

Meister Eckhart, On Detachment

(The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart. With Foreword by Bernard McGinn.
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IV. ON DETACHMENT

I have read many writings of pagan masters, and of the prophets, and of the Old and New Testaments, and have sought earnestly and with all diligence to discover which is the best and highest virtue whereby a man may chiefly and most firmly join himself to God, and whereby a man may become by grace what God is by nature, and whereby a man may come closest to his image when he was in God, 1 wherein there was no difference between him and God, before God made creatures. After a thorough study of these writings I find, as well as my reason can testify or perceive, that only pure detachment surpasses all things, for all virtues have some regard to creatures, but detachment is free of all creatures. Therefore our Lord said to Martha, "unum est necessarium " (Luke 10: 42), which is as much as to say, 'Martha, he who would be serene and pure needs but one thing: detachment.' The teachers greatly praise love, as does St. Paul who says, "Whatever things I may do, and have not love, I am nothing" (cf. 1 Cor. 13: 1). But I extol detachment above any love. First, because, at best, love constrains me to love God, but detachment compels God to love me. Now it is a far nobler thing my constraining God to me than for me to constrain myself to God. That is because God is more readily able to adapt Himself to me, and can more easily unite with me than I could unite with God. That detachment forces God to me, I can prove thus: everything wants to be in its natural place. Now God's natural place is unity and purity, and that comes from detachment. Therefore God is bound to give Himself to a detached heart.² In the second place I extol detachment above love because love compels me to suffer all things for God's sake, whereas detachment makes me receptive of nothing but God. Now it is far nobler to be receptive of nothing but God than to suffer all things for God, for

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in suffering a man has some regard to the creatures from which he gets the suffering, but detachment is quite free of all creatures. But that detachment is receptive of nothing but God, I can prove this way: whatever is to be received must be taken in somewhere. Now detachment is so nearly nothing that there is no thing subtle enough to maintain itself in detachment except God alone. He is so subtle and so simple that He can stay in a detached heart. Therefore detachment is receptive of nothing but God. The masters also extol humility above many other virtues. But I extol detachment above humility for this reason: humility can exist without detachment, but perfect detachment cannot exist without perfect humility, for perfect humility ends in the destruction of self. Now detachment comes so close to nothing, that between perfect detachment and nothing no thing can exist. Therefore perfect detachment cannot be without humility. But two virtues are always better than one.

The second reason why I praise detachment above humility is because humility means abasing oneself beneath all creatures, and in that abasement man goes out of himself into creatures, but detachment rests within itself. Now no going out can ever be so noble, but remaining within is nobler still. As the prophet David says, "Omnis gloria eius filiae regis ab intus " (Ps. 44: 14), which is to say, "All the glory of the daughter comes from her inwardness. " Perfect detachment is not concerned about being above or below any creature; it does not wish to be below or above, it would stand on its own, loving none and hating none, and seeks neither equality nor inequality with any creature, nor this nor that: it wants merely to be.³ But to be either this or that it does not wish at all. For whoever would be this or that wants to be something, but detachment wants to be nothing. It is therefore no burden on anything.

Now somebody might say, 'Well, our Lady possessed all virtues to perfection, and so she must have had perfect detachment. But if detachment is higher than humility, why then did our Lady glory in her humility and not in her detachment when she said, "Quia respexit dominus humilitatem ancillae suae " (Luke 1: 48) , that is to say, " He regarded the humility of his handmaiden "? '

I reply that in God there is detachment and humility, insofar as we can speak of God's having virtues. You should know that it was

loving humility that led God to stoop to enter human nature, while detachment stood immovable within itself when he became man, just as it did when He created heaven and earth, as I shall tell you later.

And because our Lord, when he would become man, stood unmoved in his detachment, our Lady knew that he required the same of her too, and that in this case he looked to her humility and not her detachment. For if she had thought once about her detachment and said, 'he regarded my detachment,' that detachment would have been sullied and would not have been whole and perfect, since a going forth would have occurred. But nothing, however little, may proceed from detachment without staining it. There you have the reason why our Lady gloried in her humility and not her detachment. Concerning this, the prophet said, "Audiam, quid Loquatur in me dominus deus " (Ps. 84:9), that is to say, " I will (be silent and) hear what my lord God says within me," as if he were to say, 'If God wishes to speak to me, let Him come into me, for I will not go out.'

I also praise detachment above all compassion, for compassion is nothing but a man's going out of himself by reason of his fellow creatures' lack, by which his heart is troubled. But detachment is free of this, stays in itself and is not troubled by any thing: for as long as any thing can trouble a man, he is not in a right state. In short, when I consider all the virtues, I find none so completely without lack and so conformed to God as detachment. A master called Avicenna⁴ declares that the mind of him who stands detached is of such nobility that whatever he sees is true, and whatever he desires he obtains, and whatever he commands must be obeyed. And this you must know for sure: when the free mind is quite detached, it constrains God to itself, and if it were able to stand formless and free of all accidentals, it would assume God's proper nature. But God can give that to none but Himself, therefore God can do no more for the detached mind than give Himself to it. But the man who stands thus in utter detachment is rapt into eternity in such a way that nothing transient can move him, and that he is aware of nothing corporeal and is said to be dead to the world, for he has no taste for anything earthly. That is what St. Paul meant when he said, "I live and yet do not live - Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Now you may ask what this detachment is that is so noble in itself. You should know that true detachment is nothing else but a

mind that stands unmoved by all accidents of joy or sorrow, honor, shame, or disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands unmoved by a breath of wind. This immovable detachment brings a man into the greatest likeness to God. For the reason why God is God is because of His immovable detachment, and from this detachment He has His purity, His simplicity, and His immutability. Therefore, if a man is to be like God, as far as a creature can have likeness with God, this must come from detachment. This draws a man into purity, and from purity into simplicity, and from simplicity into immutability, and these things make a likeness between God and that man; and this likeness must occur through grace, for grace draws a man away from all temporal things and purges him of all that is transient. You must know, too, that to be empty of all creatures is to be full of God, and to be full of all creatures is to be empty of God. You should also know that God has stood in this unmoved detachment from all eternity, and still so stands; and you should know further that when God created heaven and earth and all creatures, this affected His unmoved detachment just as little as if no creature had ever been created. I say further: all the prayers and good works that a man can do in time affect God's detachment as little as if no prayers or good works had ever occurred in time, and God never became more ready to give or more inclined toward a man than if he had never uttered the prayer or performed the good works. I say still further: when the Son in the Godhead wanted to become man, and became man and endured martyrdom, that affected God's unmoved detachment as little as if he had never become man. You might say at this, 'Then I hear that all prayers and good works are wasted because God does not allow Himself to be moved by anyone with such things, and yet it is said that God wants us to pray to Him for everything.' Now you should mark me well, and understand properly if you can, that God in His first eternal glance (if we can assume that there was a first glance) saw all things as they should occur, and saw in the same glance when and how He would create all creatures and when the Son would become man and suffer; He saw too the least prayer and good work that anyone should do, and saw which prayers and devotion He would and should accede to; He saw that you will call upon Him earnestly tomorrow and pray to Him, but God will not grant your petition and prayer tomorrow, for He has granted it in

His eternity, before ever you became a man. But if your prayer is not sincere and in earnest, God will not deny it to you now, for He has denied it to you in His eternity. And thus God has regarded all things in His first eternal glance, and God performs nothing afresh, for all has been performed in advance. Thus God ever stands in His immovable detachment, and yet the prayers and good works of people are not wasted, for he who does well will be rewarded, and he who does evil will reap accordingly. This is explained by St. Augustine in the fifth book of *On the Trinity*, in the last chapter thus: 'Deus autem, etc. ' which means, 'God forbid that anyone should say that God loves anyone in time, for with Him there is no past and no future, and He loved all the saints before the world was ever created, as He foresaw them. And when it comes to be that He displays in time what He has seen in eternity, then people think He has gained a new love for them; so too, when God is angry or does some good thing, it is we who are changed while He remains unchanged, just as the sun's ray hurts a sick eye and delights a sound one, and yet the sunshine remains unchanged in itself.' Augustine also touches on the same idea in the twelfth book of *On the Trinity* in the fourth chapter, where he says, 'Nam Deus non ad tempus videt, nec aliquid fit novi in eius visione, ' 'God does not see in temporal fashion, and no new vision arises in Him.' In the same sense Isidore speaks in his book *On the Highest Good*, 5 saying, 'Many people ask, What did God do before He created heaven and earth, or whence came the new will in God that He made creatures?' and he answers, 'No new will ever arose in God, for although a creature did not exist in itself (as it is now), yet it was before all time in God and in His reason.'⁶ God did not create heaven and earth as we (perishable beings) might say, 'let that be so! ' for all creatures were spoken in the Eternal Word. To this we can add what our Lord said to Moses when Moses said, " Lord, if Pharaoh asks me who you are, how am I to answer him ? " and the Lord said, " Say, 'He who IS has sent me" (Exod. 3:13 -14) . That is as much as to say, He who is immutable in Himself has sent me. But someone might say, 'Was Christ in unmoved detachment when he said: " My soul is sorrowful even unto death" (Matt. 26: 38; Mark 14: 34), and Mary when she stood before the cross? How is all this compatible with unmoved detachment?' Concerning this, you should know what the masters say, that in every man there are two kinds of

man.? The one is called the outer man, that is, the life of the senses: this man is served by the five senses, though the outer man functions by the power of the soul. The other is called the inner man, that is, man's inward nature. You should understand that a spiritual man, who loves God, makes use of the powers of the soul in the outer man only to the extent that the five outer senses need it: the inward nature is not concerned with the five senses except insofar as it is a guide or ruler of those senses, guarding them so that they do not yield to sense objects in a bestial fashion, as some folk do who live for carnal pleasures like beasts unendowed with reason; such people should be termed beasts rather than men. And whatever powers the soul has over and above what it gives to the five senses are all devoted to the inner man. And when such a man perceives a noble or elevated object, the soul draws into itself all the powers it has granted to the five senses, and then that man is said to be insensible or entranced,⁸ for his object is an intelligible image or something intelligible without an image.⁹ But you should know that God requires of every spiritual man to love Him with all the powers of the soul. He says, " Love your God with all your heart" (Deut. 6: 5; Matt. 22: 37; Mark 12: 30; Luke 10: 27). Now some people use up all the powers of the soul in the outer man. These are people who turn all their senses and their reason toward perishable goods, knowing nothing of the inner man. You should know that the outer man can be active while the inner man is completely free of this activity and unmoved. Now Christ too had an outer man and an inner man, and so did our Lady, and whatever Christ and our Lady ever said about external things, they did so according to the outer man, but the inner man remained in unmoved detachment. Thus it was when Christ said, " My soul is sorrowful unto death," and whatever lamentations our Lady made, or whatever else she said, inwardly she was in a state of unmoved detachment. Here is an analogy: a door swings open and shuts on its hinge. I would compare the outer woodwork of the door to the outer man, and the hinge to the inner man. When the door opens and shuts, the boards move back and forth, but the hinge stays in the same place and is never moved thereby. It is the same in this case, if you understand it rightly. Now I ask, 'What is the object of pure detachment? ' My answer is that the object of pure detachment is neither this nor that. It rests on

absolutely nothing, and I will tell you why: pure detachment rests on the highest, and he is at his highest, in whom God can work all His will. But God cannot work all His will in all hearts, for, although God is almighty, He can only work where He finds readiness or creates it. I say 'creates it' on account of St. Paul, because in him God found no readiness, but made him ready by infusion of grace. And so I say God works according as He finds us ready. His working is different in a man and in a stone. Here is an example from nature. If you heat a baker's oven and put in it dough of oats, barley, rye, and wheat, there is only one heat in the oven, but it does not have the same effect on the different kinds of dough, for one turns into fine bread, the second coarser, and the third coarser still. And that is not the fault of the heat, it is due to the materials which are unlike. In the same way God does not work alike in all our hearts: He works as He finds readiness and receptivity. Now in whatever heart there is this or that, there may be something in 'this' or 'that' which God cannot bring to the highest peak. And so, if the heart is to be ready to receive the highest, it must rest on absolutely nothing, and in that lies the greatest potentiality which can exist. For when the detached heart rests on the highest, that can only be on nothing, since that has the greatest receptivity. Let us take an example from nature: if I want to write on a wax tablet, then anything written on that tablet already, however wonderful it may be, will prevent me from writing there; and if I want to write I must erase or destroy whatever is on the tablet, and the tablet is never so suitable for me to write on as when there is nothing on it. Similarly, if God is to write the highest on my heart, then everything called 'this and that' must be expunged from my heart, and then my heart stands in detachment. Then God can work the highest according to His supreme will. Therefore the object of a detached heart is neither this nor that. Again I ask, 'What is the prayer of a detached heart?' My answer is that detachment and purity cannot pray, for whoever prays wants God to grant him something, or else wants God to take something from him. But a detached heart desires nothing at all, nor has it anything it wants to get rid of. Therefore it is free of all prayers, or its prayer consists of nothing but being uniform with God. That is all its prayer. In this sense we can take St. Dionysius's comment on the saying of St. Paul, "There are many who run, but only one gains

the crown " (1 Cor. 9: 25). All the powers of the soul compete for the crown but the essence alone can win it. Dionysius says the race is nothing but a turning away from all creatures and a union with the uncreated.¹⁰ And when the soul has got so far, it loses its name and is drawn into God, so that in itself it becomes nothing, just as the sun draws the dawn into itself and annihilates it. To this state nothing brings a man but pure detachment. To this we may add a saying of St. Augustine, 'The soul has a secret entrance to the divine nature, when all things become nothing for it.'¹¹ On earth, this entrance is nothing but pure detachment, and when the detachment reaches its climax, it becomes ignorant with knowing, loveless with loving, and dark with enlightenment. Thus we may understand the words of a master, that the poor in spirit are they who have abandoned all things to God, just as He possessed them when we did not exist.¹² None can do this but a pure, detached heart.

That God would rather be in a detached heart than in all other hearts, appears if you ask me, 'What does God seek in all things?' to which I answer from the Book of Wisdom, where He says, " In all things I seek rest" (Sir. 24: 11).¹³ But nowhere is perfect rest to be found but in a detached heart. That is why God prefers to be there rather than in other virtues or in anything else. You should know, too, that the more a man strives to be receptive to divine influence, the more blessed he is; and whoever can gain the highest readiness in this is in the highest state of blessedness. But none can make himself receptive to divine influence but by uniformity with God, for insofar as a man is uniform with God, to that extent he is receptive to the divine influence. But uniformity comes from man's subjecting himself to God, and the more a man is subject to creatures, the less he is uniform with God. Now the pure detached heart stands free of all creatures. Therefore it is totally subject to God, and therefore it is in the highest degree of uniformity with God, and is also the most receptive to divine influence. This was what St. Paul meant when he said, " Put on Christ,"¹⁴ meaning uniformity with Christ, for this putting on can only take place through uniformity with Christ. You should know that when Christ became man, he took on, not a man, but human nature.¹⁵ Therefore, go out of all things and then there will remain only what Christ took on, and thus you will have put on Christ.

Whoever would know the nobility and profit of perfect detachment, let him note Christ's saying concerning his humanity, when he said to his disciples, "It is expedient for you that I should go away from you, for if I do not go away, the Holy Spirit cannot come to you" (John 16 : 7).¹⁶ This is just as if he had said, 'You rejoice too much in my present form, and therefore the perfect joy of the Holy Ghost cannot be yours.' So, leave all images and unite with the formless essence, for God's spiritual comfort is delicate; therefore He will not offer Himself to any but to him who scorns physical comforts. Now take note, all who are sensible! No man is happier than he who has the greatest detachment. There can be no fleshly and physical comfort without some spiritual harm, for "the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh" (cf. Gal. 5: 17). Therefore, whoever in the flesh sows disorderly love reaps death, and whoever in the spirit sows ordered love, reaps from the spirit eternal life. Therefore, the quicker a man flees from the created, the quicker the Creator runs toward him. So, take note, all sensible men! Since the joy we might have from the physical form of Christ hinders us in receiving the Holy Ghost, how much more of a hindrance to gaining God is our inordinate delight in evanescent comforts! That is why detachment is best, for it purifies the soul, purges the conscience, kindles the heart, awakens the spirit, quickens the desire, makes us know God and, cutting off creatures, unites us with God.

Now take note, all who have good sense! The swiftest steed to bear you to His perfection is suffering, for none will enjoy greater eternal bliss than those who stand with Christ in the greatest bitterness. Nothing is more gall-bitter than suffering, nothing more honey-sweet than having suffered. Nothing disfigures the body before men like suffering, and nothing beautifies the soul before God like having suffered. The finest foundation on which this perfection can rest is humility. For whatever man's nature creeps here below in the deepest lowliness, that man's spirit will soar aloft to the heights of the Godhead, for joy brings sorrow and sorrow joy. And so, whoever would attain perfect detachment should strive for perfect humility, and thus he will come to the neighborhood of God. That this may be all our lot, so help us the highest detachment, which is God Himself. Amen.

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Notes

- 1 . As an idea in the mind of God. Cf. Sermons 5 8 and Sermon 87 and note 7 there.
2. Cf. Sermon 73.
- 3 . The variant reading *eine sin* 'to be alone' is rejected by Quint, following Schaefer.
4. Avicenna, Liber VI, Naturalium, 4.4 (ed. of 1 5 0 8) (Q). Skinner/Clark's ref. is wrong.
5. Sent. I, ch. 8, n. 4 (Q).
- 6 . Cf. note 1 above.
7. Cf. Sermon 56.
- 8 . Not 'senseless or crazy' (Clark).
9. Quint cites Thomas, De veritate, q. 13, a. 2 on the different degrees of absorption. These are reminiscent of the 'world of form' (*rupaloka*) and the 'formless world' (*arupaloka*) of Buddhism, which are attained by the practice of the *jhiinas* ('absorptions') .
- 1 0. De divinis nom. 4.9 a n d 1 3 .3 (Quint after Fischer).
- 1 1 . Not traced directly in Augustine's works.
- 1 2 . Cf. Sermon 87.
13. Not the Wisdom of Solomon but Ecclesiasticus (The Wisdom of Jesus Sirach), as in Sermon 73, note 1; cf. Sermon 45.
14. Cf. Sermon 92 and note 1 there.
- 1 5 . Cf. Sermon 4 7 and note 2 there.
- 1 6 . Cf. Sermon 75.