

Meister Eckhart

(1260-1328)

Meister Eckhart was more than likely named John but has been invariably called Meister Eckhart. He entered the Dominican order near the German town of Erfurt in Germany, in 1277 was a student of arts at Paris, and by 1280 began studying philosophy at Cologne.

In 1293-94 he wrote a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, as a Bachelor of Theology in Paris. While there, one of his teachers was probably Albert the Great, who also taught Thomas Aquinas and who made an effort to defend Aquinas against a massive effort by fellow theologians to discredit Thomas's work.

In 1294, Eckhart became prior of the Dominicans at Erfurt and vicar of the vicariate of Thuringia. In 1302 he graduated as Master of Theology in Paris, and in 1303 he lectured there as regent master. From 1303 to 1311 he served as provincial of the Dominican province of Saxony, returning to Paris from 1311 to 1313 for a second regency in theology.

For the next decade Eckhart was Professor of Theology at Strasbourg, probably at the Dominican house of studies. Active as a preacher and spiritual director, he gained a high reputation with Dominican and Cistercian nuns, Beguines, and others.

Although he must have enjoyed the good opinion of his fellow Dominicans (judging by the positions of authority he held), trouble arose in 1326. Serious questions were raised about his teachings; formal challenges were brought by theological inquisitors at Cologne.

Eckhart defended himself vigorously, charging that the inquisitors were not competent to judge his work and also claiming an exemption as a mendicant friar. (In fact, many of these inquisitors did not actually read Eckhart's work but relied on summaries.)

After the judgment went against him in Cologne, Eckhart traveled to Avignon where he hoped to make a direct appeal to the Holy See, but he died before the matter was resolved.

The case, which rested on certain statements quoted from Eckhart's sermons, resulted in the condemnation of only some of his statements. Others were said to be permissible if properly explained. In fact, it is now thought that the entire case against him was politically motivated.

Because of these controversies, Eckhart's work was seldom copied or consulted at first. But in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, his ideas influenced such figures as John Tauler, Henry Suso, and John Ruusbroec.

Today Eckhart is widely read and appreciated, not so much for his theological opinions as for his vision of God. The selection that follows is from Sermon 34. In it, notice how he develops the two characters of Martha and Mary. Martha is the older, mature sister who is protective and concerned for Mary's well-being. Mary is the younger one who loves Jesus but hasn't yet learned mature responsibility. Although Eckhart is a teacher of the spiritual life, he apparently wants prayer to lead to a life of mature service!

SERMON 34

When Our Work Becomes a Spiritual Work Working in the World

Jesus went into a certain city, and a certain woman named Martha received him. (Luke 10:38)

Three things caused Mary to sit at our Lord's feet. The first was that God's goodness had embraced her soul. The second was a great, unspeakable longing: she yearned without knowing what it was she yearned after, and she desired without knowing what she desired! The third was the sweet consolation and bliss that she derived from the eternal words that came from Christ's mouth.

Three things also caused Martha to run about and serve her dear Christ. The first was maturity of age and a depth of her being, which was thoroughly trained to the most external matters. For this reason, she believed that no one was so well suited for activity as herself. The second was a wise prudence that knew how to achieve external acts to the highest degree that love demands. The third was the high dignity of her dear guest.

The masters of the spiritual life say that God is ready for every person's spiritual and physical satisfaction to the utmost degree that that person desires....

Martha Is Mature, Mary Immature

Now Martha says, "Lord, tell her to help me." Martha did not say this out of anger. She spoke rather out of a loving kindness because she was hard pressed. We must indeed call it a loving kindness or a lovable form of teasing. How was this? Pay attention! ... Martha knew Mary better than Mary knew Martha, for Martha had already lived quite a long time. Living affords the most noble kind of knowledge... Living causes pleasure and light to be better known...

This was how it was with Martha. Therefore she said, "Lord, tell her to help me." It was as if she meant: "My sister thinks that she *can* already do what she *wishes* so long as she is only seated beneath your consolation. Let her know now if this is so, and tell her to get up and go away from you!" Next, it was tender love although Martha said it after due reflection. Mary was so filled with longing that she yearned without knowing why... Then Christ replied... "Martha, Martha, you are concerned, you are upset about many things. One thing is necessary!" ...

This was how things were with our dear Martha. Therefore he said to her: "*One thing* is necessary, not *two things*. I and you, embraced *once* by the eternal light – that is *one thing*." ... Light and spirit are *one thing* in the embrace of the eternal light.

The Circle of Eternity

Pay attention to what the "circle of eternity" is. The soul has three ways to God. One of them is to seek God in all creatures through multiple "pursuits" and through burning love. This is what King David meant when he said: "In all things I have found rest" (Eccl. 24:11).

The second way is a wayless way that is free and yet bound. On it we are raised up and carried without will and without form above ourselves and all things... This is what Christ meant when he said: "You are a happy man, Peter! Flesh and blood do not enlighten you..."

The third way is indeed called a "way," yet it means being "at home": seeing God directly in his own being. Our dear Christ says, "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life" (John 14:6).

Listen then to this wonder! How wonderful it is to be both outside and inside, to seize and to be seized, to see and at the same time to be what is seen, to hold and to be held – *that* is the goal where the spirit remains at rest, united with our dear eternity...

Mary Was Still Learning

Martha was so real that her works did not hinder her. Her activity and works brought her to eternal happiness. This happiness was indeed somewhat indirect, but a noble nature, constant industry, and virtue... are very helpful in this connection. Mary also had to become such a Martha before she could become the mature Mary. For when she sat at our Lord's feet, she was still not the true Mary...

Only after the disciples received the Holy Spirit did they begin to carry out acts of virtue. For this reason, when Mary was sitting at our Lord's feet, she was still learning. Then she was admitted into the school and learned how to live...

May God help us to follow him sincerely in the practice of the true virtues! Amen.

BIBLE SELECTION

Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV)

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "I remain in you, Jesus ..."

(Exhale) "... So I can serve others."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Consider Meister Eckhart's choice to highlight Martha as a spiritual exemplar instead of Mary, and ponder the significance of his perspective. What is this "one needful thing" he refers to, and how does he skillfully attribute it to both Martha and Mary?
2. The story of Martha and Mary showcases different facets of Christian life: service and spirituality. Explore the interconnectedness of these aspects and consider how they mutually shape and influence one another.
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Spend a day or an evening being "Martha." Begin by abiding with Jesus in prayer, then proceed to take care of dinner or housework so that others can be at ease. Reflect on how this experience feels. Consider how the practice of serving others from a place of prayer can deepen our connection with God.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

The lesson Eckhart seeks to instill within us is this: remember, always remember that Mary and Martha were sisters. That is to say, service and spirituality go hand in hand, the active life and the contemplative life should never be separated.

It is a hard lesson for us to learn. We seem constantly to swing from one extreme of the pendulum to the other. First we are out working and serving, doing and accomplishing. But, sooner or later, exhaustion of body and barrenness of soul can no longer be ignored. And so we drop everything and withdraw into a tight circle of self-care and self-interest.

What we need to see is the way the Mary and Martha impulses within us are to function in symbiosis. We first need the "one necessary thing" that Jesus spoke of. Eckhart describes this one necessary thing as "I and you, embraced once by the eternal light – that is one thing... Light and spirit are one thing in the embrace of the eternal light." His somewhat obtuse language means simply that we first enter a loving, ongoing, ever-growing relationship with God. Another way to put it is that we learn to become a branch, gaining our life sustenance from Christ, the vine.

Once this reality has worked its way deep within us then, out of the abundance of this life, we serve others, freely and joyfully. Even the clarity about which services to undertake and the means for accomplishing them flow out of the "one necessary thing." This is why Eckhart could hold Martha up as an example for us of "the practice of the true virtues." She had, according to Eckhart's understanding of the story, the one necessary thing that Mary was in the process of entering into. We may want to differ with Eckhart's interpretation of the spiritual maturity of Martha, but we can all appreciate and learn from his central point, namely, that spirituality and service are inseparable twins.

Excerpts taken from *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, Editors. HarperCollins, 2000.)