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Milrepa and Eckhart

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THE MIDDLE PATH BETWEEN EFFORT AND GRACE

At the heart of many spiritual teachings is the question of effort and grace, the difference of conscious endeavor and exertion. Both Milrepa and Meister Eckhart speak to this task that examines how we experience life and ourselves. In this paper I will compare and contrast the mysticism of Milrepa and Eckhart with Hindu and Tao teachings. I will emphasize the importance of nonattachment in all the traditions. However, before examining any of the wisdom from these spiritual teachers we must first identify what the terms mean to create a congruent understanding.

The words grace and effort are synonyms for non-action and action, struggle and ease, or movement and stillness. A more spiritual extraction of the words could be found in God and self-interest, Divinity and humanity, or surrendering and forcing. Grace, like gracefulness, implies an elegance of fluid motion. The Tao articulates this flowing as, "Less and less you need to force things, until finally you arrive at non-action. When nothing is done, nothing is left undone."¹ All of these words point to a key

¹ Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching*, 48.

imbalance prevalent in the world, particularly in the United States. Our lives in the Western world are oftentimes defined by effort in the way of struggle and toil. We believe we must get things done, so we do. In attempts to control what happens we create imbalance believing the way forward is by forging success. This also indicates an assumption that being a part of this world implies being a part of this process, as it is the mode of operation. We have very exaggerated cycles of rapid expansion and collapse, as there seems to be a lack of balance between the two extremes of perceived “laziness” and productivity. To escape this disparity would seem impossible for at the core of our essence we have somewhat evolved into a human “doing” instead of a human being.

Is it even possible to function in the world as we know it without using force? Milrepa and Eckhart were asked about if someone can live in the world and yet not be of it. The question of going off into a cave and meditating (as Milrepa did for nine years) to commune with the divine or instead being in the “world” as an active participant continues to be a question posed today of spiritual leaders. For Milrepa the “active life” can become a poison if the desire for worldly accomplishment becomes disguised as a way to help others. “Those who are full of worldly desires can do nothing to help others...Nobody can do anything for sentient beings without first attaining transcendent insight into Reality.”²

² Lhalungpa, *The Life of Milrepa*, 171.

Eckhart acknowledges the inevitability of activities and instead ascertains God must be in everything and let nothing else stand in our way of this truth.³ Operating from this place it would be possible to fall more easily into the gracefulness of life and a connection with spirit. In one of his sermons Eckhart says, "...we are made perfect by what happens to us rather than by what we do."⁴ A withdrawal must occur and at the same time strength of purpose. The Tao Te Ching asks us to do our job without clinging to the work, rushing ahead without going too far.⁵

Before exploring further the concept of exertion versus allowing, it becomes increasingly obvious that non-attachment must exist before grace can enter. It's as if we must accept things just as they are before we can proceed. Eckhart describes this as "disinterest" and believes it to be the most important virtue bringing us into our closest commune with God.⁶ He says, "...when a free mind is really disinterested, God is compelled to come into it..."⁷ Unlike "uninterest" it doesn't imply apathy or uncaring, instead it fosters a handing over of our will to something greater. This surrender of ourselves to the divine brings us into a state of what would be called "non-attachment" in Hinduism or Buddhism. The Bhagavad Gita speaks to this as a "resignation of the fruits of our action" leaving behind expectations of what the outcome will be.⁸ This

³ Blankney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, 11.

⁴ Blankney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, 107.

⁵ Mitchell, *Tao Te Ching*, 30.

⁶ Blankney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, 82.

⁷ Blankney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, 84.

⁸ Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 252.

necessary nonattachment step within effort and grace occurs as making all the difference of actually allowing grace to enter. Without desire we can experience stillness, where the divine resides.

And yet, even the nonattachment supposed to bring us closer to grace seems to require effort. One of my favorite Milrepa quotes says, “Since life is short and the time of death unknown, devote yourself wholly to meditation.”⁹ Devoting oneself to anything necessitates effort and doesn’t always come easily. The seemingly simple act of meditation requires a deep, consistent practice. Even in hatha yoga poses there exists a blend of exertion and surrender. Svasana, final relaxation pose, requires just enough energy not to fall asleep and still maintain a deep relaxation. Creativity represents another tipping point between action and non-action. It requires a deep letting go and also an intention. Struggling against the universe goes against its basic desire to create. The source of dreams and inspiration is of divine nature and yet groundedness in the physical world is needed for their realization. Without action and effort our goals quickly develop into superficial and hollow imaginings.

The bridge between this effort and effortlessness seems so narrow and leaves us the choice to carry on. In the Bible, Jesus encourages us to “*strive to enter through the narrow door.*”¹⁰ Buddhism instructs the “middle path” in all endeavors. What does this middle path look like between effort and grace and how do we mediate between these two worlds? Within that we must also find moments that require more of each. Some of humanities greatest breakthroughs have come from individuals capable of great work,

⁹ Lhalungpa, *The Life of Milrepa*, 165.

¹⁰ *King James Bible* Matthew 6:33 and Luke 13:24

who also knew how to enjoy the moment. It was said Einstein got his best ideas doodling and the popular story of Newton sitting under an apple tree and inspiring his exploration of gravity. These are examples of effort and grace in harmony. So it is with life, at any given moment, we must find the perfect equilibrium between effort and grace; between striving for an idealized future, and also enjoying the present moment.

Those who are slaves to work may have blazing success, but soon burn out. Those who only know rest may fantasize their lives away. Yoga, meditation, prayer, and other spiritual practices help us to harness these two opposites so that we might both discover and give form to our dreams. In addition they bring us back into the present moment where we can have the consciousness to explore one over the other. Yes, spiritual endeavors require an effort and a grace. I suppose they require and remind us how to mediate the paths of nonattachment, grace, and effort.

So is the path with spiritual transformation built upon disinterest. We put in our time with meditation or prayer, or we go to therapy, read books, and offer ourselves at places of worship. We get propelled along by our own strength, trying to get ourselves forward, hoping to catch a wave of freedom or intimacy with the divine. This is an essential part of the spiritual journey. Establishing a playful relationship with God a flirtation with ease on one hand and hard work on the other. Within this process, effort and grace are not mutually exclusive or even sequential; they are simultaneous, overlapping with a background supported by disinterest.

This overlapping allows us to keep our jobs, not following the path of asceticism into the mountains. In the words of Eckhart, "For the power to hear the eternal word is

within me and the power to see will leave me; for hearing I am passive and seeing I am active.”¹¹ Eckhart shows us we need both an effort of sight and a grace given by listening to experience God. In this case the sight being a fleeting response to the deep audible sounds resonating within us calling us forward into effortlessness.

Without striving on our part, we can never experience the divine grace encountered by Milrepa and Eckhart. Mere prayer without corresponding effort will not bear fruit. For even a little effort will protect from the greatest of fears.¹² When I lived at an ashram people spoke of a story of a man who, finding his house on fire, started praying for rain instead of trying to put the fire out. We cannot have effort nor grace without the other, it is through their dance where we begin to find our own equilibrium.

¹¹ Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, 108.

¹² Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 93.

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