



Ākimcañña: Self-Naughting¹

Vivo autem, iam non ego

Gal. 2:20

Eyū diz solte du sele scheiden von allem dem, daz iht ist.

Eckhart, Pfeiffer ed., p. 525

*Her umbe sol der mensche gefizzen sin, daz er sich entbilde
sin selbes unt allen creature noch keinen vater wizze denne
got alleine. . . Dis ist allen menschen fremde . . . ich wolde,
das irz befunden hetet mit lebennē.*

Eckhart, Pfeiffer ed., pp. 421, 464

When thou standest still from the thinking of self, and the willing of self

Jacob Boehme, *Dialogues on the Supersensual Life*

An egomania occasioned the fall of Lucifer, who would be "like the most High" (Isa. 14:14), thinking, "Who is like me in Heaven or Earth?" (*Tabārī* xxiv), and desiring to deify himself (Augustine, *Questions veteris et novi testamenti* cxiii), not in the way discussed below by an abnegation of selfhood, but, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, "by the virtue of his own nature" and "of his own power" (*Sum. Theol.* 1.63.3c). We are all to a greater or less extent egomaniacs, and to the same extent followers of Satan. Acts 5:36 refers to a certain Theudas as "boasting himself to be somebody."

In the vernacular, when a man is presumptuous, we ask him, "Who do you think you are?" and when we refer to someone's insignificance, we call him a "nobody" or, in earlier English, a "nithing." In this worldly sense it is a good thing to be "someone" and a misfortune to be "nobody," and from this point of view we think well of "ambition" (*iti-bhavābhava tanhā*). To be "someone" is to have a name and lineage (*nāma-gotta*) or, at least, to have a place or rank in the world, some distinction that makes us recognizable and conspicuous. Our modern civilization is essentially individualistic and self-assertive, even our educational systems being more

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¹ As the title implies, this study is mainly based on Christian and Buddhist sources.

and more designed to foster "self-expression" and "self-realization"; and if we are at all concerned about what happens after death, it is in terms of the survival of our treasured "personality"² with all its attachments and memories.

On the other hand, in the words of Eckhart, "Holy scripture cries aloud for freedom from self." In this unanimous and universal teaching, which affirms an absolute liberty and autonomy, spatial and temporal, attainable as well here and now as anywhere else, this treasured "personality" of ours is at once a prison and a fallacy, from which only the Truth shall set you free:³ a prison, because all definition limits that which is defined, and a fallacy because in this ever-changing composite and corruptible psychophysical "personality" it is impossible to grasp a constant, and impossible therefore to recognize any authentic or "real" substance. Insofar as man is merely a "reasoning and mortal animal," tradition is in agreement with the modern determinist in affirming that "this man," So-and-so (*yamāyasmā evam nāmo evam gotto*, S III.25) has neither free will⁴

² We write "personality" because we are using the word here in its vulgar sense and not in the stricter and technical sense in which the veritable "person" is distinguished from the phenomenal "individual," e.g., in *AA* II.3.2 and Boethius, *Contra Erytychen* II.

³ The doctrine is one of escape and the pursuit of happiness. It will not be confused with what has been called escapism. Escapism is an essentially selfish activity, failure to "face the music" (as when one "drowns one's sorrows in drink"), and the choice of easier paths; escapism is a symptom of disappointment and is cynical rather than mature. We need hardly say that to "wish one had never been born" is the antithesis of the perfect sorrow that may be occasioned by the sense of a continued existence: we are born in order to die, but this death is not one that can be attained by suicide or by suffering death at the hands of others; it is not of ourselves or others, but only of God that it can be said in the words of St. John of the Cross, "and, slaying, dost from death to life translate."

At the same time, the true way of "escape" is more strenuous by far than the life that is escaped (hence the designation of the religious in India as a "Toiler," *śrama-na*), and it is the degree of a man's maturity (in Skr. the extent to which he is *pakṣa*, "pukka," and no longer *āma*, "raw") that is the measure of the possibility of his escape and consequent beatitude.

⁴ The minds of some are set on Union (*yoga*), the minds of others on comfort (*kṣema*)" (*TS* II.5.11.5; cf. *KU* II.11-4).

⁵ The denial of freedom in "this man," the individual, is explicit in Sn 350, "It does not belong to the many-folk to do what they will (*na kāmākāro hi puthujjānānam*)."⁶ Cf. "Ye cannot do the things that ye would" (*Gal.* 5:17). This denial is made in a very striking manner in *Vin* I.13-14 and *S* III.66-67, where for the usual formula according to which the body and mentality are *anattā*, not I, nor mine, the proof is offered that this body, sensibility, etc., cannot be "mine," cannot be "I," for if these were myself, or mine, they would never be sick, since in this case one could say, "Let my body, sensibility, etc., be thus, or not-thus," nothing being really

nor any element of immortality. How little validity attaches to this man's conviction of freedom will appear if we reflect that while we speak of "doing what we like," we never speak of "being when we like," and that to conceive of a spatial liberty that is not also a temporal liberty involves a contradiction. Tradition, however, departs from science by replying to the man who confesses himself to be only a reasoning and mortal animal that he has "forgotten who he is" (Boethius, *De consolatioe philosophiae*, prose vi), requires of him to "Know thyself,"¹⁰ and warns him "If thou knowest not thyself, begone" (*si ignoras te, egredere*, Song of Solomon, 1:8). Tradition, in other words, affirms the validity of our consciousness of being but distinguishes it from the So-and-so that we think we are. The validity of our consciousness of being is not established in metaphysics (as it is in philosophy) by the fact of thought or knowledge; on the contrary, our veritable being is distinguished from the operations of discursive thought and empirical knowing, which are simply the causally determined workings of the "reasoning and mortal animal," which are to be regarded *yathābhūtam*, not as affects but only as effects in which we (in our veritable being) are not really, but only supposedly, involved.

ours except to the extent that we have it altogether in our power, nor anything variable any part of an identity such as the notion of a "very person" (*satpuruṣa*) intends. A further consideration is this, that if the becoming (*bhāva*) of the finite individual were not absolutely determined by "fate," "mediate causes," or "karma" (the terms are synonymous), the idea of an omniscient providence (*prajāñā, paññā*, knowledge of things not derived from the things themselves) would be unintelligible. In this connection we may remark that we are not, of course, concerned to prove dialectically any doctrine whatever, but only to exhibit its consistency and therefore its intelligibility. This consistency of the Philosophy Perennis is indeed good ground for "faith" (i.e., confidence, as distinguished from mere belief), but as this "philosophy" is neither a "system" nor a "philosophy," it cannot be argued for or against.

¹⁰ E.g., Avencebrol, *Fons vitae* 1.2, "quid est ergo, quod debet homo inquirere in hac vita? . . . hoc est ut sciat se ipsum." Cf. Jacob Boehme, *De signatura rerum* 1.1. The reader will not confuse the "science of self" (*ātmanīdyā*) here with that intended by the psychologist, whether ancient or modern; as remarked by Edmond Vansteenberghe, the γυνή, σταντόν with which Nicholas of Cusa opens his *De docta ignorantia* "n'est plus le 'Connais-toi toi-même' du psychologue Socrate, c'est le 'Sois maître de toi' (= Dh 160, 380, *attā hi attano nātko*) des moralistes stoïciens" (*Au-tour de la docte ignorance*, Münster, 1915, p. 42). In the same way, the only *raison d'être* of "Buddhist psychology" is not "scientific," but to break down the illusion of self. The modern psychologist's only concern and curiosity are with the all-too-human self, that very self which even in its highest and least suspected extensions is still a prison. Traditional metaphysics has nothing in common with this psychology, which restricts itself to "what can be psychically experienced" (Jung's own definition).

Tradition, then, differs from the "nothing-morist" (Skr. *nāstika*, Pāli *natthika*) in affirming a spiritual nature that is not in any wise, but immeasurable, innumerable, infinite, and inaccessible to observation, and of which, therefore, empirical science can neither affirm nor deny the reality. It is to this "spirit"¹¹ (Gk. πνεῦμα, Skr. *ātman*, Pāli *attā*, Arabic *rūh*, etc.) as distinguished from body and soul—i.e., whatever is phenomenal and formal (Gk. σῶμα and ψυχή, Skr. and Pāli *nāma-rūpa*, and *saññā-kāya, saññāna-kāya*, "name and appearance," the "body with its consciousness")—that tradition attributes with perfect consistency an absolute liberty, spatial and temporal. Our sense of free will is as valid in itself as our sense of being, and as invalid as our sense of being So-and-so. There *is* a free will, a will, that is, unconstrained by anything external to its own nature; but it is only "ours" to the extent that we have abandoned all that we mean in common sense by "ourselves" and our "own" willing. Only *His* service is perfect freedom. "Fate lies in the created causes themselves" (*Sum. Theol.* 1.116.2); "Whatever departeth farthest from the First Mind is involved more deeply in the meshes of Fate [i.e., *ḥarma*, the ineluctable operation of "mediate causes"]; and everything is so much freer from Fate by how much it draweth nigh to the pivot of all things. And if it sticketh to the constancy of the Supernal Mind, that needs not move, it is superior to the necessity of Fate" (Boethius, *De consolatioe philosophiae*, prose iv). This freedom of the Unmoved Mover ("that which, itself at rest, outgoeth them that run," *Isā Up.* iv) from any *necessitas coactionis* is that of the spirit that bloweth where and as it will (*ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ*, John 3:8; *carati yathā vāsam*, RV x.168.4).¹² To possess it, one must have been "born again . . . of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8) and thus "in the spirit" (St. Paul, *passim*), one must have "found and awakened to the Spirit" (*yasyānuvittah pratibuddha ātmā*, BU iv.4.13),¹³ must be in *excessus*

¹¹ The phenomena of this "spirit" (the realizations of its possibilities of manifestation under given conditions) are all phenomena whatever, among which those called "spiritualistic" have no privileged rank; on the contrary, "a mouse is miracle enough. . . ."

¹² RV x.168.3-4, John 3:7-8, and *Gylfaginning* 18 present remarkable parallels [cf. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar með Skáldatali*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1935)—ED.].

¹³ "He who sees, thinks and discriminates this Spirit, whose pleasure and play are with the Spirit, whose dalliance is with the Spirit [as in BU iv.3.21, "All creation is female to God"] and whose joy is in the Spirit, he becomes autonomous (*svarāj*), he becomes a Mover-at-will (*kāmācārin*) in every world; but the worlds of him whose knowledge is otherwise than this are corruptible, he does not become a Mover-at-will in any world" (CU vii.25.2). The conception of motion-at-will is developed in many texts, from RV ix.113.9, "Make me undying there where motion

("gone out of" oneself, one's senses), in *samādhi* (etymologically and semantically "synthesis"), unified (*eko bhūṭah*, cf. *ekodi-bhāva*), or in other words "dead" in the sense that "the kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead" (Eckhart), and in the sense that Rūmī speaks of a "dead man walking" (*Mathnawī* vi.742-755), or again that of initiatory death as the prelude to a regeneration. There is not, of course, any necessary connection between liberation and physical death:⁹ a man can as well be liberated "now in the time of this life" (*ditthe va dhamme parimibbuto, jīvan mukta*) as at any other time, all depending only upon his remembering "who he is," and this is the same as to forget oneself, to "hate one's own life" (psyche, "soul," or "self," Luke 14:26), *deficere a se tota* and *a semetipsa liquescere* (St. Bernard),¹⁰ the "death of the soul" (Eckhart),

is at will" (*yatrānukāmaṃ caranam . . . māṃ amṛtam kṛdhi*), onwards. The Christian equivalent can be found in John 3:8 and 10:9 ("shall go in and out, and find pasture," as in TU III.10.5, "he goes up and down these worlds, eating what he will and assuming what aspect he will").

Motion-at-will is a necessary consequence of filiation or deification, the Spirit moving "as it will" in virtue of its omni- and total presence and because "he that is joined unto the Lord is one Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17), all possession of "powers" (*śakti, iddhi*, such as flying through the air or walking on the water) being gifts of the Spirit and depending upon a more or less *ablatio omnis alteritatis et diversitatis* (Nicholas of Cusa). In other words, our freedom and beatitude are the less the more we are still "ourselves," *un tel*. The "miracle" is never an "impossibility," but only so according to our way of thinking: performance is always the demonstration of a possibility. It is not opposites (as "possible" and "impossible"), but contraries—for example, rest and motion—both of which are "possibles," that are reconciled *in divinis*. "Primitive" languages retain the stamp of this polarity in words which may mean either of two contrary things (cf. Freud on Abel, "Gegensinn der Urwort" in *Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Forschungen*, II 1910, and Betty Heilmann, "The Polarity of the Infinite," JISOA, V, 1937).

It may be added that because of the identity of the immanent and transcendent Spirit (1 Cor. 6:17; "That art thou" of the Upaniṣads, etc.), we make no real distinction in the present article between "my spirit" (the "ghost" that we "give up" at death) and "the Spirit" (the Holy Ghost), although sometimes writing "spirit" with reference to the immanent essence (*antarātman*) and "Spirit" with reference to the transcendent essence (*paramātman*). So far as a distinction can be made, it is "logical but not real" (*secundum rationem, non secundum rem*).

⁹ "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Eccl. 12:7). Our sense of being may be "in the spirit" or "in the dust," and so either "saved or lost." It is well for him "who has been of strength to awaken before the body is unstrung" (KU VI.4).

¹⁰ For St. Bernard, see Étienne Gilson, *La Théologie mystique de Saint Bernard* (Paris, 1934), ch. 5. How close to Indian formulation St. Bernard comes appears in his distinction of *proprium* from *esse* (*mama* from *attā*) and in Roussetlet's summary (*ibid.*, p. 150, n. 2) "Cela revient à dire qu'on ne peut pleinement posséder Dieu sans pleinement se posséder soi-même," at the same time that (*ibid.*, p. 152, n. 1)

"nothing else than that the spirit goeth out of itself, out of time, and entereth into a pure nothingness" (Johannes Tauler), becoming thus "free as the Godhead in its non-existence" (Eckhart); to have said "Thy will be done, not mine" or, in other words, to have been perfected in "Islām."¹¹

Man has thus two selves, lives or "souls," one physical, instinctive, and mortal, the other spiritual and not in any way conditioned by time or space, but of which the life is a Now "where every where and every when is focused" (*Paradiso* XXIX.12), and "apart from what has been or shall be" (KU II.14), that "now that stands still" of which we as temporal beings, knowing only a past and future, can have no empirical experience. Liberation is not a matter only of shaking off the physical body—oneself is not so easily evaded—but, as Indian texts express it, of shaking off all bodies, mental or psychic as well as physical. "The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul (*ψυχή*) and spirit (*πνεῦμα*)." (Heb. 4:12). It is between these two that our choice lies: between ourselves as we are in ourselves and to others, and ourselves as we are in God—not forgetting that, as Eckhart says, "Any flea as it is in God is higher than the highest of the angels as he is in himself." Of these two "selves" the psychophysical

"Il n'y a plus de *suam*, l'être s'est vidé de lui-même," as in SB III.8.1.2-3, where the initiated sacrificer is "as if emptied out of himself" (*iricāna vātāmā bhavati*) in order to enter into possession of his "whole self" (*sarvāmānam*), or as in A 1:249, where the man who "has brought into full being body, will and foreknowing (*bhāvita-kāyo, citto, pañño*—i.e., whole self) is not emptied out (*aparitto* = *aprarikta*) but the Great Spiritual-Self of which the way is beyond all measure (*mahattā appamāna vihāri*)."

¹¹ As far as possible this clear distinction of "Soul" (*ψυχή, anima, nafs, vedanā*, etc.) from "spirit" (*πνεῦμα, spiritus, rūh, ātman*, etc.) is maintained in the present article; cf. Origen, cited by Eckhart (Pfeiffer ed., p. 531) "dīn geist ist dīr niht genomen: die kreftē dīner sēle sint dīr genomen" ("It is not thy spirit, but the powers of thy soul [= *indriyāni*] that art taken from thee"). It must also be recognized, however, that in the European tradition the word "soul" is used in many senses (for example, "animal" is literally "ensouled," *anima* here as *spiraculum vitæ*; cf. Skr. *prāna-bhṛt*) and that in one of these senses (which is strictly that of Philo's "soul of the soul," *Heres* LV; cf. Augustine, *De duobus animabus contra Manicheos*) "soul" means "spirit." In what sense "soul" is or is not to be taken to mean "spirit" is discussed by William of Thierry in the *Golden Epistle*, I (p. 87 in Walter Shewring's English version, London, 1930). In the same way, *ātman* may refer to the psychophysical "self" or to the spiritual self; from the latter point of view, the psychophysical self is *anattā*, "not spiritual!"

It is because both "soul" and "spirit" are selves, although of very different orders, that an equivocation is inevitable. The use of the words in their context has always to be very carefully considered; the proper sense can always be made out.

and spiritual, one is the "life" (ψυχή) to be rejected and the other the "life" that is thereby saved (Luke 17:33 and Matt. 16:25), and of these again the former is that "life" (ψυχή) which "he who hateth . . . in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12:25) and which a man *must* hate, "if he would be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). It is assuredly all that is meant by *psyche* in our "psychology" that is in this way *le moi haïssable*; all of us, in fact, that is subject to affects or affections or wants of any sort, or entertains "opinions of his own."¹²

The unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* is therefore altogether in order when he says so poignantly (ch. 44) that "All men have matter of sorrow: but most specially he feeleth matter of sorrow, that wotteth and feeleth that he is . . . And whoso never felt this sorrow, he may make sorrow: for why, he never yet felt perfect sorrow.¹³ This sorrow, when it is had . . . maketh a soul able to receive that joy, the which receiveth from a man all witting and feeling of his being." And so also William Blake, when he says, "I would go down unto Annihilation and Eternal Death, lest the Last Judgment come and find me Unannihilate, and I be seiz'd and giv'n into the hands of my own Selfhood."¹⁴ In the same way St. Paul, *in vivo*, *autem iam non ego: vivit vero in me Christus* (Gal. 2:20) [and Rūmī, "He has died to self and become living through the Lord" (*Mathnawī* III.3364)].

¹² Cf. the citation from Jacob Boehme at the head of this article. It is comparatively easy for us to admit that a "self-willing" is egotistical; it is far more difficult but equally indispensable to realize that a "self-thinking"—i.e., "thinking for oneself" or "having opinions of one's own"—is as much an error or "sin," defined as "any departure from the order to the end," as any wilfulness can be. A good case of "thinking for oneself" is what is called the "free examination of scripture"; here, as was remarked by David MacLver, "the number of possible objections to a point of doctrine is equal to the number of ways of misunderstanding it, and therefore infinite."

¹³ *Vairāgya*, "dis-gust," as distinguished from *āśā bhāṅga*, "disappointment": *nek-ḥamāna-sita* as distinguished from *geha-sita* in S IV.232 and in Mil 76. Cf. *κατὰ θεὸν λύπη* as distinguished from *τοῦ κόσμου λύπη* in 1 Cor. 7:10.

¹⁴ As remarked by St. Thomas Aquinas (*Sum. Theol.* I.63.3), "no creature can attain a higher grade of nature without ceasing to exist," which self-denial is a thing "against the natural desire." It is not of its "own" will that the creature can desire its own "annihilation" or "death" [cf. Meister Eckhart, Evans ed., I, 274]. But our consciousness of being (as distinguished from any conceit of being So-and-so or Such-and-such) is precisely *not* the "creature"; it is another will in me than "mine," the lover of another (S IV.158) self than "mine" that "longs intensely for the Great Self" (*mahattam abhikṣhāṅkātā*, A II.21)—i.e., for Itself. This does not pertain to *our* self-love, but God's, who is in all things self-intent and loves no one but himself. ["Thus we understand how a life perishes. . . . If it will not give itself up to death, then it cannot attain any other world" (Boehme, *Sex puncta* v.10).]

We are sometimes shocked by the Buddhist disparagement of natural affections and family ties [cf. MU VI.28, "If to son and wife and family he is attached—for such a one, no, never at all!"]. But it is not the Christian who can thus recoil, for no man can be Christ's disciple "and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters," as well as himself (Luke 14:26 [cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 68A]). These unpromising words, from one who endorsed the command to honor father and mother and who equated contempt with murder, show clearly enough that it is not an ethical doctrine of unselfishness or altruism that we are dealing with but a purely metaphysical doctrine of the transcending of individuation. It is in the same sense that he exclaims, "Who is my mother, or my brethren?" (Mark 3:33, etc.), and accordingly that Meister Eckhart warns, "As long as thou still knowest who thy father and thy mother have been in time, thou art not dead with the real death" (Pfeiffer ed., p. 462).

There can be no return of the prodigal, no "turning in" (*nivṛtti*), except of same to same. "Whoever serves a God, of whom he thinks that 'He is one and I another,' is an ignoramus" (BU I.4.10); "If then you do not make yourself equal to God, you cannot apprehend God: for like is known by like" (Hermes, *Lib.* XI.2.20b). The question is asked of the one who comes home, "Who art thou?" and if he answers by his own or a family name, he is dragged away by the factors of time on the threshold of success (JUB III.14.1-2):¹⁵ ". . . that ill-fated soul is dragged back again, reverses its course, and having failed to know itself, lives in bondage to un-

¹⁵ The traveler, at the end of life's journey (not necessarily on his deathbed), knocks at the Sundoor (as in JUB, etc.), which is the door of the house of Death (as in KU) and that of Yama's paradise (as in RV), and would be received as a guest or, as expressed in Pāli, *amata-dvāram āhacca titthati* (S II.43). Admission, however, depends upon anonymity, with all its implications of "being in the spirit" (*ātmany etya mukha ādatte*, "going in the spirit, the gate accepts him," JUB III.33.8). There can be no doubt that the same mythical and profound eschatology underlies the Homeric legend of Ulysses and Polyphemus. The latter is assuredly Death. (His one eye corresponds to Śiva's third; that it is blinded and thus "closed" means that the world illumined by sun and moon, the *two* eyes of the gods, is to persist for Ulysses and his companions. It must be an initiatory, not a final death that is overcome, as is also suggested by the "cave.") His land which yields crops untillied is a Paradise, like Yama's or Varuṇa's; Ulysses would be his guest. The story, as told by Homer (and Euripides), has become an adventure rather than a myth, but it remains that the hero who overcomes Death is the one man who when he is asked, "Who art thou?" answers, "No one"; and it is noteworthy that in the Euripides version, when the blinded Cyclops cries out, "Where is Nobody?" the chorus answers, "Nowhere, O Cyclops." It would be hard to say whether Homer still "understood his material"; it may be taken for granted that Euripides did not.

