

“THE EQUANIMOUS ECKHART”

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In whatever way you find God most, and you are most aware of God, that is the way you should follow. But if another way presents itself, quite contrary to the first, and if, having abandoned the first way, you find God as much in the new way as in the one you left, then that is right. But, the noblest and best thing would be this: if a person were to come to such *equality*, with such calm and certainty that one could find and enjoy God in *any* way and in *all* things, without having to wait for anything or chase after anything: *that* would delight me!... Every work helps towards this. If anything does not help towards this, you should let it go (“*The Master’s Final Words*”, vol. 3, *Meister Eckhart*, ed. O’C. Walshe).

With these words, spoken sometime around 1329, it is believed that Meister Eckhart, the Dominican preacher and Rhineland mystic, said farewell to his disciples and set off for Avignon, France to defend his teachings before a theological commission (It happens to the best of them!). He died while in Avignon, but left a great legacy for all who seek to follow the path to spiritual wholeness and freedom. Deeply steeped in his own Christian vocation, and much formed in the scholastic philosophy and theology of his times, Eckhart has a message for all people of all ages. One of the constant themes in Eckhart’s sermons and writings is that of living life with *equanimity* -- a deep, inner calm and peace gained through the discipline of detachment. It is a theme which shares much common ground with the Buddhist tradition, so perhaps it is a good place to begin to look at the message of this spiritual master, as well as our own spiritual practice.

Eckhart links together several other themes around that of living life with equanimity: *detachment*, the *will of God*, and the *birth of the Word in the soul* being among the most important. He believes that anyone truly serious about a spiritual path must grow in detachment, that is, seeking nothing, clinging to nothing, desiring nothing but to be the beloved child of God. Or as he says in the treatise *On Detachment*, “Detachment is nothing else but a mind that stands unmoved by all accidents of joy or sorrow, honour, shame or disgrace.” In Sermon 43 he says, “The less we turn our aims or attention to anything other than God, and in so far as we look to nothing outward, so we are transformed in the Son, and so far the Son is born in us and we are born in the Son and become the one Son.” The birth of God or the birth of the Word in each of us, then, is possible only to the extent that we let go of the outward, often obsessive search for *some-thing* which will make us complete.

In this letting go, or detachment, we allow ourselves to be carried along by the will of God, and thus are free to *be* who we really are. “How do I know if it is God’s will?” we ask ourselves. Eckhart replies: “If it were *not* God’s will for a single instant, it would not be -- it *must* always be God’s will (43).” So allowing what *is* to simply *be* is both a daily lesson in detachment and a sure path towards the inner calm which Eckhart calls equanimity. For several months we at the Forest of Peace Ashram in Oklahoma have been studying the sermons of

Meister Eckhart, and more than once we have racked our brains trying to come to a deeper understanding of this teaching on accepting God's will as the essential element in living an equanimous life. Do we just passively stand back and let the world oppress the poor, and simply breathe out, "Oh, this is God's will?" How do we understand growth and transformation if everything that *is* already is God's will? These are not easy questions, and I do not propose to have the answers, but Eckhart does seem to have a very profound teaching to pass on to us. In many of his sermons he uses examples of people dealing with suffering and sickness. What good is it, he often asks, to heap pain upon pain by crying out to God, wondering why our friend is sick? We simply increase the suffering by not embracing it as what *is* in this moment. "With those who are pleased with God's will," he says, "whatever God gives them, sickness or poverty or anything else, they prefer than to anything else (43)." By accepting, and even embracing the given situation, one develops an inner calm, a deep peace which serves as a light, teaching us how to live through the present situation.

To live calmly in the midst of a painful situation does not necessarily mean that I stand passively by and allow the same thing to happen again (if indeed I can help prevent it), but it is an invitation to hold on to the present moment as God's gift and live deeply with the moment. If my child has been hit by a car and killed while crossing the street at a dangerous intersection, it will do me no good to wail and moan for the next ten years blaming God, the whole world and myself for the accident. There is certainly the normal human grief that accompanies any unexpected tragedy, but only by sitting with and embracing the pain can I find the deep peace to carry on with life. At the same time, though, there is nothing wrong (and, in fact, it is the right way) with trying to get the city council to approve the placing of a stop light at the intersection to prevent further accidents from happening. So to accept what *is* as God's will does *not* lead to passivity, in the sense of relieving ourselves of responsibility, but it does lead to inner peace, and with inner peace one can truly act justly and lovingly towards the world's pain. In fact, as Eckhart says, "Being just means being equable in joy and in sorrow, and in bitterness and sweetness, so that nothing whatever keeps one from being found one with justice" (Sermon 66). True justice, then, is always equanimous, peaceful and never vengeful or hateful.

In a treatise entitled *The Book of Divine Comfort*, Eckhart treats in depth the theme of living equanimously in the midst of suffering. "All suffering comes from love and attachment. So if I suffer on the account of transitory things, then I and my heart have love and attachment for temporal things, I do not love God with all my heart and do not yet love that which God wishes me to love... Is it any wonder then that God permits me to be rightly afflicted with loss and sorrow?" And as a remedy to the suffering, the great medieval master says this: "I accept and take the suffering in God's will and from God's will. *Such* suffering alone is perfect suffering, for it arises and springs from pure love of God's sheer goodness and joy." And then further on in the same text he adds, "If my suffering is in God and God suffers with me, how then can my suffering be painful when suffering loses pain, and my pain is in God and my pain *is* God?" To live in equanimity in the midst of suffering is to live mindful of the reality that we live *in* God and our suffering is part of the very essence of God.

Eckhart tries to point out, then, in a manner greatly in tune with spiritual teachings from the East, that our suffering is caused precisely because of our attachment to temporal things. In other words, we cling to the painful thing or event, forgetting that we live and move and have our

being in the very heart of God. It is important to note that Eckhart is *not* saying that temporal things are bad or even illusory in and of themselves, for earlier in the same treatise he says, “One should love God alone *in* creatures and creatures in God alone.” So it is not the creatureliness of life that is to be avoided, for God is *in* all of creation and all of creation is *in* God, but it is the attachment *to* the things of creation, the things of the world, which causes our suffering. To live an equanimous life, a life of inner peace and tranquility, one must be free of the craving and aversion which make us slaves of things, people, emotions and ways of thinking. This freedom brings us home to a deep awareness of our indwelling in God.

When one’s “inner desert,” to use Eckhart’s image, is calm and centered, free of attachments, then the soul is empty enough to be surprised by the birth of the Eternal Word. We are all called to be “mothers of the Word,” says Eckhart, but this is only possible when the inner world is spacious and free, unattached. Building on the theme of the gospel story of Jesus entering the Temple of Jerusalem to cleanse it of the money changers, Eckhart asks us examine what or who occupies our inner temple. For the Word to be born in us, for us to experience the divine life welling up within us, there must be silence in the temple. “If anyone else would speak in the temple (which is the soul) but Jesus, Jesus is silent, as if he were not at home -- and he *is* not at home in the soul, for she has strange guests to talk to. But if Jesus is to speak in the soul, she must be all alone, and she has to be quiet... What does the lord Jesus say? He says what he *is*. What is he, then? He is a Word of the Father” (Sermon 6).

This inner quiet, this place of equanimous tranquility (not upset by either sorrow or joy) is the birthplace of God in us. It is the place where we see ourselves with the eyes of God, created in the divine image, filled with light and grace. It is our true home. How do we *get* to that place? We *get* there by stopping, sitting, waiting, listening, being. “This cannot be learnt by running away, by fleeing into the desert away from outward things,” says Eckhart. “One must learn to acquire an inward desert, wherever and with whomever that one is. One must learn to break through things and seize God in them (*The Talks of Instruction*).” And so our true home is the inward desert, an arid desert in full bloom, a noisy world bathed in silence, a broken humanity held together in the heart of God. To dwell in this home is to know the equanimous peace which Meister Eckhart longed to radiate to his disciples almost seven centuries ago, and through his writings, continues to teach us today.