

Living the Paradox of the Spiritual Life

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

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... if we look closer we shall find that this passage [*from a Meister Eckhart sermon*] has a certain “icon-like” quality, in that it is not meant simply to teach a doctrine but also to kindle a certain kind of awareness. In other words, we can profitably use [*this passage from a Meister Eckhart sermon*] as a support for meditation and prayer, because if we ponder over it slowly and carefully, letting its phrases resound in the mind, we shall begin to have a glimmering awareness of a world beyond that in which we normally live. This effect, which we might almost call “poetic” and “magical,” is due to Eckhart’s special way of thinking and of using language. It is this which enables him not merely to *talk about* spiritual realities, but at the same time to kindle in his listeners an awareness that these realities truly exist, that we have only to reach out in order to be able to touch them. Things which previously we had only heard or read about, now begin actually to impinge on our consciousness, and the spiritual quest emerges as something possible and eminently desirable.

We need to learn this way of thinking and speaking about spiritual truths, so typical of Eckhart, because our own spiritual lives will then be refreshed by it. The thing to grasp about it is that it is founded on *antithesis* and *paradox*, the contrast and clash between opposites. We see this clearly in the quoted extract [*given earlier and taken from a sermon by Meister Eckhart*]. [*This extract*] begins with practical counsel about how we live in the world we actually find ourselves in, dominated by “self” and “all things” which we have to detach from. Then it swings right away from the earthly pole of existence and plunges us into the Mystery of God, with whom we hope to unite. Then we are swung back into our own world again and plunged into the human world, to explore the depths of our own souls, where there is a great treasure waiting to be uncovered. Finally, we are lifted out of the human world and plunged again into the depths of God, the abyss of mystery which is his nature. This swinging rhythm or oscillation between unlike poles, breathing in and breathing out, speaking and remaining silent, doing and resting, is the basic rhythm of the spiritual life, and it is only within that rhythm that we can know God, experience him, think and talk about him. If we abandon ourselves to this rhythm, let ourselves be carried by it, it will gradually kindle within us the spark of Divine Knowledge. It will open for us the Wisdom-Eye, the Eye of the Heart.

That is why we call the way taught by Eckhart the Way of Paradox, because it is founded on the tension between opposites. If the Eye of the Heart were fully open, and we had attained complete Divine Knowledge, we would see that these contraries are all contained finally in an all-embracing *unity*; God and Man, pleasure and pain, success and failure, are ultimately all one in God. But we cannot reach this perception save in and through the tension of opposites. That is why Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, a profound thinker and enthusiastic reader of Eckhart came to conceive God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coming together of opposites.

This tension has to be experienced on two levels: first, in daily living; second, in thought and speech. Another word for it is *crucifixion*, for the Cross is the perfect symbol of the tension between opposites, and the all-embracing unity in which they are reconciled. In daily living, the tension is experienced as detachment, the crucifixion of the will. But there also has to be a crucifixion of *thought* and *speech*. The idea that mind and language have to be crucified may strike us as rather strange at first; but if we pause for a moment we shall see that it must be so. I am destined for union with God; I was created for that; and will find fulfilment only in that. But I cannot attain this by remaining what I am now; I have to die somehow to the lie I am living, so as to find the new life in God. This death and rebirth must involve my *whole* self, not only my daily life, but also my thought and speech. No part of me, not even my mind and tongue, can get through to God without passing through the clash of contraries.

That is why Eckhart talks constantly in antitheses and paradoxes. The deepest truth of God can be grasped only in this way. Therefore, in his preaching and writing, Eckhart keeps us perpetually swinging from one pole to the other; he will not let us rest in either. To rest in one and forget the other is to lose hold of the truth, which is essentially paradoxical. God is everything, yet nothing; distinct from creation, yet indistinct from it; there is a tension between action and contemplation, withdrawal and involvement, silence and speech, being and nothingness. Having made a statement, Eckhart will often go on to deny it; but the truth lies neither in the affirmation nor in the denial, but in the tug-of-war between the two. This is baffling for the normal human mind, which works on the logical Principle of Contradiction, according to which a proposition cannot be both true and false at one and the same time. But according to Eckhart, that is exactly what the highest truth is. It transcends the Principle of Contradiction, and can be grasped only through paradox.

This way of opening the Wisdom-Eye through paradox and the clash of contraries will remind many people of Zen; and indeed there is a certain similarity, though Eckhart's way is totally Christian, founded on the mystery of the cross and the resurrection, in which the perception of unity in the clash of opposites is realized to the highest degree. Yet the radiance and lightness of touch in Eckhart are reminiscent of Zen. The purpose of paradox, too, is the same in both cases: it is not to deny or destroy the human mind with nonsense but to bring the normal human intellect to the awareness of its own limitations and thus open it up to the possibility of a higher kind of knowing. If we accept this, and follow Eckhart in his Way of Paradox, we shall obtain a glimpse of that knowledge which was his. If we view the Christian Revelation and seek to live it, in accordance with this Way, we shall find that many mysteries will be unlocked for us and our whole spiritual life will be energized. ...