

## The Two Paths

From: *The Way of Paradox – Spiritual Life as Taught by Meister Eckhart*

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Pages 11-13

Perhaps we feel ready, now, to set forth on our spiritual journey, under the guidance of Meister Eckhart. But before we do, there is something we must bear in mind. There are two quite different paths to our spiritual goal, and only one of them is Eckhart's. Whether we choose his path, or the other, will depend upon our own temperament and natural bent.

If, as many have done, we compare the spiritual journey to the ascent of a mountain, the two paths appear in this way: the first is a winding path, approaching the summit gradually, pausing at each stage. It is slow, but thorough. The second assaults the summit directly, ascending the steep rock-face without hesitation or delay. The descent afterwards may be slow and gradual, but the initial ascent is not. It is a dangerous path, but it attains its goal and is right for those who are suited to it.

The first path is that of much modern psychoanalysis, perhaps especially of the Freudian and Jungian type. The penetration of the deeper levels of the mind, the filtering through into consciousness of the contents of the unconscious mind, is slow and gradual. As the unconscious reveals itself through dreams and symbols, and through impulses never experienced previously, none of these "revelations" are dismissed or discarded. They are to be pondered over, accepted and worked through gradually, though without letting ourselves be trapped or overwhelmed by them. If we patiently and persistently follow this serpentine path into the depths of ourselves, we shall discover at the cost of some danger, unsuspected sources of energy for good or for ill – buried treasures, guarded by "dragons" and "gnomes"; and if we follow the path right to the end, beyond the merely psychological, we shall finally come to the deepest level of all, the "treasure hidden in the field" of which the gospel speaks (Mt 13:44) – the pure, undifferentiated consciousness, stripped of all that is egotistical and personal, the central core of our nature, where the light of God shines.

This path is not only taken by psychiatry. It is taught and practiced, seemingly, in certain schools of Tantric Buddhism and, also, it seems, has been trodden by certain Christian mystics of the visionary and imaginative type, such as Julian of Norwich and Henry Suso, for whom the revelation of God comes through visions, symbols thrown up from the deep levels of the mind, which are meditated on until their meaning has been extracted.

This is a great path, but it is not the path of Eckhart.

His approach, like that of Zen, perhaps, is direct. It aims straight for the goal, the deepest layer of the mind, the pure essence of consciousness which is the Image of God in us. If, as we penetrate further towards the center, images and symbols arise, promises of new desires and new possibilities, they are to be ignored and passed by, until the Central Core is reached, where

we can become rooted and grounded in God. Then, strengthened and enlightened by that, we can ascend slowly to the light, unlocking caverns and treasures on our way, if that seems right. But the first prerequisite is to find God in the deepest core of ourselves, and this is done by detachment, by letting go of all in us that is not God, until a spark of awareness awakens in us, which Eckhart calls “the Birth of God in the soul.” There is nothing final or definitive about it; it is only a start. There remains the ascent, the gradual exploring of all that was previously neglected. As this process goes on, the spark of consciousness steadily grows until it gradually illuminates the whole mind. It is the work of a lifetime.

This is the path of apophatic [i.e., *via negativa*] mysticism, as taught and practiced by Evagrius, by the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and by all spiritual teachers within that tradition. This is the path which Eckhart outlines in his sermons and treatises.

It is a path which is right for many people, in an age of darkness and confusion. Therefore we can speak of it, in the title of this chapter, as “Light in the Darkness.” The darkness is not only the insecurity and peril of the present age; it is also the darkness which is within ourselves. The Light is not merely guidance and help in solving our problems in the external world; it is the dawning within us of the awareness of God.

If this path of Eckhart’s interests us, then we may proceed. The first thing we have to learn how to open what is often called today the Wisdom-Eye, but which St. Paul calls “the Eye of the Heart.” In other words, we have to learn a new way of *knowing*. This is the subject of the next chapter.