysticism back down to the earthly level of the everyday. To begin with, he suggests that the dynamic circling between the final three ox pictures can be understood, not just as a distant course for enlightened masters, but also in terms of the basic threefold Zen practice of *zazen* 坐禪, *samu/angya* 作務·行脚, and *sanzen* 參禪 (USS 6: 248). In the silence and stillness of seated meditation (*zazen*), one experientially embodies the emptiness of letting everything go; in daily work (*samu*) or on the path of pilgrimage (*angya*), one nondually enters into and learns from the natural way of things; and in the face-to-face interviews with the teacher (*sanzen*), one learns how to engage in the “not one and not two” betweenness of interpersonal encounter.

Moreover, Ueda does not restrict this movement through ego-abandonment towards reaffirmation of nature and community to the institutional practice of Zen. For example, he suggests that it is not just formal meditation, but also the simple everyday act of breathing in and out which can be experienced as an exhaustive exhalation of the ego and a reaffirmative inhalation of the open expanse of the world (USS 6: 278). Breathing out, I let go of my attachment to my ego and its self-centered environs; breathing in, I affirm the nondual unity of my true self and the encompassing world.

Ueda also frequently uses the everyday Japanese greeting of the bow as an example to illustrate how mutual self-negation—the emptying of all ego-centered presumptions and agendas—returns us to the openness of a radical nothingness that we share in common beneath the roots of our personal being. When one sincerely bows, “by way of making oneself into a nothingness, one returns into the infinite depths of that ‘between’ where there is neither an I nor a you.... Then, when we rise again so as to come back to life anew and face one another, this becomes a matter of, as Dōgen puts it: thus am I; thus are you” (UEDA 1991, 67; see also USS 6: 274–75 and IO: 107ff). Rising up together out of nowhere, I do not greet you as either a friend or a foe of my ego, nor even as a fellow child of God, but rather, just such as you are.

With such models and suggestions, drawn from the daily routine of Zen monks and the customary greeting of the Japanese, the task for us

would be to find and establish in our own lives an everyday practice of non-mysticism.

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