

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

All and Nothing

St. John of the Cross and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue

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1

As the Christian-Buddhist dialogue gains momentum and spreads to all parts of the world, the attention of scholars and students of religion is drawn to the notions of nothingness and non-being. It is well known that the koan *mu* (無) usually translated as *nothing* is central to Zen practise. Both beginners and proficients wrestle with *mu*, repeating it with the exhalation of the breath or keeping it before the mind's eye. And in the *Heart Sutra* (*Hannya Shingyō*), recited constantly in Zen monasteries everywhere, we hear a series of negations that baffle the uninitiated: "no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind. . . no old-age-and-death, and no extinction of them; no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path, no cognition, also no attainment. . ."

The distinguished Kyoto philosopher Nishitani Keiji, in his well-known book *Shukyō to wa nani-ka?* (宗教とは何か?) translated into English as *Religion and Nothingness* faces the western tradition and asks for nothing less than a conversion to absolute nothingness.¹ This may sound like a shocking challenge to a western civilization based not

¹ See *Religion and Nothingness* by Keiji Nishitani, translated by Jan Van Bragt, University of California Press, 1982, p. xxxvi.

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on *nothing* but on *something*. It may sound like a forthright challenge to the Christian belief in an omnipotent God. But is it?

Even a cursory glance at the writing of Nishitani reveals that he is propounding neither atheism nor nihilism. Indeed he wants to rescue the West from an atheism and a nihilism that are sapping its vitality and strength. His thought, as well as much modern Buddhist thought, will be misunderstood if we do not realize that nothing is a translation of *mu*, and *mu* is a translation of the sanskrit *sunyata*. In fact all the negative words in Zen are finally rooted in *sunyata*, which has been translated in a variety of ways. Of *sunyata* a standard Buddhist dictionary writes: "Although often translated as 'void' or 'nothingness', the translation 'relativity' . . . is preferable. Sunyata does not deny the concept of existence as such, but holds that all existence and the constituent elements which make up existence are dependent upon causation. Sunyata . . . must not be confused with nihilism or a denial of the existence of phenomena in any form."²

And so the word nothing or nothingness as well as the Chinese character (無) can easily be misunderstood. *Kū* (空) meaning emptiness or the sky is certainly a better translation. Enlightened people will say that no word or character can express *sunyata* which can only be grasped (and then partially) by an awakening or enlightenment. Be that as it may, one thing is clear: the Buddhist *nothing* must not be taken as a metaphysical denial of existence as though one were to say: "No thing is there."

In this paper, however, it is not my intention to enter deeply into the Buddhist experience of *sunyata*. Rather is it my intention to look at the notion of nothing in the mystical tradition of the West. Obviously this can only be done satisfactorily in collaboration with Buddhist scholars. But a first step can be made with a view to building a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity.

2

As theology developed in the early Christian centuries there arose a *theology of affirmation* and a *theology of negation*. The two theologies complemented one another, one stating that we can affirm that God is and that we can say something about His attributes; the other stating

² *Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary*, Daitō Shuppansha, Tokyo, 1979, p. 184.

that we know more about what God is not than about what He is, thus stressing his unknowability. The theology of negation influenced the mystical current associated with great names like Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, St. John of the Cross and St. Therese of Lisieux. The early Thomas Merton was also influenced greatly by this trend, as was the English poet T.S. Eliot. And so we are here dealing with a tradition that is part of modern culture in the West, vibrantly alive in the hearts of thousands of contemplatives throughout the world. This trend is also called a mysticism of darkness because it uses symbols like night, the cloud, emptiness, nothingness. But it should not be considered melancholy or pessimistic; for the darkness is full of joyful wisdom and the night is more lovely than the dawn.

It is here interesting to note that the theology of negation was influenced at its roots by neoplatonism; and some scholars maintain (though they have not succeeded in proving it to the satisfaction of all) that neoplatonism was influenced by Indian thought. If this is true, it is not impossible that *sunyata*, somehow Christianised by early theologians and mystics, made its way into the western world at the beginning of the Christian era.

3

This paper deals with one of the greatest exponents of western mysticism: the sixteenth century Spaniard, St. John of the Cross, who is acclaimed not only as a mystic but also as a poet and an artist. Today he is the master and guide of many contemplatives, who assiduously study and follow his radical teaching. His emphasis on nothing (in Spanish *nada*) has earned him the title of *doctor de la nada*. But obviously his nothing, like *sunyata*, is far from atheism. In fact it is all wisdom and love. Let me quote a passage from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* where, citing the prophet Jeremias, he writes about the nothingness of all things:

“All the creatures of heaven and earth are nothing when compared with God, as Jeremias points out: ‘I looked at the earth, and it was empty and nothing; and at the heavens, and I saw they had no light’ (Jer. 4:23). By saying that he saw an empty earth, he meant that all its creatures were nothing and

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that the earth too was nothing. In stating that he looked up to the heavens and beheld no light, he meant that all the heavenly luminaries were pure darkness in comparison with God. All creatures in contrast to God are nothing, and a person's attachments to them are less than nothing. . . just as darkness is nothing, and less than nothing, since it is a privation of light. . ."³

Note that St. John of the Cross here says that created things are nothing *when compared with God*. Scripture scholars would probably quarrel with his exegesis of Jeremias but no Thomist would deny that he is here expounding sound metaphysics. For Aquinas holds that separated from God all things are nothing, just as they were created from nothing.

But is God nothing?

For St. John of the Cross God is all. But *the experience of God* can be like nothing. Indeed, at a high stage in the mystical life, faith is like thick darkness or like night; and God also is like night to the soul. In other words God is light in Himself but darkness to us; God is all in Himself but nothing to us.

The Zen people say that lengthy explanations of *mu* are useless and that only by enlightenment can one grasp its meaning. And the same can be said of the *nada* of St. John of the Cross. Nevertheless I will try to say something about his doctrine of nothingness.

4

At the beginning of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, his most theological work, St. John of the Cross draws a sketch of the mountain that the would-be mystic must climb. (See Appendix). It is said that in his teaching and direction he made great use of this sketch which points to the way to true wisdom and love. On the summit of the mountain we find the words,

“Only the honor and glory of God dwells on this mount”

³ *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 1.4.3. All quotations in this paper are taken from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, ICS Publications, Washington D.C., 1979.

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And then the saint describes the steep path up the mountain with the words:

“Nothing, nothing, nothing
nothing, nothing, nothing
and even on the mount, nothing”

Even on the mount nothing! Even when one is face to face with the glory of God, one has nothing, one sees nothing, one is nothing.

St. John of the Cross admits that there are other paths up this mountain; but the way of nothing is the most direct and the most secure. So well does he fit his title of *doctor de la nada*.

But elsewhere in the same sketch he introduces another note: that of all. And so he writes:

“To reach satisfaction in all
desire its possession in nothing
To come to the knowledge of all
desire the knowledge of nothing
To come to possess all
desire the possession of nothing
To arrive at being all
desire to be nothing”

In this way the nothing is balanced by the all. Now we see that the nothing is not a lugubrious negativity but a freedom from slavery, so that one can love all and have all. The one, who has nothing, has everything. And so the saint can look at all created things and exclaim paradoxically:

“Now that I least desire them, I have them all without desire”

Here we see that St. John of the Cross is not inveighing against things (for all created things are good) but against the desire for things, against clinging to things, against putting one's security in things. And he means things separated from God. In other words he insists that separated from God things are nothing but in God they are in a sense everything. And so his doctrine here is like that of another Spanish mystic, St. Ignatius of Loyola, who spoke about seeing all things in God and God in all things. His words also echo St. Paul who spoke of

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“having nothing yet possessing all things” (2 Cor. 6:10). But St. John of the Cross has expressed this all-and-nothing doctrine with such starkness that he can be called not only *doctor de la nada* but also *doctor del todo*.

5

For St. John of the Cross the path of all-and-nothing is the path of Jesus. He is quite clear in asserting that his doctrine is nothing but an interpretation of the Gospel wherein Jesus is the prince of mystics. And so he prefaces his whole work with words of good counsel:

“First, have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with His. You must then study His life in order to know how to imitate Him and behave in all events as He would.”⁴

These words are of cardinal importance for the understanding of the sanjuanist nothing. In particular St. John of the Cross had great love for the cross of Jesus. When asked about his nothing he very quickly drew a small sketch of Jesus crucified, a sketch which has become famous not only for its religious but also for its artistic merits. It is as though he were to say: “On the cross Jesus had nothing; and I also wish to have nothing. On the cross Jesus became nothing; and I also wish to become nothing. Through the cross Jesus became everything; and I also wish to become everything.” And of Jesus he also says: “In His life He had no other gratification, nor did He desire any other, than the fulfillment of His Father’s will, which he called His meat and food.”⁵

But it was above all in the heart-rending *Lama Sabacthani* that Jesus became nothing or was, as St. John of the Cross says, annihilated. “At the moment of His death,” he writes, “He was certainly annihilated in His soul, without any consolation or relief, since the Father left Him that way in innermost aridity in the lower part. He was thereby compelled to cry out: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mt. 27:46). This was the most extreme abandonment, sensitively, that He had suffered in His life.”⁶ But this nothing was also everything and the

⁴ *Ascent*, 1.13.3.

⁵ *Ascent*, 1.13.5.

⁶ *Ascent*, 2.7.11.

annihilation was a triumph so that the saint can continue:

“And by it He accomplished the most marvellous work of His whole life, surpassing all the works and deeds and miracles He had ever performed on earth or in heaven. That is, He brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace.”⁷

Then he returns to the *nada*:

“The Lord achieved this, as I say, at the moment in which He was most annihilated in all things; in His reputation before men, since in beholding Him die they mocked Him instead of esteeming Him; in His human nature, by dying; and in spiritual help and consolation from the Father, for He was forsaken by His Father at that time. . .”⁸

In short, Jesus surrendered everything, even His life. And in this way He became nothing.

And the disciple is not greater than his master nor is the one sent greater than the one who sends. As Jesus was reduced to nothing so also the disciple and “when he is brought to nothing, the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between his soul and God will be effected.”⁹ “Blessed are the poor” said Jesus; and by the poor he means the radically poor, who have nothing. Such people are blessed and they will possess the kingdom, which is all. Gospel texts declaring that the disciple of Jesus must renounce all—even life itself—could be multiplied. One must renounce father and mother and wife and children and lands and all things. Going on a journey one must not take two tunics: one must take nothing. The man who found the treasure in the field covered it up and then with great joy sold everything in order to buy that field.

It is important to remember that the renunciation of all things is the answer to a personal call and in cooperation with the grace that comes with that call. One does not simply sit down and renounce all things.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Rather does one hear the loving call: "Come, follow me!" and then one proceeds to renounce all things step by step under the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit.

6

I have spoken of nothing as the way to the most radical poverty and as an expression of that same poverty. Now let me come to the peculiarly mystical dimension of this poverty of St. John of the Cross.

Nothing means that one must give up not only desire for material things but also desire for knowledge. In doing so one enters into a cloud of unknowing and becomes nothing in a cognitive or spiritual way. And yet one gives up this knowledge for a more sublime knowledge which can be called faith or wisdom or enlightenment or awakening. And this, being a knowledge of God, can be called all. Of this wisdom St. Paul writes: "But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. . . (1 Cor. 2:7). It is secret and hidden (and from these words "mystical" is derived) because it is quite different from ordinary knowledge and cannot be understood by the ordinary working of the intellect. Indeed by comparison with ordinary knowledge it is foolishness, for the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men and women.

But for a better understanding of St. John of the Cross let me say a word about his theological and psychological background.

Through his study of scholasticism St. John of the Cross inherited a Greek psychology which spoke of the human person as composed of sense and spirit and of possessing three powers of the soul: the memory, the understanding and the will. From his theological studies he knew that human beings are called to the vision of God; but, wounded by original and personal sin, they can only come to this goal after extensive purification achieved through the sufferings of this life or through purgatory after death. In this life we can know God by faith, which is a gift: in the next life we can only know God through the gift which scholastics called the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*). And so the mystical life is a journey of faith and of purification leading through death to the supreme awakening: the vision of God. Such, in the briefest terms, is the theological background. Now let me look at the practicalities.

When one embarks on the life of prayer one makes use of the senses and of the three powers of the soul: the memory, the understanding and the will. In short, one reasons and thinks and speaks to God in the ordinary way, assisted by ordinary grace. But as time goes on God begins to communicate himself "by pure spirit." This is a light so powerful that it blinds the ordinary powers of the soul and one is left helpless, experiencing no sensible consolation and unable to use the memory, the understanding and the will. This is the dark night. It is brought on by the light of God, but it is like an experience of nothingness. Here are the words of St. John of the Cross:

"This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorance and imperfections, natural and spiritual and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology. Through this contemplation God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens."¹⁰

Here every word is important. It is an inflow of God Himself. In other words it is a direct meeting with God. Again, this action of God is both purgative and illuminative. It purges the soul and at the same time teaches the soul. And the soul does not understand what is going on: that is why it is in the night of nothingness. And the great lesson taught to the soul is perfect love.

And so the faculties are emptied in order to be filled. The senses are transformed: and how powerfully the senses of St. John of the Cross were transformed is evident from the sensual beauty of his poetry. Also transformed are the three powers of the soul and, thanks to this inflow of God into the soul, there is faith in the intellect, hope in the memory and love in the will. In this way the person becomes like God. Indeed, he or she "becomes God through participation."¹¹ St. John of the Cross is careful to avoid pantheism. One cannot become God substantially: i.e. one cannot become the substance of God. But one does become God by union of memory, understanding and will—by faith, hope and charity.

¹⁰ *The Dark Night*, 2.5.1.

¹¹ *The Dark Night*, 2.20.5.

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This purification is very painful. In the first night, the night of the senses, one is deprived of sensible consolation. In the second night one is deprived of all that supported one's faith. One is then left with pure faith or naked faith whereby one believes God for God—just as one hopes in God for God and loves God for God. No human considerations now help one's faith. Indeed these human considerations have fallen away, so that pure faith is an experience like pure doubt: it can be compared to the great doubt or the great death in Zen wherein one loses everything. A classic example of this night of faith is found in the experience of St. Therese of Lisieux, the French Carmelite, who passed through a stage in which she felt that she had lost all faith and had become an atheist. In fact this was the time when her faith was most pure and most resplendent, but for her it was a Gethsemani.

And this night is painful not only because of the loss of all things but also because the communication of God is very painful to human nature. No one can see God and live, says the scripture; and the light of God burns and shrivels up the human heart plunging it into terrible darkness. Of the purgation the saint can write:

“When this purgative contemplation oppresses a man, he feels very vividly indeed the shadow of death, the sight of death, and the sorrows of hell, all of which reflect the feeling of God's absence, of being chastised and rejected by Him, and of being unworthy of Him, as well as the object of His anger. The soul experiences all this and even more, for now it seems that this affliction will last for ever.”¹²

Yet this suffering does not stem from the action of God but from the impurity of the person who cannot at first accept that action. And it does not last for ever. As he or she is purified, the painful suffering gives way to deep peace and joy. It is not that the darkness goes away but rather that one comes to love the darkness. Hence St. John of the Cross can sing:

“O night, more lovely than the dawn”

The night is beautiful because it brings great wisdom; it brings a great liberation from fear, anxiety, clinging of all kinds. It leads to the

¹² *The Dark Night*, 2.6.2.

spiritual marriage between God and the soul. It leads to the vision of God, found through death and the light of glory.

7

I have said that the nothing of St. John of the Cross is a radical following of Jesus. It is an answer to the call of Jesus who has first loved us, an answer like that of Peter when he said: "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you" (Jn. 21:17), and Jesus said: "Follow me." And St. John of the Cross might add: "Follow me into the dark night, and through that dark night to the vision of my glory in eternal bliss."

In describing this following of Jesus in love St. John of the Cross makes extensive use of the *Song of Songs*. Indeed his greatest poems center around the bride-bridegroom theme in which Jesus, the Incarnate Word, is the bridegroom and the soul is the bride. I need not here enter into controversial questions about this symbolism. Only let me say that in appealing to the bride-bridegroom theme he is following a long mystical tradition that goes back to Origen in the third century and is particularly evident in St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Indeed the man-women theme is central to the whole Bible from *Genesis* to *Revelation* and it is found in the prophets where God is the bridegroom and Israel the bride. St. John of the Cross finds the all-and-nothing theme in the love of the *Song of Songs*:

"If a man offered for love
All the wealth of his house
It would be utterly scorned." (Ct. 8:7)

And this is to say that if a man offered all for love it would be nothing.

It should be noted that when St. John of the Cross speaks of the bridegroom he is not referring to the imageless Godhead but to Jesus, the Word Incarnate. And he says that his stanzas "deal with the exchange of love between the soul and Christ, its Bridegroom. . ."¹³ I say this to stress the deeply incarnational dimension of his writings. Indeed, he makes the interesting remark that when one attains to the vision of God the first thing one wants to understand is the mystery of the Incarnation:

¹³ *The Spiritual Canticle*, Prologue.

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“One of the main reasons for the desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ (Phil. 1.23) is to see Him face to face and thoroughly understand the profound and eternal mysteries of His Incarnation, which is by no means the lesser part of beatitude. As Christ Himself says to the Father in St. John's Gospel: ‘This is eternal life that they might know you, the one true God, and your Son Jesus Christ whom you have sent’ (Jn. 17:3). The first thing a person desires to do after having come a long distance is to see and converse with the one he deeply loves; similarly, the first thing the soul desires upon coming to the vision of God is to know and enjoy the deep secrets and mysteries of the Incarnation and the ancient ways of God dependent upon it”¹⁴

So central is the Incarnation to his writings.

I have spoken of the following of Christ. Now let me add that there are two ways in which one may follow. One can fix one's eyes on the outer Jesus, imitating him, acting as he would act and speaking as he would speak. But there is also an inner following whereby one allows the life of Christ to flow through one's whole being. Here one can say that I dwell in Christ and Christ dwells in me, just as the branch dwells in the vine and the vine in the branch. This indwelling of Jesus is a real experience in the eucharistic life of Christians. St. John of the Cross makes use of the Pauline text: “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). He has been saying that in the union of love “each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love.” And he goes on:

“This is the meaning of St. Paul's affirmation: *Vivo autem, iam non ego; vivit vero in me Christus* (I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me)(Gal. 2.20). In saying, I live, now not I, he meant that even though he had life it was not his, because he was transformed in Christ, and it was more divine than human. He consequently asserts that he does not live, but that Christ lives in him. In accord with this likeness and transformation, we can say that his life and Christ's were one life through union of love. This transformation into

¹⁴ *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 37.1.

divine life will be effected perfectly in heaven, in all those who merit the vision of God and not their own life—although, indeed, it will be their own life, because God's life will be theirs. They will truly proclaim, We live, now not we, but God lives in us."¹⁵

And so again we have the all and the nothing. The life of God is all and it lives in me as it will live in the blessed in heaven. On the other hand my own life is nothing since I can say with Paul: "It is no longer I who live. . . ." And yet St. John of the Cross is again careful to avoid words that might lead to pantheism for he writes: "He (Paul) meant that even though he had life it was not his, because he was transformed in Christ, and it was not his, because he was transformed in Christ, and it was more divine than human."¹⁶ It is also important to note that the saint keeps emphasizing that union with God is through Christ. We dwell in Christ and Christ dwells in the Father.

8

As one reflects on this mystical journey one naturally asks about the goal. Where is it leading? Is there an end?

And as we have already seen the goal is the vision of God which can only be found through death. This vision is the all for which one renounces all and becomes nothing. The poetry of St. John of the Cross is filled with the longing for the vision of God and the suffering of one who loves God but cannot know Him as He is. In *The Spiritual Canticle* he writes:

"Reveal Your presence,
And may the vision of Your beauty be my death;
For the sickness of love
Is not cured
Except by Your very presence and image"¹⁷

Reveal your presence! Let me see your face! Until I see You face to face I am sick with love. This theme runs through the poetry, occurring again and again. The greatest wound is the wound of love; but this is a

¹⁵ *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 12.8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 11.

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sweet wound. "O sweet cautery, O delightful wound! O gentle hand! O delicate touch. . ." ¹⁸ And only death is the answer. The old mystical theologians had asked whether or not Moses and St. Paul had had the vision of God in this life. But this is an academic question. In St. John of the Cross we find the longing for death and the hope that the vision of God may be the very cause of his death.

But is there any foretaste of the vision of God in this life?

We know that St. John of the Cross in his thrust towards unknowing rigorously rejects visions and voices and revelations of all kinds. But there is a certain awakening or enlightenment in this life which he does not reject. Of this he sings:

"How gently and lovingly
You wake in my heart. . ." ¹⁹

and together with this awakening is the breathing of God:

"And in Your sweet breathing,
Filled with good and glory,
How tenderly you swell my heart with love!" ²⁰

Here is an awakening which is not, and cannot, be rejected. And the saint writes: "There are many kinds of awakening which God effects in the soul, so many that we would never finish explaining them all." ²¹ He does not explain them all; but does attempt a description of one of them. Here it is interesting to note that the saint never says, "I awaken. . ." or "I get enlightenment. . ." It is the Son of God who awakens in me. Moreover it is not an awakening of the imageless Godhead but of the Word Incarnate. "For this awakening is a movement of the Word in the substance of the soul. . ." Let me quote this extraordinary passage in detail:

"For this awakening is a movement of the Word in the substance of the soul, containing such grandeur, dominion and glory, and intimate sweetness that it seems to the soul that all the balsams and fragrant spices of the world are com-

¹⁸ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 2.

¹⁹ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 4.4.

mingled, stirred, and shaken so as to yield their sweet odor, and that all the kingdoms and dominions of the world and all the powers and virtues of heaven are moved; and not only this, but it seems that all the virtues and substances and perfections and graces of every created thing glow and make the same movement all at once."²²

But words are inadequate to describe the movement of this great Emperor (the reference here is to Isaiah (9:6)). The remarkable delight of this awakening is that the soul comes to know creatures through God and not God through creatures. In other words it comes to know the effects through their cause and not the cause through its effects. "And the soul sees what God is in Himself and what He is in His creatures in only one view, just as one who in opening the door of a palace beholds in one act the eminence of the person who dwells inside together with what he is doing."²³ And then a mighty voices sounds within:

"That which a person knows and experiences of God in this awakening is entirely beyond words. Since this awakening is the communication of God's excellence to the substance of the soul, which is its heart. . . an immense, powerful voice sounds in it, the voice of a multitude of excellences, of thousands of virtues in God, infinite in number."²⁴

And if such is the experience of man or woman in this life, what must be the experience of the vision of God in glory! "For if, when He does awaken, scarcely opening His eyes, He has such an effect on the soul, what would it be like were He ordinarily in it fully awake?"²⁵

Besides the awakening there is the breathing of the Spirit. But about this St. John of the Cross will not speak. "I do not desire to speak of this spiration, filled for the soul with good and glory and delicate love of God, for I am aware of being incapable of so doing, and were I to try, it might seem less than it is."²⁶

²² Ibid.

²³ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 4.7.

²⁴ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 4.10.

²⁵ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 4.15.

²⁶ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 4.17.

And so *The Living Flame of Love* ends with silence.

9

If one cannot speak about the greatest awakenings in this life, how can one speak about the vision of God in glory? In treating of the beatific vision, which is the goal of human life, St. John of the Cross follows the theology of his day. Obviously the vision of God does not mean that one looks at God as a person might look at a picture, though such naive presentations of the vision of God have sometimes appeared in Christian art. For St. John of the Cross the vision of God is not the person looking at a picture but the union of the intellect with God. In this life the human will can be united with God, but the intellect can only be united with God through faith. We can *love* God as He is; our will can go directly to His very substance; but we cannot *know* God as He is, and our intellect is always in darkness—the darkness of faith. But in glory we are united with God through both intellect and will, thus “becoming God by participation.” Traditional theology appealed to Paul: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Towards the end of *The Dark Night* St. John of the Cross speaks of the ladder of love by which one ascends to God. Using an interesting metaphor he tells us that “as one climbs a ladder to pillage the fortresses containing goods and treasures, so too, by this secret contemplation, the soul ascends in order to plunder, know, and possess the goods and treasures of heaven.”²⁷ And so one climbs this ladder, rung by rung, until one comes to the vision of God through death. St. John of the Cross uses the traditional scriptural texts to make his point:

“The tenth and last step of this secret ladder of love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God which a person possesses as soon as he reaches it. After reaching the ninth step in this life, the soul departs from the body. Since these souls—few that they are—are extremely purged through love, they do not enter purgatory. St. Matthew says: *Beati mundo corde, quoniam ipsi Deum*

²⁷ *The Dark Night*, 2.18.1.

videbunt (Mt. 5:8). As we mentioned, this vision is the cause of the soul's complete likeness to God. St. John says: *We know that we shall be like Him* (1 Jn. 3:2), not because the soul will have as much capacity as God—this is impossible—but because all that it is will become like God. Thus it will be called, and shall be, God through participation."²⁸

But again, in speaking of the vision of God, the greatest mystics are reduced to silence.

10

I began by saying that the doctrine of St. John of the Cross could be a bridge between Christianity and Buddhism. In conclusion, then, let me indicate some areas in which fruitful dialogue may be possible.

First let us recall that as the Bodhisattva is one who seeks for wisdom so also is St. John of the Cross and those who follow his teaching. In both cases the seeker after wisdom begins with a total commitment. The Bodhisattva makes his vows:

However immeasurable the Dharma Teachings are,
We vow to master them all;
However endless the Buddha's Way is,
We vow to follow it.²⁹

St. John of the Cross begins with a great determination to seek the beloved at all costs:

Seeking my Love
I will head for the mountains and the watersheds,
I will not gather flowers,
Nor fear wild beasts.³⁰

While it is true that St. John of the Cross is primarily one who loves and that the object of his love is Jesus, the Incarnate Word, it is also true that the final goal is wisdom: the vision of God. In Buddhism the goal is nirvana. Whether nirvana and the vision of God have anything

²⁸ *The Dark Night*, 2.20.5.

²⁹ *Shiguseigan, Great Vows for All*.

³⁰ *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 3.

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in common is a subject on which Christians and Buddhists could begin fruitful dialogue.

Again, in both the process has certain similarities. One goes beyond the discriminating intellect to a realm of silence which can be described as emptiness, nothingness and darkness. Going forth from one's self one may pass through a period of apparent meaninglessness and of great suffering called the great doubt or the great death in Zen and the dark night in St. John of the Cross. This is a period of purification and leads to awakening or enlightenment in which one becomes one's true self.

And is there anything in common between *sunyata* and *nada*? Here interesting dialogue has already begun. Enough to refer my readers to the two articles of James Heisig: *Sunyata and Kenosis*.³¹ The author points to and develops dialogue between *sunyata* and *Epistle to the Philippians* where Paul says that Jesus emptied himself taking the form of a servant. Dialogue on this point has been made by philosophers of the Kyoto school. I have not mentioned it in this paper because St. John of the Cross never quotes this text. But it does fit with his doctrine of *nada*.

Again, studies are being made on Christian *agape* and Buddhist *karuna*. What the future holds we do not know.

For fruitful dialogue we must look not only at similarities but also at differences. On this point both Buddhists and Christians agree. And one difference seems to be that in St. John of the Cross the interpersonal dimension is very strong. The love of the bride and the bridegroom is central to his poetry and to his thought. As I have said, his journey begins with a deep commitment to Jesus who is the Word made Flesh and through Jesus to the Father—through Jesus he comes to a Trinitarian experience which is the vision of God. While he does say that the elect become God by participation, he is always careful to maintain the autonomous (though not separate) personality of men and women. And this interpersonal dimension of the mystical experience is carried over into human friendship in this life.

In this paper I have spoken about St. John of the Cross. It should be remembered, however, that he is just one in a whole line of mystics,

³¹ *Spirituality Today*, Vol. 39, Nos. 3 & 4, 1987.

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each of whom has his or her strong points and limitations. The dialogue, then, must be carried on through study of a great variety of Buddhists and Christians. Above all it must be carried on by men and women who themselves have some experience of Buddhist wisdom or Christian wisdom.