Chapter 3

HUMAN DESTINY
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Introduction

The human mind has a natural tendency to take cognizance first of all, of the aims that are targeted and then of the way or the means of attaining the aims and the ends. This is evident in every project that people undertake and every programme in the academic world as well as in the world of culture, entertainment, business, transport, communication etc. Thinkers and teachers like Gautama Buddha and Friar John immediately realize first of all, the importance of setting the end or the goals in the first place in their own personal lives and next in their teachings and writings for the benefit of humanity in general. It is logical therefore, that we deal here with the aims and targets of these two great sages whose lives and particularly whose teachings we propose to compare.

Gautama Buddha

The ultimate goal of Buddhists in general is to attain the state of nirvana. It is towards this goal that all ascetico-religious praxis and the doctrinal formulations are geared. The purpose of Buddhist life is contained in the kind of soteriology that the Buddha proclaimed upon attaining enlightenment concerning the true nature of existence in the world and its ultimate fulfilment. The nature of ultimate goal can properly be evaluated only if the nature of life is understood correctly within the context of day-to-day experiences. This is what we attempted to do in
chapter two which presents a general outline of the perspectives of Gautama Buddha on the one hand and Friar John on the other.

**Nirvana – the Goal**

A significant insight that the Buddha had concerning life is contained in the Four Noble Truths. Life in the world is characterised by pain or sorrow. It is the simplest characterisation of existential condition of sentient beings in the world. Therefore it is but natural for every creature to seek freedom from this pain. It is this understanding of life that has determined the goal for a Buddhist. Hence the goal of life must be judged within the framework of this understanding that life is painful.

From this simple description of life given by the Buddha, it is clear that the goal of life, as opposed to the phenomenal life must necessarily be of the nature of painlessness. This goal of ultimate repose is termed as nirvana. As a state in itself, nirvana consists of total freedom from that which the phenomenal life denotes. Life is painful on account of its fluxional nature – which expresses itself through birth, growth and death, which is unending as it is cyclic (samsara). Caught up in this samsara, every being experiences pain at every level of existence. Freedom from the recurring samsara has to be a real one, and not a notional one. It is in nirvana that such freedom is realized.²
Etymology

_Nirvana_ is a Sanskrit word (nibbāna in Pāli) that has been used by various religious groups in India, but it primarily refers to the spiritual goal in Buddhism. In the broadest sense the word _nirvana_ is used in the same way as the English word for _enlightenment_, a generic word used to designate any Buddhist notion of the highest spiritual experience.

The word _nirvana_ literally means “blown out” (as in a candle) and refers, in the Buddhist context, to the imperturbable stillness of mind after the fires of desire, aversion, and delusion have been finally extinguished.³

“_Nirvāṇa_” is composed of three phones: _ni, va_ and _na_.

- **ni** (_nir, nis, nih_): _out, away from, without_, a term that is used to negate.
- **va**: _blowing_ as in _blowing of the wind_ and also as _smelling_⁴
- **na**: _nor, never, do not, did not, should not_⁵

The abhidharma-mahāvibhāsa-sāstra, a sarvastivādin commentary, 3rd century BCE and later, describes the possible etymological interpretations of the word _nirvana_.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vana</th>
<th>+Nir</th>
<th>Nature of nirvana</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The path of rebirth</td>
<td>Leaving off</td>
<td>Being away from the path of rebirth permanently avoiding all paths of transmigration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest</td>
<td>Without</td>
<td>To be in a state which has got rid of, forever, of the dense forest of the three fires of lust, malice and delusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weaving</td>
<td>Being free</td>
<td>Freedom from the knot of the vexations of karmas and in which the texture of both birth and death is not to be woven</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stench or stink</td>
<td>Without</td>
<td>Being without and free from all stench of karmas</td>
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So etymologically, the Pāli word *Nibbāna* is formed of *Ni* and *Vana*. *Ni* is a negative particle and *vana* means lusting or craving. “It is called Nibbāna, in that it is a departure from the craving which is called vana, lusting.” Literally, Nibbāna means non-attachment.

It may also be defined as the extinction of lust, hatred and ignorance, “The whole world is in flames,” says the Buddha. “By what fire is it kindled? By the fire of lust, hatred and ignorance, by the fire of birth, old age, death, pain, lamentation, sorrow, grief and despair it is kindled.”
Early Buddhist and Abhidharma Traditions:

In the Pāli Nikāyas and Chinese Agamas, works first written down two or three centuries after the death of the Buddha, there is little philosophical discussion about the nature of nirvana. On technical points such as the enlightened person’s status after death, the sutras admonish that such metaphysical speculation is only an obstacle to achieving the ultimate goal.⁶ In a famous story found in the Majjhima Nikāya, Malunkyaputta asked the Buddha several metaphysical questions, including whether the Buddha continues after death. Gautama expressly refused to answer any question relating to life after death and condemned all speculation as unedifying:

I have not revealed that the Arhat exists after death, I have not revealed that he does not exist; I have not revealed that he at once exists and does not exist after death, nor that he neither exists nor does not exist after death. And why, Malunkyaputta, have I not revealed these things? Because, O Malunkyaputta, this is not edifying, nor connected with the essence of the norm, nor tend to turning of the will, to the absence of passion, to cessation, rest, to the higher faculties, to supreme wisdom, nor to Nibbāna; therefore have I not revealed it.⁷

The early Buddhist texts approached nirvana primarily as a practical solution to the existential problem of human anguish. Specifically, they maintained that by undertaking a disciplined praxis the Buddhist practitioner can achieve a non-discursive awakening (bodhi) to the interdependent non-substantiality of reality, especially of the self. With that insight, it was believed,
one could be released from the grips of insatiable craving and its resultant suffering.\(^8\)

Nirvana is very often described in negative terms such as “cessation” (\textit{nirodha}), “the absence of craving” (\textit{trsnaksaya}), “detachment”, “the absence of delusion” and “the unconditioned” (asamskrta). Although in the Nikāyas and AbhidharmaSchool commentaries there are scattered positive references to, like, “happiness” (\textit{sukha}), “peace”, and “bliss” and to metaphors of transcendence such as “the farther shore”, the negative images predominate. The word \textit{nirvana} itself means “extinction”, and other words used synonymously with it, such as \textit{moksa} and \textit{mukti} refer to emancipation.\(^9\) However, a prominent tendency was to understand \textit{nirvana} as a release from \textit{samsāra}, the painful world of birth and death powered by passion, hatred and ignorance.

As we have seen earlier, the Buddhist view of \textit{samsara} developed as the notion of rebirth was taking root in ancient India. So enlightenment came to be understood as the extinction (\textit{nirvana}) of what can be reborn, that is, as the dissolution of any continuing personal identity after death. “This led to the need to distinguish between (1) enlightenment of the person who has transcended in this world the suffering caused by craving and (2) the perfect \textit{nirvana} achieved only when that person dies and is fully released from \textit{samsara}, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The Pāli texts, therefore, distinguished “\textit{nirvana with remainder}” (saupadisesanibbāna) from “\textit{nirvana without remainder}” (anupadisesanibbāna), or
even more simply, enlightenment (*nibbāna*) from *complete* enlightenment (*parinibbāna*; Sanskrit, *parinirvana*)”.

The distinction between *samsara* and *nirvana* is ambiguous; do these terms refer to psychological or ontological states i.e. are they states of mind or kinds of existence? If *samsara* refers to a psychological state of suffering, then the transition from *samsara* to *nirvana* is only a profound change in attitude, perspective and motivation. If, on the other hand, *samsara* refers to the pain-stricken world itself, then *nirvana* must be somewhere else. In this context, the metaphor of *nirvana* as “the farther shore” could assume a metaphysical status. And so, *nirvana* could be understood as a permanent state of bliss beyond the world of birth, death and rebirth. The reaction against such an interpretation influenced the Mahayana Buddhist views of enlightenment.

**Mahayana Tradition**

In Mahayana tradition nirvana is not regarded as the final goal nor as different from samsara. They minimized the opposition between nirvana and samsara, renouncing the suggestion that nirvana was an escape from the world of suffering. Instead they considered enlightenment as a wise way of living in the world. The Madhyamika and Yogācāra schools which are the two major Indian branches of Mahayana philosophy developed their own way of rejecting the escapism to which, it was thought, the Abhidharma interpretation led.
The strategy of Mahayana was to undermine the epistemological and logical basis for the distinction between the concepts of nirvana and samsara. There is no samsara without nirvana and vice versa and therefore one cannot be absolute and the other relative. The Madhyamika tradition radically interpreted Buddha’s original silence on this critical issue by trying to demonstrate that any philosophical attempt to characterize reality is limited by the logical interdependence of words or concepts. According to Nagarjuna, to the extent we can talk or reason about nirvana and samsara, they must depend on each other; neither can be absolute in itself. “For the Madhyamikas, the real cause of human turmoil is that through naming and analyzing we try to grasp and hold onto what exists only through the distinctions imposed by the conventions of language. From this perspective, Buddhist practice frees one from this attachment to concepts by cultivating prajna, a nondiscursive, direct insight into the way things are. Once one recognizes that the substantialized sense of ego is based on a linguistic distinction having no ultimate basis, an enlightened attitude develops in which one actively shares in the suffering of all other sentient beings. In this way, the wisdom of prajna can also be considered a universal form of compassion, karunā”.

The Yogācāra school asserted that nirvana and samsara had a common ground, viz. the activity of the mind; mind is the basis of both delusion (samsara) and enlightenment (nirvana). This implied that in each person there is an inherent core of Buddhahood. Sometimes this core was called the tathāgata-garbha meaning “Buddha womb”, “Buddha embryo” or “Buddha matrix”; in other cases it was
considered to be part of a store-consciousness (*alayavijnana*) containing seeds (*bijā*) that could sprout either delusional or enlightened experience. In either case Buddhist practice was seen as a technique for clarifying or making manifest the Buddha mind or Buddha nature within the individual.\textsuperscript{14}

The Sautrantikas, like other Hinayanists, thought of nirvana as a state in which there is cessation of passions, ill-will, delusion etc. An Arhat, upon the eradication of impurities, enters nirvana in terms of which is experienced the total destruction of consciousness. This conception of nirvana is supported by both the *Ratnasutta*, a Hinayana text and by the *Lankavatara*-sutra, a Mahayana work. The Sautrtantikas, being the upholders of Hinayana realism, considered nirvana as a state of ultimate nullity or of death.\textsuperscript{15}

Sarvastivadins considered *nirvāṇa* to be a positive entity. For them nirvana meant dissociation or disjunction of elements, and elements in themselves are said to be real and their nature everlasting (*dharmasvabhava*). Cessation of phenomenal life in nirvana is affected not because nirvana is a state of inexistence, but because of disjunction of elements. The elements in the state of samsara associate themselves with one another, and so give rise to phenomenal categories. Thus, nirvana may be said to be the cessation of compound elements, and not of elements or of atoms as such. It would mean that life exists to the extent atoms remain in association with one another.\textsuperscript{16}

**Nibbāna: Before and After**

Narada Thera has the following to say about *Nibbāna*. 
It should not be understood that Nibbāna is a state of nothingness or annihilation owing to the fact that we cannot perceive it with our worldly knowledge. One cannot say that there exists no light just because the blind man does not see it. In that well known story, too, the fish arguing with his friend, the turtle, triumphantly concluded that there exists no land.

The nibbāna of the Buddhists is neither a mere nothingness nor a state of annihilation, but what it is no words can adequately express. Nibbāna is a Dhamma which is “unborn, unoriginated, uncreated and unformed.” Hence, it is eternal (dhuva), desirable (subha), and happy (sukha).

In nibbāna nothing is “eternalized”, nor is anything “annihilated”, besides suffering.

According to the Pāli text, references are made to Nibbāna as sopadisesa and anupadisesa. These, in fact, are not two kinds of Nibbāna, but the one single Nibbāna, receiving its name according to the way it is experienced before and after death.

Nibbāna is not situated in any place nor is it a sort of heaven where a transcendental ego resides. It is a state which is dependent upon this body itself. It is an attainment (dhamma) which is within the reach of all. Nibbāna is a supra-mundane state attainable even in this present life. Buddhism does not state that this ultimate goal could be reached only in a life beyond. Here lies the chief difference between the Buddhist conception of Nibbāna and the non-Buddhist conception of an eternal heaven attainable only after death or a union with a God or Divine
Essence in an after-life. When Nibbāna is realized in this life with the body remaining, it is called sopadisesa nibbāna-dhātu. When an arahat attains parinibbāna, after the dissolution of his body, without any remainder of physical existence, it is called anupadisesa nibbāna-dhātu.

Nibbāna is deliverance from suffering; Nibbāna is the eradication of egoism. Nibbāna is the destruction of lust, hatred and ignorance.

Buddhism also speaks of this sopadisesa nibbāna-dhātu - a state of peace and cool tranquility of mind, albeit temporary. Ajahn Buddhadasa, a well-known Thai master of the last century, said that when village people in India were cooking rice and waiting for it to cool, they might remark, “Wait a little for the rice to become nibbāna.” So here, nibbāna means the cool state of mind, free from the fires of the defilements. As Ajahn Buddhadasa remarked, “The cooler the mind, the more Nibbāna in that moment.” We can notice for ourselves relative states of coolness in our own minds as we go through the day.\textsuperscript{17}

**Images of Nirvana**

Bhikkhu Khantipalo in his book *Buddhism Explained, an Introduction to the Teachings of Lord Buddha*, enumerates the following pictures of nirvana.\textsuperscript{18}

1. Becoming Cool – when the burning of desires in this fretful and feverish life has been quenched, the heart is not agitated in anyway. Unstrained, un-burning, it enjoys tranquillity or coolness.
2. Other Shore – this bank of a river is seen to be dangerous with many things to arouse terror. Looking across the stream, the further bank is seen as secure, a place of beauty. The person who is determined to go across the river gathers sticks and makes a raft which he then paddles across the river to the other bank. Reaching it, he leaves the raft behind and goes on his way happily. The insecure conditions refer to the realm of birth-and-death. The raft is the Dhamma. The other side which is serene and secure is the state of nirvana.

3. Unconditioned and Uncompounded – the events in the world of birth-and-death are conditioned or compounded by certain factors while nirvana is not and therefore neither arises nor passes away.

In the Pāli texts nirvana is called “the Unconditioned, the End, the Unpolluted, the Truth, the Beyond, the Subtle, the Very Hard to see, the No-decay, the Stable, the Taken leave of, the Unindicated, the Unimpeded, the Peace, the Deathless, the excellent, the Fortunate, the Security, the Destruction of Craving, the Wonderful, the Astonishing, the freedom from Harm, the Unharmed State, the Extinguished, the Harmless, the Non-attached, the Purity, the Freedom, the Done away with (craving), the Island, the Cave, the Shelter, the Refuge, the Ultimate Goal.”

The concept of nirvana does not appear to be the same in the different sects of Buddhism. Is there anything common to the definitions and descriptions mentioned above? Does Gautama Buddha give any definition accepted by all? Is it entirely a moral concept and nothing more?
Different Interpretations of Nirvana

1. Extinction?

Hermann Oldenberg says if anyone describes Buddhism as the religion of annihilation and attempts to develop it therefrom as from its specific germ, he has in fact succeeded in wholly missing the main drift of the Buddha and the ancient order of his disciples.\textsuperscript{20}

While in the case of beings who are committed in the path of metempsychosis, consciousness, escaping from the dying, becomes the germ of a new state of being, the consciousness of the dying saint is extinguished without residuum. The Buddha says, When the disciple has entered into Nirvana, “Dissolved is the body, extinct is perception; the sensations have all vanished away. The conformations have found their repose: the consciousness has sunk to its rest.”\textsuperscript{21}

Does this end of the earthly existence imply at the same time the total cessation of being? Is it the Nothing that receives the dying Perfect One into its dominion? Some have thought to find the answer to this question contained in the word Nirvana itself, i.e., “Extinction.” It seemed the most obvious construction that extinction is an extinction of being in the Nothing, but doubts were soon expressed as to the propriety of so summary a disposal of this question. It was quite allowable to speak of an extinction in the case where being was not annihilated, but where it, freed from the glowing heat of suffering, found the path to the cool repose of painless happiness.\textsuperscript{22}
The goal to which the Buddhist pressed was solely deliverance from the sorrowful world of origination and decease. Religious aspiration did not purposely and expressly demand that this deliverance should transport to nothingness, but when this was taught at all expression was merely given thereby to the indifferent, accidental consequences of metaphysical reflections, which prevent the assumption of an everlasting, immutable, happy existence. In the religious life, in the tone which prevailed in the ancient Buddhist order, the thought of annihilation has had no influence. “As the great sea, O disciples, is permeated by but one taste, the taste of salt, so also, O disciples, this Doctrine and this Law are pervaded by but one taste, the taste of deliverance.”

2. **Moral**

Pratap Chandra says Nibbāna is basically a moral concept. He quotes Rhys Davids and Stede who say, “Nibbāna is purely and solely an *ethical* state, to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight. It is, therefore, not transcendental. The first and most important way to reach *Nibbāna* is by means of the Eightfold Path, and all expressions which deal with the realization of emancipation from lust, hatred and illusion apply to *practical* habits and not to speculative thought. *Nibbāna* is realized in one’s heart; to measure it with a speculative measure is to apply a wrong standard”.

Nirvana is a renovation of life, a revitalization that brings about a new dynamism. Nirvanic personalities are endowed with great courage, boldness and inner strength.
One of the characteristics of nirvanic personality is joy and inner peace. The very words used by the Buddha to describe nirvana manifest it: sorrowlessness (asokam), security (khemam), purity (suddhi), sublimity (panitam), peace (sānti), release (vimutti). All these characteristics are the natural outcome of a life of “greed-lessness, hate-lessness, folly-lessness” (alobha, adosa, amoha). Four other virtues of a nirvanic personality are: friendliness or loving kindness (mettā), gentleness (muditā), compassion toward the suffering (karunā) and equanimity (upekkhā) vis-a-vis fortune and misfortune.

3. Temporary

Buddha’s disciple hopes to attain this happiness not merely in the hereafter. He who has conquered ignorance and got rid of desire enjoys the supreme reward already in this life. From the flames of becoming, decease, and suffering, the believer, he who has knowledge, saves himself in the world of “extinction” (Nirvana), in the cool quiet of everlasting peace. He overcomes ignorance and thereby sets himself free from the painful fruits, which are bound up with it through the natural necessity of the law of causality. He knows the four noble truths, his soul is freed from the calamity of desire, of becoming, of error, and of ignorance. There arises in him the knowledge of his deliverance; ended is rebirth, there is no more returning to this world. “The disciple, who has put off lust and desire, rich in wisdom, has here on earth attained the deliverance from death, the rest, the Nirvana, the eternal state.”
“Him I call indeed a Brahmana who has traversed this miry road, the impassable world, difficult to pass, and its vanity, who has gone through, and reached the other shore, is thoughtful, steadfast, free from doubts, free from attachment, and content.”

It is not an anticipation in parlance, but it is the absolutely exact expression of the dogmatic thought, when not merely the hereafter, which awaits the emancipated saint but the perfection, which he already anticipates in this life is called the Nirvana. What is to be extinguished has been extinguished, the fire of lust, hatred, bewilderment.

If we are to indicate the precise point at which the goal is reached for the Buddhist, we must not look to the entry of the dying Perfect One into the range of the everlasting, but to that moment of his earthly life, when he has attained the status of sinlessness and painlessness; this is the true Nirvana.

4. Permanent Beatitude

Max Muller has above all others maintained with warm eloquence the notion of Nirvana as the completion but not as an extinction of being. His position is that although later Buddhist metaphysicians have undoubtedly regarded the Nothing as the supreme object of all effort, yet the original teaching of Buddha and the ancient order of his disciples was different: for them, the Nirvana was nothing more than the entry of the spirit upon its rest and eternal beatitude, which is as highly exalted above the joys, as it is above the sorrow of the transitory world. Max Muller asks, would not a religion, which lands us at last in the
Nothing, cease to be a religion? It would no longer be what every religion ought to be and purports to be, a bridge from the temporal to the eternal but it would be a delusive gangway which suddenly breaks off and shoots a man just when he fancies, he has reached the goal of the eternal, into the abyss of annihilation.\textsuperscript{31}

5. \textbf{Union with God}

According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, Buddha refused to allow any speculations about the condition of men who attain nirvana, since it is not an object of knowledge. In the Tevijja Sutta he even allows it to be called \textbf{union with Brahma}. He quotes Rhys Davids: ‘In holding out a hope of union with Brahma as a result of the practice of universal love, the Buddha is most probably intended to mean a ‘union with Brahma’ in the Buddhist sense, that is to say, a temporary companionship as a separate being with the Buddhist Brahma, to be enjoyed by a new individual not consciously identical with its predecessor. It is just possible that the \textit{argumentum ad hominem} should be extended to this part of the sutta, and that the statement in iii. I should be taken to mean: ‘This (universal love) is the only way to that kind of union with your own Brahma which you desire.’ But such a yielding to heretical opinion at the close of his own exposition of the truth would scarcely be attributed to a Buddha.’ But Dr. Radhakrishnan criticizes and says: Rhys Davids forgets that it is no heresy according to Buddha. If we look upon Nirvana as a positive condition, we must admit the reality of a permanent. Buddha is obliged to admit a permanent principle. ‘There is, O disciples, a something that is not born, not produced, not created, not compounded. Were there not, O
disciples, this something not born...there would be no possible exit for what is born.’

It is also clear that the reduction of self to a number of skandhas is not ultimate. If the self is merely an impermanent compound of body and mind, qualities and functions, then when it disappears, there is nothing which is delivered. We destroy our desires, burn our karma, and are lost forever. Freedom becomes extinction. But Nirvana is timeless existence and so Buddha must admit the reality of a timeless self. There is a being at the back of all life, which is unconditioned, above all empirical categories, something which does not give rise to any effect and is not the effect of anything else. ‘Of Nirvana, we cannot say that it has arisen or that it has not arisen or that it cannot arise; that it is past or future or present.’ Nirvana is the simultaneity, which is the support of all succession. Concrete time loses itself in the eternal. The shifting nature of the world conceals the stable reality. Only such a view is necessary to complete Buddha’s account of Nirvana.

As a conclusion to these different interpretations of nirvana I quote Hermann Oldenberg:

Before I undertook this task, it was my conviction that there is in the ancient Buddhist literature no passage which directly decides the alternative whether the Nirvana is eternal felicity or annihilation. So much the greater was therefore my surprise in the course of these researches I lit not upon one passage but upon very numerous passages, which speak as expressly as possible upon the point, regarding which the controversy is waged and determine it with a clearness which leaves nothing to be desired. And it
was no less a cause of astonishment to me when I found that in that alternative, which appeared to have been laid down without possible cogency, viz. that Nirvana must have been understood in the ancient Order to be either the Nothing or a supreme felicity, there was finally neither on one side nor on the other perfect accuracy.\(^\text{34}\)

**Tathāgatagarbha**

This is an expression found especially in Mahayana Buddhism along with the gradual process which may have taken even centuries of sublimating and quasi-divinizing the image of Gautama Buddha.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Tathāgatagarbha sūtras are a group of Mahayana sūtras that present the original concept of Buddha-nature, i.e. the original vision of the Buddha-nature as an ungenerated, unconditioned and immortal Buddhic element within all beings.\(^\text{35}\)

The Sanskrit term “*tathāgatagarbha*” may be parsed into *tathāgata* (“the one thus gone”, referring to the Buddha) and *garbha* (“root/embryo”). The latter has the meanings: “embryo”, “essence”\(^\text{36}\); whilst the former may be parsed into “*tathā*” (“[s]he who has there”and“āgata” (semantic field: “come”, “arrived”) and/or “*gata*” (“gone”).\(^\text{37}\)

Many are agreed that the *tathāgatagarbha* is an immortal, inherent transcendental essence or potency and that it resides in a concealed state (concealed by mental and behavioural negativities) in every single being, even the worst - the icchantika.
The *tathāgatagarbha* itself needs no cultivation, but only uncovering or discovery, as it is already present and perfect within each being:

“An unknown treasure exists under the home of a poor person that must be uncovered through removing obstructive dirt, yielding the treasure that always was there. Just as the treasure already exists and thus requires no further fashioning, so the matrix-of-one-gone-thus [i.e. the *tathāgatagarbha*], endowed with ultimate Buddha qualities, already dwells within each sentient being and needs only to be freed from defilements”.

The *tathāgatagarbha* is the ultimate, pure, ungraspable, inconceivable, irreducible, unassailable, boundless, true and deathless quintessence of the Buddha's emancipatory reality, the very core of his sublime nature.

The Buddha reveals how inside each person’s being there exists a great Buddhic “treasure that is eternal and unchanging”. This is no less than the indwelling Buddha himself.

**Progressive posthumous elevation of the Buddha**

1. **Buddha as an Ordinary Mortal:**

   That the Buddha was an ordinary human being, endowed with the greatest psychic powers, is a view that emerges within the Theravada Buddhism. The body and mind (the five skandhas) of a Buddha are impermanent and changing, just like the body and mind of ordinary people. However, a Buddha recognizes the unchanging nature of the Dharma, which is an eternal principle and an
unconditioned and timeless phenomenon. This view is said to be common in the Theravada school, and the other early Buddhist schools.\textsuperscript{40}

Some modern Theravadins affirm that the Buddha was “just a human”: such affirmations are often intended to contrast their view of him with that of the Mahayana, and with Christian views of Jesus. According to the Canon, Gautama was born as a human, albeit highly spiritually developed as a result of the previous lives in the career of the bodhisattva. With his enlightenment, however, he perfected and transcended his human condition.\textsuperscript{41}

When asked whether he was a deva or a human, Gautama Buddha replied that he had eliminated the deep-rooted unconscious traits that would make him either one, and should instead be called a Buddha; one who had grown up in the world but had now gone beyond it, as a lotus grows from the water but blossoms above it, unsoiled.\textsuperscript{42}

2. **Buddha as Extraordinary Mortal:**

   Andrew Skilton writes that the Buddha was never historically regarded by Buddhist traditions as being merely human:

   “It is important to stress that, despite modern Theravada teachings to the contrary ... he was never seen as being merely human. For instance, he is often described as having the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks or signs of a mahāpuruṣa, “superman”; the Buddha himself denied that he was either a man or a god; and in the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* he states that he could live for an aeon were he asked to do so”.\textsuperscript{43}
It is believed that though the Theravada school does not emphasize the more supernatural and divine aspects of the Buddha that are available in the Pāli Canon, elements of Buddha as the supreme person are found throughout this canon.44

In the Pāli Canon Gautama Buddha is known as being a “teacher of the gods and humans”, superior to both the gods and humans in the sense of having nirvana or the greatest bliss, whereas the devas, or gods, are still subject to anger, fear and sorrow.

In the Madhupindika Sutta45 Buddha is described in powerful terms as the Lord of the Dhamma (Pāli: Dhammasami, Sanskrit: Dharma Swami) and the bestower of immortality (Amatassadatta).

Similarly, in the Anuradha Sutta46 Buddha is described as the Tathāgata – the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the superlative attainment. When Buddha is asked as to what happens to the Tathāgata after death of the physical body, Buddha replies:“And so, Anuradha – when you can’t pin down the Tathāgata as a truth or reality even in the present life – is it proper for you to declare, ‘Friends, the Tathāgata – the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the superlative attainment – being described, is described otherwise than with these four positions: The Tathāgata exists after death, does not exist after death, both does & does not exist after death, neither exists nor does not exist after death’?”
3. **Buddha as Supra-Mundane:**

In the early Buddhist schools, the Mahāsāṃghika branch regarded the buddhas as being characterized primarily by their supra-mundane nature. The Mahāsāṃghikas advocated the transcendental and supra-mundane nature of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the fallibility of arhats. Of the 48 special theses attributed by the *Samayabhedoparacananacakra* to the Mahāsāṃghika Ekavyāvahārika, Lokottaravāda, and the Gokulika, 20 points concern the supra-mundane nature of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

A doctrine ascribed to the Mahāsāṃghikas is, “The power of the tathāgatas is unlimited, and the life of the buddhas is unlimited”. According to Guang Xing, two main aspects of the Buddha can be seen in Mahāsāṃghika teachings: the true Buddha who is omniscient and omnipotent, and the manifested forms through which he liberates sentient beings through skillful means. For the Mahāsaṃghikas, the historical Gautama Buddha was one of these transformation bodies (*nirmānakāya*), while the essential real Buddha is equated with the Dharmakāya.

4. **Buddha as God:**

See below “God in Buddhism”.

**Buddha-Nature**

*Buddha-nature, Buddha-dhatu* or *Buddha Principle* (*Buddha-dhātu, Tathāgatagarbha*), is taught differently in various Mahayana Buddhism traditions. Broadly speaking Buddha-nature is concerned with ascertaining what allows
sentient beings to become Buddhas. The term, Buddha nature, is a translation of the Sanskrit coinage, ‘Buddha-dhātu’, which seems first to have appeared in the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra, where it refers to ‘a sacred nature that is the basis for [beings’] becoming buddhas’.

The idea of Buddha-nature originated in India, and was further developed in China, due to the different culture Buddhism had to adapt to. It was the result of interplay between various strands of Buddhist thought, on the nature of human consciousness and the means of awakening.

The idea of the tathāgata-garbha is grounded on the sayings of the Buddha that there is an innately pure luminous mind (prabhasvaracitta), “which is only adventitiously covered over by defilements (agantukaklesa).” This luminous mind is being mentioned in the Anguttara Nikāya:

“Luminous, monks, is the mind. And it is defiled by incoming defilements”.

The Mahāsāṃghika coupled this idea of the luminous mind with the idea of the mulavijnana, the substratum consciousness that serves as the basis consciousness.

Initially Gautama Sakyamuni seems to have been a very sensitive and humane human being. After the experience of enlightenment he was transformed into an enlightened leader and impressive teacher. His monastic organization became not only influential but widespread. In spite of councils that attempted to identify his canonical or canonized teachings, it became inevitable that schools branched out and extended beyond the boundaries of India into far off horizons.
The result of the encounter and possible collision of Buddha’s teaching with other cultures and world views brought about new fusions of horizons and new perspectives and new modes of understanding, interpreting and applying Buddha’s principles. It is not clear whether or not Gautama was a professed atheist as we shall presently see. However, it appears that some of the regions invaded by Gautama’s teachings could not only not bear with his atheism, but took vengeance on it by attempting to transform Gautama Buddha himself into the Supreme Being. This leads us to the idea of God in Buddhism.

**God in Buddhism**

The term ‘God’ is commonly used to define a Being who created the universe and rules it. Buddhism offers an elaborate cosmology, including gods and *devas*. But the Buddha of the early texts also gives arguments refuting the existence of such beings.61 These gods are not viewed as creators, they are subject to suffering and change like all other living beings, and must eventually die.62

A common misconception among non-Buddhists is that the Buddha is the Buddhist counterpart to “God”. Buddhism does not teach the dependency on any supreme being for enlightenment. The Buddha is a guide and teacher who points the way to enlightenment, but the struggle for enlightenment is one's own.63 But in the *Dharmakaya* doctrine the Buddha teaches that the Buddha is no longer essentially a human being, but has become a being of a different order altogether. In his ultimate transcendental “body/mind” mode as Dharmakaya, he has eternal and infinite life, is present in all things as the Buddha-nature, and is possessed of
great and immeasurable qualities. The *Nirvana Sutra* mentions the Buddha-nature as “the boundless Dharmadhatu”. The *Lotus Sutra* and especially such *tantras* as the *Kunjed Gyalpo Tantra* give expression to a vision of the Buddha as the omnipresent, all-knowing, liberative essence and deathless Reality of all things. In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* the Buddha declares:

“Nirvana is stated to be eternally abiding. The Tathāgata [Buddha] is also thus, eternally abiding, without change”.

This is a particularly important metaphysical and soteriological doctrine in the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Tathāgata-garbha sutras*. According to the *Tathāgata-garbha sutras*, failure to recognize the Buddha's eternity and, even worse, outright denial of that eternity, is considered a major obstacle to the attainment of complete awakening (*Bodhi*). 64

For the Tibetan Buddhist master, Dolpopa, and his *Jonangpa School*, the Buddha is to be understood as the wondrous and holy wish-fulfilling Essence of all things, beyond comprehension:

“Buddha – an essence of immeasurable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, excellent exalted body, wisdom, qualities, and activities extremely wondrous and fantastic – is vast like space and the holy source, giving rise to all that is wished by sentient beings like a wish-granting jewel, a wish-granting tree ...” 65
An influential and doctrinally striking Mahayana Buddhist scripture, *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* treats of the existence of the “Tathāgata-garbha” (Buddha-Matrix, Buddha-Embryo, Buddha-Essence, literally meaning “the womb of the thus-come-one”) within all sentient creatures. The Buddha reveals how inside each person's being there exists a great Buddhic “treasure that is eternal and unchanging”. This is no less than the indwelling Buddha himself. The *Tathāgatagarbha Sutra* declares the reality of an Awakened Essence within each being.

The *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* states that Buddha-nature is everlasting, pure and blissful, and is ‘the Self of living beings’. The Buddha-nature is taught to be an ultimate, conceptually inconceivable, immortal reality.

The self of which the Buddha speaks is said by him to be the “essential intrinsic being” (*svabhava*) or even “life-essence” (*jīvaka*) of each person, and this essential being is none other than the Buddha himself – “radiantly luminous” and “as indestructible as a diamond”.

Buddhist scholar and chronicler, Merv Fowler, writes that the Buddha-nature is really present as an essence within each being:

“The teaching that Buddha-nature is the hidden essence within all sentient beings is the main message of the *tathāgata-garbha* literature, the earliest of which is the *Tathāgata-garbha Sutra*. This short sutra says that all living beings are in essence identical to the Buddha regardless of their defilements or their continuing transmigration from life to life... As in the earlier traditions, there is
present the idea that enlightenment, or nirvana is not something which has to be achieved, it is something which is already there... In a way, it means that everyone is really a Buddha now”.

As already noted above, Jeffrey Hopkins says that an unknown treasure exists under the home of a poor person that must be uncovered through removing obstructive dirt, yielding the treasure that always was there. Just as the treasure already exists and thus requires no further fashioning, so the matrix-of-one-gone-thus [i.e. the tathāgatagarbha], endowed with ultimate Buddha qualities, already dwells within each sentient being and needs only to be freed from defilements.

We deal here with God in Buddhism for two reasons. One, Mahayana and other forms of Buddhism as we have just seen, seem to transform Buddha himself into a Supreme Being. Two, nirvana and its meanings and implications might perhaps be better understood if we have some notion of the attitude of Buddha and Buddhism towards the Supreme Being.

Gautama Buddha, allegedly, avoided speculative theories and arguments that have little to do with the cessation of suffering and the attainment of nibbāna. He seems to have spoken little of God, although he seems to have pondered on causality and the causal relationships underlying the universe (pratītyasamutpāda) which constitute the natural order (dharma).

The Buddha recommended that a human being must study Nature (dhammavicaya) in order to attain personal wisdom (prajna) regarding the nature
of things (dharma). The purpose of spiritual exercises is the attainment of nibbāna.

There is a story of two Brahmins consulting the Buddha about their respective paths to union with Brahma. Buddha asks them “Has any of the teachers of the Brahmans, versed in the Vedas seen Brahma face to face?”

“Mortals cannot see the immortal,” was the reply.

Buddha’s rejoinder: “Then the Brahmans should say: “we show you the way into a union with what we know not.” Is it not like building a stair-case to a mansion whose location or perhaps even existence we do not know? The succession of teachers is like a ... “a string of blind men, clinging one to another.”

Moreover, the Buddha maintains that the Brahmins, who omit the practice of the due qualities, would be united with Brahma after death.71

Buddha, here, is shown to be highly critical of Brahmin practices, which could possibly have alienated him from Brahma so as to induce him to avoid the word Brahma. Apart from this, he has no definite information about whether the Supreme Being is reachable by human efforts.

Dr. S. Radhakrisnan says that Buddha realized that the only way to remove the haunting fear of the gods, the threatened torments of the future and the corruption of the human spirit, inclined to buy the goodwill of the gods by flattery and praise, was to destroy the gods once and for all. The uncertain nature of philosophical speculation which indulged in all sorts of fancies, and the practical conviction which made men throw the burden on gods rather than rely on their
own efforts, led Buddha to confine his teaching to this world. A God who can neither adapt nor alter, neither produce nor modify, is no God at all. Moreover, it is not easy to reconcile the heart-rending facts of life with the belief in a loving God. The suffering of the world is intelligible only on the hypothesis of karma. It explains all about the world of living beings, inhabitants of hell, animals, ghosts, men and gods.\textsuperscript{72}

According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, the Buddhists disputed the teleological argument for God’s existence maintaining that the order and the beauty seen in creation is only anthropological i.e. dependent on the perceivers rather than on the perceived. Moreover, the causes contained in the effects which in their turn become causes are sufficient to explain the existence of the world without there being need for a first cause. Another reason for disputing the first cause that is perfect was the imperfection, evil and suffering in the world. It is not clear from Dr. Radhakrishnan, which schools in which regions disputed or denied the first cause.\textsuperscript{73} If that was the mind of the early Buddhists they could also have pointed out that some of the deities of popular Hinduism scarcely deserved the title of deities, since some of them also were depicted as having human cravings.

Is the Notion of Divinity Incompatible with Buddhism?

There are reasons to think that there is a high degree of compatibility between Buddhism and theism.\textsuperscript{74} The very fact that historically theism manifested itself more and more explicitly in later Buddhist thought proves that even initially, there was compatibility. Another reason for the compatibility is the elevated
standard of Buddhist morality. It seems rather difficult to maintain high moral standards, without belief in some unshakeable foundation, which may, or may not be called God. The word “God” (deva) was applied to many, changing and impermanent things and deified persons that did not deserve the name.

To regard Buddhism as ‘non-theistic’ may be overly simplistic; although many traditional theist beliefs were initially thought to pose a hindrance to the attainment of nibbāna, the highest goal of Buddhist practice, in some schools. Different traditions of Buddhism differ mildly in their reverential attitudes. While Theravada Buddhists view the Buddha as a human being who attained nibbāna or Buddhahood, through human efforts, some Mahayana Buddhists consider him an embodiment of the cosmic Dharmakaya, born for the benefit of others. In addition, some Mahayana Buddhists worship their chief Bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara, and hope to embody him.

There are Buddhist trends that express a philosophical belief in an eternal Buddha: a representation of omnipresent enlightenment and a symbol of the true nature of the universe. The primordial aspect that interconnects every part of the universe is the clear light of the eternal Buddha, where everything timelessly arises and dissolves.

Those forms of Buddhism that are compatible with some notion of the supreme, omnipotent, eternal, are obviously more amenable to being compared with John of the Cross, who could be invited to comment on Buddhist views, since he comes later in time than most of them.
Richard Hayes says:

In the Nikāya literature, the question of the existence of God is treated primarily from either an epistemological point of view or a moral point of view. As a problem of epistemology, the question of God's existence amounts to a discussion of whether or not a religious seeker can be certain that there is a greatest good and that therefore his efforts to realize a greatest good will not be a pointless struggle towards an unrealistic goal. And as a problem in morality, the question amounts to a discussion of whether man himself is ultimately responsible for all the displeasure that he feels or whether there exists a superior being who inflicts displeasure upon man whether he deserves it or not . . . the Buddha Gautama is portrayed not as an atheist who claims to be able to prove God's nonexistence, but rather as a skeptic with respect to other teachers' claims to be able to lead their disciples to the highest good.¹³

There are other texts that extol the dhamma and emphasize the power of dhamma. Dhamma usually means doctrine but there are instances in which a certain power is attributed to it – a protective power of truth and goodness. It is a power that protects saintly individuals. It upholds them in a miraculous way and draws from within them powers that are almost supernatural. The Vattaka Jatakaya of the book of Birth Stories has an example of its protective power. The Buddha and his disciples were passing through a jungle one day while they suddenly noticed a fast advancing jungle fire. The monks were frightened but the Buddha calmed them and asked them to trust in the good acts they had performed and in the power of
truth and goodness that prevails in the universe. The fire continued to advance
burning the whole area around but leaving untouched the place where they were.
To the amazed disciples, the Buddha explained the doctrine of the protective
power of truth. This shows how the power of dharma protects the good person
and how a nirvanic personality can be bold and courageous before the worst
adversities of life. Does this trust in the power of truth and universal goodness not
imply a virtual belief in God?
From these and other texts it would appear that many Buddhists while avoiding
the word ‘God’ are believers in the reality of God.
It is not God Who is responsible for man’s sorrows, according to Hayes’ reading
of the Nikāyas. It is man’s ignorance and his cravings. If this interpretation is
correct, then the Buddha’s thought was akin to that of some pre-Socratics and even
to that of Aristotle, who thought that God was too superior to humans to be
concerned with their affairs.
Some followers of the Buddha seem to have intuited that the Supreme Being
cannot be material, but must be metaphysical and spiritual; the word “spiritual”
comes into English, from the Latin “spiritus”, meaning breath. No wonder, some
schools of Buddhism, seem to have attributed some sort of divinity to space,
because of its immensity and all-embracing nature.
Dr. B. Alan Wallace writes of this doctrine:

“The essential nature of the whole of samsara and nirvana is the absolute space
(dhatu) of the tathāgata-garbha, but this space is not to be confused with a mere
absence of matter. Rather, this absolute space is imbued with all the infinite knowledge, compassion, power, and enlightened activities of the Buddha. Moreover, this luminous space is that which causes the phenomenal world to appear, and it is none other than the nature of one's own mind, which by nature is clear light.”

Dr. B. Alan Wallace noting a progression within Buddhism from doctrines of a mind-stream (bhavanga) to that of the absolutised tathāgata-garbha, comments that it may be too simple in the light of such doctrinal elements to define Buddhism unconditionally as 'non-theistic': “...Buddhism is not so simply non-theistic as it may appear at first glance.”

In some Mahayana traditions, the Buddha is indeed worshiped as a virtual divinity who is possessed of supernatural qualities and powers as mentioned above. Dr. Guang Xing writes: “The Buddha worshiped by Mahayanist followers is an omnipotent divinity endowed with numerous supernatural attributes and qualities ... [He] is described almost as an omnipotent and almighty godhead.”

In later Mahayana literature, however, the idea of an eternal, all-pervading, all-knowing, immaculate, uncreated and deathless Ground of Being (the dharmadhatu, inherently linked to the sattvadhatu, the realm of beings), which is the Awakened Mind (bodhicitta) or Dharmakaya ("body of Truth") of the Buddha himself, is attributed to the Buddha in a number of Mahayana sutras, and is found in various tantras as well. In some Mahayana texts, such a principle is occasionally
presented as manifesting in a more personalized form as a primordial Buddha, such as Samantabhadra, Vajradhara, Vairochana, and Adi-Buddha, among others. Dr. Wallace writes:

“A careful analysis of Vajrayana Buddhist cosmogony, specifically as presented in the Atiyoga tradition of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, which presents itself as the culmination of all Buddhist teachings, reveals a theory of a transcendent ground of being and a process of creation that bear remarkable similarities with views presented in Vedanta and Neo-platonic Western Christian theories of creation”. 89

In fact, Wallace sees these views as so similar that they seem almost to be different manifestations of the same theory. He further comments: “Vajrayana Buddhism, Vedanta, and Neo-platonic Christianity have so much in common that they could almost be regarded as varying interpretations of a single theory”. 90

Tibetan monk-scholar, Dolpopa, of the Tibetan Jonang tradition, speaks of a universal spiritual essence or noumenon (the Buddha as Dharmakaya) which contains all sentient beings in their totality, and quotes from the Sutra on the Inconceivable Mysteries of the One-Gone-Thus:

‘... space dwells in all appearances of forms .. similarly, the body of the one-gone-thus [i.e. Buddha] also thoroughly dwells in all appearances of sentient beings ...

For example, all appearances of forms are included inside space. Similarly, all appearances of sentient beings are included inside the body of the one-gone-thus [i.e. Buddha as Dharmakaya].’ 91
Dolpopa further quotes Buddhist scripture when he writes of this unified spiritual essence or noumenon as the ‘supreme Over-Self of all continuums’\textsuperscript{92} and as ‘Self always residing in all, as the selfhood of all.’\textsuperscript{93}

“The Absolute is a non-dual consciousness. The duality of the subject and object does not pertain to it. It is said to be void (sunya), devoid of duality; in itself it is perfectly real, in fact the only reality ...There is no consciousness of the Absolute; Consciousness is the Absolute” – this is what Dr. A. K. Chatterjee remarks about Yogācāra Buddhism.\textsuperscript{94}

The Shin Buddhist priest, John Paraskevopoulos, in his monograph on Shin Buddhism, writes:

‘In Shin Buddhism, Nirvana or Ultimate Reality (also known as the “Dharma-Body” or Dharmakaya in the original Sanskrit) has assumed a more concrete form as (a) the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amitābha) and Infinite Life (Amitayus)and (b) the “Pure Land” or “Land of Utmost Bliss” (Sukhavati), the realm over which this Buddha is said to preside ... Amida is the Eternal Buddha who is said to have taken form as Shakyamuni and his teachings in order to become known to us in ways we can readily comprehend.’\textsuperscript{95}

The Śrīmālā Sūtra is among sources that enunciate the idea that the Buddha nature is possessed of four guna-paramitas [qualities of perfection]: permanence, bliss, self, and purity. The Buddha-nature is ultimately identifiable as the supra-mundane nature of the Buddha. These elevated qualities make of the Buddha one to whom devotion and adoration could be given.\textsuperscript{96}
In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the Buddha takes a strong stand against the idea that there is no Self, saying:

Just as the wrestler had the idea - due to his impaired thinking - that he had lost the diamond, even though it was lodged in his body, similarly worldly beings do not comprehend the Self's Reality (*ātma-tattva*); they fall under the sway of unwholesome friends and do not understand the Tathāgata’s utterances with underlying meaning; they meditatively cultivate the notion that they lack the Self, even though there is the Self.97

The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* also warns that meditatively cultivating non-Self and Emptiness in regard to the Buddha Nature will not end suffering - quite the opposite. The Buddha states:

By having cultivated non-self in connection with the Buddha nature and having continually cultivated emptiness, suffering will not be eradicated but one will become like a moth in the flame of a lamp.98

The attainment of nirvanic liberation (*mokṣa*), by contrast with empty or selfless phenomena, is said to open up a realm of “utter bliss, joy, permanence, stability and eternity”, in which the Buddha is “fully peaceful” and “immovable” (*acala*) like a mountain.99

We have already seen how in some regions and in some schools of later Buddhism, Buddha himself was raised to the rank of Supreme Being. Did Buddha himself make any pronouncements in favour of belief in God? He did say that everything is passing and impermanent but his implication was that whatever
begins to be will at some time cease to be. But what about that which does not begin to be? The atheism or theism of Buddhist schools seems to depend more on local and regional cultures which were met and encountered by Buddhism as it spread first to India and Sri Lanka and then to China, Tibet and Japan.

Chapter fifteen of the *Dhammapada* gives a lucid exposition of the quality of life characteristic of a nirvanic personality. It shows that nirvana stands for an authentic, integrated and dynamic form of life:

We live happily indeed, not hating those who hate us! Among men who hate us, we dwell free from hatred!
We live happily indeed, free from ailments among the ailing! Among men who are ailing let us dwell free from ailments!
We live happily indeed, free from greed among the greedy! Among men who are greedy, let us dwell free from greed.
We live happily indeed, though we call nothing our own! We shall be like the bright gods, feeding on happiness!
Victory breeds hatred, for the conquered is unhappy. He who has given up both victory and defeat, he, the contented is happy.
There is no fire-like passion; there is no losing thro like hatred; there is pain like this body; there is no happiness higher than rest.
Hunger is the worst of diseases, the elements of the body the greatest evil; if one knows this truly, that is Nirvana, the highest happiness.
Health is the greatest of gifts, contentedness the best riches, trust is the best of relationships, Nirvana the highest happiness.
Conclusion

As we have seen, nirvana has a variety of meanings and diverse interpretations. By nirvana some tend to understand total extinction. Others argue that total extinction even as an idea is too unpleasant to the very nature of the human mind to be considered as the doctrine of one so wise as the Buddha. These would point out that the Buddha himself spoke not of total extinction of the self but of extinction of the cravings, of ignorance, of vices with a view to attaining tranquillity, peace and equanimity.

This moral interpretation of nirvana that bestows peace and stability of mind in this life is certainly a great blessing that flows from the cessation of desires. But is it a temporal or temporary blessing that has something to do with after-life or does it have nothing at all to do with the after-life? If it does have something to do with after-life, can it be related to karma? Is there a connection between karma and nirvana? Do they who are unsuccessful in rooting out cravings manage somehow to attain nirvana after some succession of re-birth?

A more positive interpretation of nirvana implies happiness and blissful existence. As for who is it that attains this blissful existence, the answer in the ancient scriptures is not a straightforward one. The human person is scarcely a single unit but is an aggregate. Some schools maintain that all the components of this aggregate are subject to anicca.
Nirvana is a popular term in use today, but it was not the only word that the Buddha used, to designate the sublime state of happiness of the liberated individual; nor was it the word that he used most. In Sutta Nipāta, for instance, the word nibbāna is used only fourteen times, whereas the word santi (peace) is used twenty-nine times.\textsuperscript{101}

As to the question about when nirvana is attained, Gautama is said to have taught that time itself has passed away.

Since in most religions God is associated with the after-life, in this section on nirvana has been included also the Buddhist idea of God. Apparently the unavoidability of the Supreme and Infinite Being compelled the followers of Buddha in some regions and cultures, to transform Gautama Sakyamuni the Buddha himself into a supreme being.

\textbf{John of the Cross}

\textbf{Biblical Presuppositions}

Friar John as a believer in the Judaeo-Christian revelation took monotheism for granted. He believed in one God, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, whose infinite goodness is manifested by the whole of natural creation, and also in the history of salvation. This history of salvation made
John aware that after the fall of the human race through the sin of Adam and Eve, God promised them a day of redemption. In view of that redemption God chose Abraham whose faith being tested, his children, the Israelites, became the chosen race. Reflections on the Old Testament occur very frequently in the writings of St. John of the Cross which contain deep insights into the methods of God in relating to and communicating with the children of Adam and Eve. Friar John while gaining insights into God’s nature by pondering on God’s methods begins also to realize the incomprehensibility and ineffability of God. The greatest wonder of all is in the New Testament which reveals God as One nature in Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The divine nature of course being entirely spiritual is akin to the nature of consciousness or mind, thought or word and love or will. Furthermore, the Word of God took on Himself human nature and came down to earth in the form of Jesus Christ.

This Incarnation of the Word of God was an invitation to supernatural union with God and divinization.

When asked about the first commandment Jesus answered: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” For Friar John, this great commandment is an explicit invitation to union with God. “This passage contains all that spiritual persons must do and all I must teach them here if they are to reach God by union of the will through charity. In it human beings receive the command to employ all the faculties, appetites, operations, and emotions of their soul in God so that they will use all this ability
and strength for nothing else, in accord with David's words: I will keep my strength for you. [Ps. 59:10 {Ps. 58:10}]

For Friar John ontologically speaking, there is already an ontological presence of the Supreme Being in every being in the sense that whatever is and all that is, is given being and is sustained in being, by the Supreme Being. God therefore, is present by His essence giving being to all that is and by His knowledge of all things He is intimately present, more intimately than the innermost self of things. The difference between this natural union of creatures with God and the supernatural union with which Friar John is more concerned, is that creatures in general and human beings in particular are infinitely distinct from God who, while being immanent is also transcendent. It is through the supernatural revelation made by God through Jesus that human beings are invited to participate in God’s knowledge of Himself and love of Himself. It is through this participation in the divine nature that Friar John aspires to union with God. This union was partially realized by Friar John already in this life and fully realized in the next. This supernatural union is the objective of all the strivings of John of the Cross and also the chief aim of all his writings.

**Presence of God: Natural and Supernatural**

As mentioned above, the human person for Friar John is constituted of material body and spiritual soul. The spiritual soul precisely because it is spiritual, is not subject to decay or decomposition; and being essentially simple it is naturally deathless. For John of the Cross however, anyone who is in a state of
grievous sin is spiritually dead from a supernatural point of view. This is so because a state of grace bestows on the soul participation in the life of God, a life to which all humans are invited. God wills all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. It may appear paradoxical that the soul which cannot die naturally can die supernaturally. The perspectives are different. With many catholic theologians John believes that the final goal the attainment of which brings fulfilment, tranquillity, peace, joy, eternal life is none other than the vision of God Himself. This goal absolutely surpasses and exceeds the capacity of human nature: which means it is supernatural. The goal being supernatural the means must also be supernatural. Natural, human, moral virtues do not and cannot suffice to attain the supernatural end. The moral virtues no doubt are needed but they must be supernaturalized through grace which is a participation in the inner divine life. When human nature is healed of its many wounds and elevated to a higher level by this sanctifying grace it is made ready to share forever the beatific vision of God for all eternity. This is where also John’s union with God reaches perfection transforming him into God by participation.

Following the views of traditional scholastic metaphysics which has a basis in the Bible, Friar John takes for granted that God as Supreme Being and Creator confers being and existence on every one of His creatures and therefore is present to them and united with them by knowledge because He knows them all, by power because He gives them being and sustains them in existence, and by essence
because His knowledge and power are His essence. “It is true that God is ever present in the soul, as we said, and thereby bestows and preserves its natural being by his sustaining presence”. And again, “It brings special happiness to a person to understand that God is never absent, not even from a soul in mortal sin and how much less from one in the state of grace”.

Regarding God’s presence by essence John says, “To understand the nature of this union, one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By it he conserves their being so that if the union should end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist”. Here Friar John is speaking of the presence of God who is the Supreme Being in all created beings imparting to them the very act of being according to the diverse orders of being in so far as they exist. This pertains to the natural order according to which every created being depends as long as it exists, on the Creator.

Supernaturally God is present to and united with rational and intellectual beings who know Him by faith and love Him by grace. Not all to whom He is naturally present are united with Him supernaturally. “He does not always communicate supernatural being to it. He communicates supernatural being only through love and grace, which not all souls possess. And those who do, do not possess them in the same degree. Some have attained higher degrees of love, others remain in lower degrees. To the soul that is more advanced in love, more
conformed to the divine will, God communicates himself more. A person who has reached complete conformity and likeness of will has attained total supernatural union and transformation in God”.

In the eleventh stanza of the *Spiritual Canticle* Friar John 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 presence and image.

The second is His presence by grace, in which God abides in the soul, when He is pleased and satisfied with it. But John warns that not all have this presence of God; for those who fall into mortal sin lose it. He says: “*It is true that God is ever present in the soul, as we said, and thereby bestows and preserves its natural being by his sustaining presence.*

The third is His presence by spiritual affection, for God usually grants His spiritual presence to devout souls in many ways by which he refreshes, delights, and gladdens them. It is obvious therefore, that this type of presence is exceptional and God does not lavish it except to “devout souls”109, as John says.
But “neither is the sublime communication nor the sensible awareness of His nearness a sure testimony of His gracious presence, nor is dryness and the lack of these a reflection of His absence”. 110

Though it will not be easy to know why God makes His presence felt in some and not in others, it is good to think that when He does it is for the good of the soul. Referring to Mary Magdalene 111 to whom the Risen Christ appeared he says: “And though she beheld Him, He seemed only an ordinary man, that by the warmth of His presence He could finish instructing her in the belief she was lacking”. 112

**Union with God**

As already mentioned above, God’s gracious presence in those who believe His revelation and love Him is the foundation of the aspirations of Friar John for union with Him. The first commandment of Divine Revelation is: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength”. 113 This commandment of love for Friar John implies invitation to union. 114 For him love is outgoing, equalizing, assimilating and unitive. Who would have dared even to think of union with God if God had not commanded that we love Him? But since God had given this commandment Friar John accepts the invitation as addressed to himself and makes it the supreme goal of his aspirations, yearnings, endeavors and strivings.
Proximate Means to Union

In chapter 6 of II Book of the Ascent of Mount Carmel Friar John discusses the method of leading the three faculties of the soul viz. intellect, memory and will into the spiritual night, the means to divine union. First he explains how the theological virtues\textsuperscript{115} viz. faith, hope, and charity (related to these faculties as their proper supernatural objects), the proximate means to union through which the soul is united with God, cause the same emptiness and darkness in their respective faculties: faith in the intellect, hope in the memory, and charity in the will. Then he explains how in order to journey to God the intellect must be perfected in the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope, and the will in the nakedness and absence of every affection.\textsuperscript{116} The theological virtues darken and empty the soul of all things. The soul is not united with God in this life through understanding, or through enjoyment, or through imagination, or through any other sense; but only faith, hope and charity (according to the intellect, memory and will) can unite the soul with God in this life. These virtues void the faculties: Faith causes darkness and a void of understanding in the intellect, hope begets an emptiness of possessions in the memory, and charity produces the nakedness and emptiness of affection and joy in all that is not God.\textsuperscript{117}

Union of the Intellect through Faith

Faith is a strong belief or trust.\textsuperscript{118} It is complete trust or confidence in someone or something. In a very general sense faith refers to the acceptance of the word of some person or persons as when children accept the word of their parents
or students accept the words of the professor or researchers accept what they consider reliable sources of information. This type of faith is all-pervasive in human relationships. It may sometimes move on from acceptance of somebody’s word to acceptance of somebody’s skill or expertise as when we speak of faith in a dentist or a doctor or a tourist guide. Quite often faith may take a person from trusting the word of another and the skill of another to the very person as often happens in friendship and marriage. The last instance is an example of how faith in words leads to union of minds or intellects. The union of minds and agreement in views is a step towards union of wills and union of persons. It is in this perspective that Friar John speaks of faith in God as a step towards union with God.

From the above mentioned instances of faith in man we get some understanding of how faith in God’s revelation is a step towards union with God. On the way to union with God Friar John as mystical doctor tells us that there are supernatural experiences from which we must be detached in order not to be misled and deceived. Faith in the Word of God must be preferred to particular revelations, locutions, feelings, visions even if they are from God and even if they are supernatural. Only the general wisdom and love imparted to the soul in contemplation must be welcomed by a person seeking union with God.¹¹⁹

Friar John who had reached the high state of mystical union with God discovered through experience that the human intellect was absolutely inadequate
to the understanding of divine mysteries. It is true that divine revelation enlightens human reason in general. But Friar John on his way to union with God experienced a kind of enlightenment that was overpowering – so overpowering that the light of God caused utter darkness in the human understanding. Just as the human eye cannot gaze on the brightness of the noonday sun without becoming dazed and blind just so the human intellect may experience in supernatural contemplation the divine brightness and splendour as light and darkness. Friar John says: “Faith … is a certain and obscure habit of soul. It is an obscure habit because it brings us to believe divinely revealed truths that transcend every natural light and infinitely exceed all human understanding. As a result the excessive light of faith bestowed on a soul is darkness for it; a brighter light will eclipse and suppress a dimmer one. The sun so obscures all other lights that they do not seem to be lights at all when it is shining, and instead of affording vision to the eyes, it overwhels, blinds, and deprives them of vision since its light is excessive and unproportioned to the visual faculty. Similarly, the light of faith in its abundance suppresses and overwhelms that of the intellect. For the intellect, by its own power, extends only to natural knowledge, though it has the potency to be raised to a supernatural act whenever our Lord wishes”. This happened especially to Friar John when the Lord wished to bestow on him the gift of contemplation.

Friar John calls the journey to union with God a dark night.

“We can offer three reasons for calling this journey toward union with God a night.
The first has to do with the point of departure, because individuals must deprive themselves of their appetites for worldly possessions. This denial and privation is like a night for all one's senses.

The second reason refers to the means or the road along which a person travels to this union. Now this road is faith, and for the intellect faith is also like a dark night.

The third reason pertains to the point of arrival, namely God. And God is also a dark night to the soul in this life. These three nights pass through a soul, or better, the soul passes through them in order to reach union with God”. 121

For Friar John the proximate means by which the human intellect is united with God is faith. Faith is the admirable means of advancing to God, our goal.122

So much does Friar John emphasize the transcendence of the divine light that he ventures to say that the human intellect is going astray when it understands at this juncture.

“The reason is that God transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to it. Hence while the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from him. It must withdraw from itself and from its knowledge so as to journey to God in faith, by believing and not understanding. In this way it reaches perfection, because it is joined to God by faith and not by any other means, and it reaches God more by not understanding than by understanding”. 123
This faith was operative in the dark contemplation described by Friar John as secret to the intellect. “…Contemplation is mystical theology, which theologians call secret wisdom and which St. Thomas says is communicated and infused into the soul through love. This communication is secret and dark to the work of the intellect and the other faculties. Insofar as these faculties do not acquire it but the Holy Spirit infuses it and puts it in order in the soul …the soul neither knows nor understands how this comes to pass and thus calls it secret.”

**Union of Memory through Hope**

The memory is the faculty that stores the knowledge of the intellect as well as the impressions of the senses. These impressions carry with them figures and forms, images and imprints of varieties of objects especially those that impress us more because of our desires and cravings and also because of our profession, state of life, duties and obligations. These forms, imprints, figures, impressions are sometimes termed by Friar John possessions of the memory. For Friar John when God becomes our support and our sole desire, the closer we draw to God in union the more the memory has to be kept empty stripped of all forms, figures and imprints that do not pertain to our obligation in life.

The meaning of what has been just said will be clear from the following quotations.

“To begin with natural knowledge in the memory, I include under this heading all that can be formed from the objects of the five corporeal senses (hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch), and everything like this sensory knowledge that the
memory can evoke and fashion. It must strip and empty itself of all this knowledge and these forms and strive to lose the imaginative apprehension of them. It should do this in such a way that no knowledge or trace of them remains in it; rather it should be bare and clear, as though nothing passed through it, forgetful of all and suspended".\textsuperscript{126}

"... None of the supernatural forms and ideas that can be received by the memory is God, and the soul must empty itself of all that is not God in order to go to God. Consequently the memory must likewise dismiss all these forms and ideas in order to reach union with God in hope. Every possession is against hope... \textit{hope is for that which is not possessed} [Heb 11:1].\textsuperscript{127}

The memory must be separated from all forms and figures in order to be united with God. This complete annihilation and dispossession makes room in the memory for \textit{hope} in God and through this hope the memory is united to God. As Friar John says: “There is no way to union with God without annihilating the memory as to all forms. This union cannot be wrought without a complete separation of the memory from all forms that are not God. As we mentioned in the night of the intellect, God cannot be encompassed by any form or distinct knowledge... Since the memory cannot at the same time be united with God and with forms and distinct knowledge, and since God has no form or image comprehensible to the memory, the memory is without form and without figure when united with God. Its imagination being lost in great forgetfulness without the remembrance of anything, it is absorbed in a supreme good. This is noted every
day through experience. That divine union empties and sweeps the phantasy of all forms and knowledge, and elevates it to the supernatural’.128

Friar John says that greater the dispossession of the memory, the greater will it have hope and greater the hope, greater will be the union. “In the measure that the memory becomes dispossessed of things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God; for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains. And it hopes more when, precisely, it is more dispossessed of things; when it has reached perfect dispossession it will remain with perfect possession of God in divine union. But there are many who do not want to go without the sweetness and delight of this knowledge in the memory, and therefore they do not reach supreme possession and complete sweetness”.129 Hope undoubtedly puts the memory in darkness and emptiness as regards all earthly and heavenly objects. Hope always pertains to the unpossessed object. If something were possessed there could no longer be hope for it.130 Hope, says Friar John, has the characteristic of covering all the senses of a person's head so they do not become absorbed in any worldly thing, nor is there any way some arrow from the world might wound them. Hope allows the soul only a visor that it may look toward heavenly things, and no more. This is the ordinary task of hope in the soul; it raises the eyes to look only at God.131 “Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, for as St. Paul says, hope is for that which is not possessed [Rom. 8:24]. It withdraws the memory
from what can be possessed and fixes it on what it hopes for. Hence only hope in God prepares the memory perfectly for union with him”.132

Further he says that: “a soul must renounce all possession of the memory in order to reach union with God in hope, for if hope is to be centred entirely on God, nothing that is not God should reside in the memory ... no form, figure, image, or idea (whether heavenly or earthly, natural or supernatural) that can be grasped by the memory is God or like to him... Consequently, if the memory desires to pay attention to this knowledge it is hindered from union with God: first, because of the encumbrance; second, because the more possessions it has the less hope it has. The soul, therefore, must live in nakedness and forgetfulness of distinct forms and knowledge about supernatural apprehensions so as not to impede union of the memory with God through perfect hope.”133 And more the memory is united with God, the more the distinct knowledge is perfected, until the memory loses it entirely; that is, when the soul is perfect and has reached the state of union.134

**Union of Will through Love**

The object of the will is the good as already explained above in chapter two. For Friar John, the Supreme Good is God Himself who not only allows but invites and commands human beings especially believers in Jesus to love Him. He says: “For a treatise on the active night and denudation of this faculty, with the aim of forming and perfecting it in this virtue of the charity of God, I have found no more appropriate passage than the one in chapter 6 of Deuteronomy135, where Moses commands: *You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and*
with all your soul, and with all your strength [Dt. 6:5]. This passage contains all that spiritual persons must do and all I must teach them here if they are to reach God by union of the will through charity. In it human beings receive the command to employ all the faculties, appetites, operations, and emotions of their soul in God so that they will use all this ability and strength for nothing else, in accord with David's words: I will keep my strength for you [Ps. 59:10 {Ps. 58:10}]."136

This command to love God for Friar John is equivalent to an obligation to do everything in his power for union with God. With God cooperating or rather with Friar John cooperating with God he attained the highest state of mystical union in this life and all his writings are intended to describe and express the joys of that union, to help others to understand the route to that union and to attain it.

‘The strength of the soul’ comprises the faculties, passions, and appetites. All this strength is ruled by the will. When the will directs these faculties, passions, and appetites toward God, turning away from all that is not God, the soul preserves its strength for God, and comes to love him with all its might.137 Friar John says that the will has to be purified of all the inordinate emotions; for the inordinate emotions are the source of unruly appetites, affections, and operations, and the basis for failure to preserve one’s strength for God.

According to Friar John, there are four of these emotions or passions: joy, hope, sorrow, and fear. These passions keep the strength and ability of the soul for God, and direct it toward Him, when they are so ruled that a person rejoices only in what is purely for God's honour and glory, hopes for nothing else, feels sorrow
only about matters pertaining to this, and fears only God. The more people rejoice over something outside God, the less intense will be their joy in God; and the more their hope goes out toward something else, the less there is of it for God; and so on with the others.¹³⁸

The entire matter of reaching union with God consists in purging the will of its appetites and emotions so that from a human and lowly will it may be changed into the divine will, made identical with the will of God.¹³⁹ When the will is not strongly fixed on God and is more dependent on creatures, the more these four passions combat the soul and reign in it. A person then very easily rejoices in what deserves no rejoicing, hopes for what brings no profit, sorrows over what should perhaps cause rejoicing and fears where there is no reason for fear.¹⁴⁰

Friar John warns us that when these emotions go unbridled they are the source of all vices and imperfections, but when they are put in order and calmed, they give rise to all the virtues. Further, in the measure one of the passions is regulated according to reason, the others are also. These four passions are so interlinked that where one goes actually the others go virtually. If one is recollected actually, the other three in the same measure are recollected virtually. If the will rejoices over something, it must consequently in the same degree hope for it, with the virtual inclusion of sorrow and fear. And in the measure that it loses satisfaction in this object, fear, sorrow, and hope will also be lost.¹⁴¹

In the opening pages of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross indicates the nature of his work, declaring his intention to explain how one reaches the
“high state of perfection". Right at the beginning of the work he states “This treatise explains how to reach divine union quickly. It presents instruction and doctrine valuable for beginners and proficients alike that they may learn how to unburden themselves of all earthly things, avoid spiritual obstacles, and live in that complete nakedness and freedom of spirit necessary for divine union.”

Nakedness does not refer to physical or bodily nakedness but to spiritual nakedness which implies the stripping away of undue attachments to creatures and to all the masks that humans invent to make themselves appear more than they really are. Introducing the theme of the work he says: “The following stanzas (of the poem – the Dark Night) include all the doctrine I intend to discuss in this book, The Ascent of Mount Carmel. They describe the way that leads to the summit of the mount – that high state of perfection we here call union of a soul with God”.

He explains the path one must follow in order to reach perfection or “union with God”. John had arrived at union with God and from the very height of contemplation he views that path, which ascends to the top without deviation. He can look back with clarity of vision unobtainable by those who are on the way. His excellent view from the summit prompted him to write; he felt compelled to encourage spiritual persons along the journey.

Stating the summary of the III Book of The Ascent of Mount Carmel he says that it is a “Doctrine about the attitude required ... that a soul may reach union with God in perfect hope and charity”.

Introducing his work The Dark Night he comments that it is “An explanation of the stanzas describing a soul’s conduct along the
spiritual road which leads to the perfect union with God through love, insofar as it is attainable in this life”. And The Living Flame of Love, the last of his major works he says is “A commentary on the stanzas which treat of the very intimate and qualified union and transformation of the soul in God.”

Even a minor work of his The Precautions he wrote “for the use of anyone desiring to ... reach perfection quickly.”

His purpose in instructing people to root out cravings and inordinate attachments is not only peace of mind and peace of soul but the attainment of this union. Union of the understanding with God through faith, union of the memory with God through hope are intended and directed towards the union of the will with God through love or charity. When this union of the will with God through charity is attained, perfection is attained.

As already indicated in the second chapter, the three faculties of the spiritual part of the human person for Friar John are the intellect, the memory and the will. These three faculties have their potentiality of being elevated to the supernatural order. When a human person accepts the Christian revelation, which comes from God that very acceptance is for Friar John the faith that begins to unite the believer’s intellect with God. This faith is the substance of things to be hoped for. Hope therefore, is a virtue which for Friar John unites the memory with God. The third great theological virtue is charity, which elevates the will to union with God. The person who is united with God through faith in the intellect, hope in the memory and love in the will, may be given by God the gift of supernatural
contemplation. If only one or two of these faculties is united with God Friar John may regard this as a case of partial union with God.

**Substantial Union**

To understand the nature of substantial union, we must know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. Friar John of the Cross says that this union between God and creatures always exists. By it he conserves their being so that if the union should end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist. Therefore, in discussing union with God he is not discussing the substantial union that always exists, but the soul's union with and transformation in God that does not always exist, except when there is likeness of love. He says, “We will call it the union of likeness; and the former, the essential or substantial union. The union of likeness is supernatural; the other, natural. The supernatural union exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconfirmed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love.”

In stanza 26 of *The Spiritual Canticle*, the soul sings:

*In the inner wine cellar*

*I drank of my Beloved, and, when I went abroad through all this valley*

*I no longer knew anything, and lost the herd which I was following.*

Commenting on the line ‘*I drank of my Beloved*’, Friar John says as the drink is diffused through all the members and veins of the body, the communication by
God is diffused substantially in the whole soul, or better, the soul is transformed in God. “In this transformation she drinks of God in her substance and in her spiritual faculties. With the intellect she drinks wisdom and knowledge; with the will, sweetest love; and with the memory she drinks refreshment and delight in the remembrance and the feeling of glory”.  

Some explanation is in order here concerning the terms “substance”, “substantial” and “substantially”. By “substance”, Friar John means essence. Hence, for Friar John there is infinite distance between the substance of God who is uncreated and the substance of the soul which is a created essence. By “substantial” presence of God in the soul Friar John re-affirms and presupposes the infinite distance of the creature from the Creator while at the same time affirming the immanence of the Creator in every created being in so far as it is being. By way of illustration one may for instance, say that the sun is in all the cities of the earth. Is it true that the sun is in all cities of the earth? Actually, the sun is 150 kilometres away. But the light and the warmth of the sun make the sun present in all the cities of the earth facing the sun. Analogously, the Supreme Being while immanent in every being is also transcendent.

When Friar John speaks of the ‘union of likeness’ he is referring not to all creatures but only to human beings; and not to all human beings but only to those who are united to God in their intellect through faith, in their memory through hope, in their will through love. This activity of believing, hoping, loving God eventually affects the substance of the soul and effects its transformation into God
in such a way that the soul becomes God by participation. Of course, Friar John will never think that the soul actually becomes God. When he says that the soul becomes God by participation he means to say that the human being becomes God-like.

Speaking of the soul becoming God by participation Friar John writes: “the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; its will is God's will; its memory is the memory of God; and its delight is God's delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into him, it has become God through participation in God, being united to and absorbed in him, as it is in this state. Such a union is wrought in this perfect state of the spiritual life, yet not as perfectly as in the next life. Consequently the soul is dead to all it was in itself, which was death to it, and alive to what God is in himself.”

Commenting on the third stanza of the Living Flame he says: “All that can be said of this stanza is less than the reality, for the transformation of the soul in God is indescribable. Everything can be expressed in this statement: The soul becomes God from God through participation in him and in his attributes, which it terms the “lamps of fire.” And “Having been made one with God, the soul is somehow God through participation”.

Speaking of the complete transformation of the soul in God he says: “One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God through participation as God breathes in her. For, granted
that God favours her by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which she becomes deiform and God through participation, how could it be incredible that she also understand, know, and love - or better that this be done in her - in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself! Yet God accomplishes this in the soul through communication and participation”. While John also speaks of the transformation of the soul through participation in the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity: in the Father through power, in the Son through wisdom, in the Holy Spirit through love.

Participation for Friar John does not mean that God has parts that can be shared by many. God being the First and the Supreme Being has no parts at all and cannot therefore be shared at the supreme level by any other. When Friar John speaks of participation in God he refers to analogous participation. Water, for example, to be heated is kept on the fire. The longer the water remains on the fire, the more it participates in the heat of the fire. This is the illustration given by Aquinas. Water however, doesn’t take to itself any of the sparks of the fire. In a similar manner, through meditation and prayer people who remain close to God by the grace of God become warmer and brighter; they participate in and become partakers, of, the Divine Nature. As John says: “What God seeks, he being himself God by nature, is to make us gods through participation, just as fire converts all things into fire”. Would Friar John agree with Aquinas? What does he mean by saying that fire turns all things into fire? His meaning becomes clear from the following text.

“When God grants this supernatural favour to the soul, so great a union is caused
that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God's as it was before, just as the window, although illumined by the ray, has being distinct from the ray's.”

This is what Friar John means when he says we become God by participation. While retaining their own metaphysical ego and identity, they may be said to lose their psychological ego which gets lost in the immense ocean of God’s love.

Contemplation

The contemplation about which Friar John speaks has a very special technical meaning in the mystical sphere. It is a supernatural experience. Friar John himself defines it as follows: “Contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love”.157

In stanza 39 of the Spiritual Canticle the soul sings:

*The breathing of the air,*

*The song of the sweet nightingale,*

*The grove and its living beauty*

*In the serene night,*

*With a flame that is consuming and painless.*
This contemplation, in which the soul, by means of her transformation, has sublime knowledge in this life of the divine grove and its living beauty, is called "night." Because, however sublime this knowledge may be, it is still a dark night when compared with the beatific knowledge the soul asks for here. In seeking clear contemplation, she asks that this enjoyment of the grove and its living beauty, as well as the other goods mentioned, take place now in the serene night; that is, in beatific and clear contemplation, the night of the dark contemplation of this earth changing into the contemplation of the clear and serene vision of God in heaven. Therefore, by saying "in the serene night," she means in the clear and serene contemplation of the vision of God. King David declares of this night of contemplation: The night will be my illumination in my delights [Ps. 139:11], which is like saying: When I shall delight in the essential vision of God, then the night of contemplation will have changed into day and light for my intellect.¹⁵⁸

Friar John says that the contemplation is not only night for the soul but also affliction and torment. “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. Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illuminining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love”.¹⁵⁹
Contemplation is sometimes dry\textsuperscript{160} and sometimes dark\textsuperscript{161}; it is sometimes purifying\textsuperscript{162} and even dreadful\textsuperscript{163}; it is sometimes illumining\textsuperscript{164} and sometimes delightful\textsuperscript{165}.

Now why this light of contemplation, which is so gentle and agreeable that there is nothing more to desire and which is the same light the soul must be united to and in which it will find all its blessings in the desired state of perfection, produces such painful\textsuperscript{166} and disagreeable effects when in these initial stages it shines upon the soul?\textsuperscript{167} Friar John answers this question by saying that there is nothing in contemplation or the divine inflow that of itself can give pain; contemplation rather bestows sweetness and delight. “The cause for not experiencing these agreeable effects is the soul's weakness and imperfection at the time, its inadequate preparation, and the qualities it possesses that are contrary to this light. Because of these the soul has to suffer when the divine light shines upon it”\textsuperscript{168}. That means contemplation is sweet, but bitter because of soul’s inadequacy. Because the light and wisdom of this contemplation is very bright and pure, and the soul in which it shines is dark and impure, a person will be deeply afflicted on receiving it. When eyes are sickly, impure, and weak, they suffer pain if a bright light shines on them.\textsuperscript{169}

This pain and affliction is distinguished by Friar John into a first and a second stage corresponding to stages in the process of purification and illumination. The first stage he calls the first night which corresponds to the state of beginners.\textsuperscript{170} The second stage he calls the second night which corresponds to
that of proficients.\textsuperscript{171} This first night is the lot of beginners, at the time God commences to introduce them into the state of contemplation. It is a night in which their spirit also participates … The second night or purification takes place in those who are already proficients, at the time God desires to lead them into the state of divine union. This purgation, of course, is more obscure, dark, and dreadful.\textsuperscript{172}

The effects\textsuperscript{173} of supernatural contemplation are very deep and extremely varied.\textsuperscript{174} They differ for each degree of union and each grace. Certain philosophers have applied themselves to showing the value of knowledge acquired through contemplation. For them, contemplation would be precious, especially on account of the intimate vision of being and of the world that it secures. It is indeed true that contemplation brings precious lights, but Friar John of the Cross has only one desire and asks only thing of supernatural contemplation: that it may lead him to perfect union, to transforming union by connaturnality of love. That in fact is the end to which it is directly ordered; that is its essential effect. Incomparably more penetrating than natural contemplation, which reaches to the inner riches of life and of life in created things; more profound too than theological contemplation, which makes its own mysteries of eternal light contained in revealed truths; supernatural contemplation penetrates even to divine Truth, has contact with God Himself, the uncreated Light, the all-consuming Fire, the limitless Ocean, the Sun with burning rays. It keeps us all united with Him, and submits it to the enriching and transforming action of the Infinite.
In supernatural contemplation, the soul, like a mirror exposed to the rays of the sun is all aglow with the light of the divine Sun, that shines upon souls; like a sponge immersed in the ocean, it is permeated with pure waters from the Fountain of living water; like the log thrown into a fire, it too is transformed into fire by the all-consuming Fire, which is God.

These different comparisons found in the lyricism of Friar John of the Cross and other mystics, are used to express the soul’s progress in intimate union and the all-pervasive action of the divine Light, wrought in contemplation. By it, the soul is purified, illumined, adorned with light, with beauty, with the riches of God, and transformed from brilliance to brilliance unto a likeness of the Word of God. St. John of the Cross says contemplation is “an infused loving knowledge that both illumines and enamours the soul elevating it step by step unto God, its Creator”.175

This transformation in God is the single end towards which the desires of a truly contemplative soul can tend, a soul committed to the road of “nothing” on its way to the Absolute.

**Conclusion**

This chapter attempts an over-all presentation of the goals aimed at by Gautama Buddha and Friar John respectively. Whereas Gautama Buddha aims at the attainment of peace, tranquility, freedom from cravings and nirvana, Friar John aims not only at freedom from cravings, peace and tranquillity, but also at union with God. Whereas Gautama Buddha apparently speaks very little about
God explicitly, John of the Cross centres his whole thought on union with God. Is there any contradiction between these two great spiritual masters? There appears to be at least at first sight great harmony and compatibility between their approaches to human existence, to the problem of suffering and evil and to the need of eliminating inordinate cravings. The basic difference between the two is apparently that while Gautama Buddha trusts in reason and the natural law, Friar John, taking for granted reason and the natural law, sets the aspirations of his heart on the promise of divine revelation that commands him to love God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength.

15 Cfr. Motilal Pandit, Beyond the Word, Buddhist Approach to Knowledge and Reality, pp. 257-258.
16 Cfr. Motilal Pandit, Beyond the Word, Buddhist Approach to Knowledge and Reality, p. 251.


Cfr. Hermann Oldenberg, *BUDDHA, His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, p. 266.

Hermann Oldenberg, *BUDDHA, His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, p. 267.

Hermann Oldenberg, *BUDDHA, His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, p. 265.


Dhammapada, 414. Hereafter Dhp.


Hermann Oldenberg, *BUDDHA His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, pp. 267-268.


Hermann Oldenberg, *BUDDHA, His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, p. 269.


69 Cfr. footnote no. 23.


73 Dhp 116


84 Antony Fernando, Buddhism Made Plain An Introduction for Christians, p. 60.


Dhp 197-204.

Antony Fernando, Buddhism Made Plain An Introduction for Christians, p. 53.

Dt. 6: 5


2A 5, 4

St. John of the Cross, The Spiritual Canticle 1, 8. Hereafter SC.

2A 5, 3

2A 5, 4

SC 11

SC 11, 3

SC 1, 3

Mary Magdalene (Mary of Magdala), a native of Magdala was a holy woman who ministered to Jesus and His disciples during His public ministry (Lk 8: 2-3) and who according to Jn 20: 1-2; 11-18 (see also Mk 16: 9-11), was the first person to see the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ. Cfr. also Mt. 28: 1-6; Lk. 24: 4-6; Jn. 20: 15.

3A 31, 8

Dt. 6: 5

Cfr. 3A 16, 1

Faith, Hope and Charity (Love) are called Theological Virtues because they are bestowed by God on human beings at the time of baptism and they unite the person to God.

Cfr. 2A 6, 1

Cfr. 2A 6, 1-2


Cfr. 2A 10

2A 3, 1

Cfr. 2A 2, 1

St. John of the Cross, The Living Flame of Love, 3, 48. Hereafter LF.

According to Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D., the editors of The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, the most probable source is in Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae 2-2. 45. 2.


3A 2, 4

3A 7, 2

Cfr. 2N 21, 7

2N 21, 11

3A 11, 1-2

Cfr. 3A 2, 8

The Book of Deuteronomy is one of the Old Testament books of the Bible.

3A 16, 1

Cfr. 3A 16, 2

Cfr. 3A 16, 2


Title of the commentary on the *Living Flame of Love*.

The Precautions

2A 5, 3

SC 26, 5

LF 2, 34

LF 3, 8

LF 3, 78

SC 39, 4; Cfr. also nos 5 & 6.

Sayings 107

2A 5, 7; Cfr. also SC 36, 5; 22, 3; 2N 20, 5

1N 10, 6

Cfr. SC 39, 13

2N 5, 1

Cfr. 1N 9, 6

Cfr. 1N 9, 6

Cfr. 1N Introduction 2; 2N 6, 5; 2N 9, 3; cfr. also 2N 11, 1(as painful)

1A 1, 3

Cfr. 2N 5, 1; 17, 8

Cfr. SC 27, 5; LF 3, 50; SC 34, 6; 1N Introduction 1; 2N 9, 5.6; 13, 1; 16, 14

Cfr. 2N 11, 1

Cfr. 2N 9, 10

2N 9, 11

Cfr. 2N 5, 5

By beginners he refers to those who were traditionally said to be in the “purgative” stage.

By proficients he refers to those who were traditionally said to be in the “illuminative” stage.

1A 1, 3

For delightful effects of supernatural contemplation cfr. 2N 13.


2N 18, 5