Chapter 1

LIFE AND TEACHINGS
Chapter 1 - LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Introduction

The procedure followed in this section will first consider the life and teachings of Gautama Sakyamuni who came to be known as the Buddha after his enlightenment; and then we shall be looking into the life and teachings of St. John of the Cross. The same procedure will be followed in all the chapters. One reason for allotting the Buddha the first place in our considerations is his chronological precedence.

Gautama Buddha

The term Buddha, literally meaning “awakened one” or “enlightened one”, is not a proper name but rather a title, such as messiah (the Christ). Thus, the term when used generically should be accompanied by an article, such as “the Buddha” or “a buddha”. The personal name of the Buddha known in ancient Indian history is Gautama (in Sanskrit), or Gotama (in Pāli). Therefore, in using the term the Buddha, it is generally assumed that it refers to Gautama the Buddha. In using the indefinite article a, the belief is implied that there will be innumerable buddhas in the future as there have been in the past. Gautama was initially not known as the Buddha as we shall see presently. He came to be known as the Buddha only after his enlightenment around the age of 35.
The Socio-Cultural Milieu

During the period of Gautama Buddha (c.563 - c.483 BC) the northeastern region of India was alive with many small religious movements, each having a charismatic yogic leader, a rule or set of laws, and a community of adherents. This pattern was later adopted by the Buddhists as the *tri-ratna* (three jewels): the *Buddha*, the *dharma* (rule) and the *sangha* (community). At this time many were not content with just the external formalities of Brahmanic sacrifices and rituals. Hence many of the discontented giving up their place in society, their sacred threads (*upavita*), and the sacred tuft of hair (*sikhā*), adopted the life of wandering almsmen. In northwest India, such itinerant ascetics tried to go beyond the Vedas. In the literature that grew out of this movement, a new emphasis on renunciation and transcendental knowledge can be found. But northeast India, which was little influenced by the Aryans who had developed the main tenets and practices of the Hindu faith, became the breeding ground of most heterodox sects. Society in this area was troubled by the breakdown of tribal unity and the expansion of several petty kingdoms. In the religious sphere, this was a time of doubt, turmoil and experimentation. As a result, new sects flourished – skeptics, atomists, materialists and antinomians i.e. those against rules or laws. The most important sects to arise at the time of the Buddha were the Ajivikas, who emphasized the rule of fate (*niyati*), and the Jainas who stressed the need to free the soul from matter. Unlike early Buddhists, both the Ajivikas and Jainas believed in the permanence of the elements that constitute the universe, and also the existence of the soul.²
A proto-Samkhya sect that advocated the dualism of spirit (*purusa*) and (*prakrti*) was dominant where Buddhism later arose and perhaps had some impact on early Buddhist thought. But all these religious sects shared the same vocabulary — *Nirvāna* (Transcendent Freedom), ātman (self or soul), *yoga* (union), karman (causality), *tathāgata* (thus-gone or he who has thus attained), *buddha* (enlightened one), *samsāra* (eternal recurrence or becoming) and *dharma* (rule or law) — and most were based on the practice of *yoga*. According to tradition, the Buddha himself was a *yogin* i.e. a miracle-working ascetic.³

**Birth and Early Life**

Many legends surround the birth and early life of Gautama.⁴ According to one such, Siddhartha Gautama was born about the year 563 BC in the kingdom of the Sākyas, on the borders of present-day Nepal and India. Being the son of Suddhodana, the king, and Mahāmāyā, the queen, Gautama Buddha thus came from a Ksatriya family i.e. the warrior caste or ruling class.

On the day of the name-giving ceremony, it is said, that the Brahmins predicted that if the child remained at home, he would become a universal monarch; if he left home, he would become a buddha. On the seventh day after his birth, his mother died and the child was brought up by her sister Mahāprajāpatī Gautami. The young prince was brought up in great luxury, and his father fearing that his son might escape from home to become an ascetic as the Brahmins had predicted, took great care of him hoping to make him his successor. According to
the Anguttara Nikāya, a canonical text, the Buddha himself is reported to have said later about his upbringing:

“Bhikkus [monks], I was delicately nurtured, exceedingly delicately nurtured, delicately nurtured beyond measure. In my father’s residence lotus-ponds were made: one of blue lotuses, one of red and another of white lotuses, just for my sake… Of Kāsi cloth was my turban made; of Kāsi my jacket, my tunic, and my cloak … I had three palaces: one for winter, one for summer and one for the rainy season. Bhikkus, in the rainy season palace, during the four months of the rains, entertained only by female musicians, I did not come down from the palace.”

The Four Trips

Gautama grew up and seems to have eventually married a young princess, Yasodhara, who bore him a son, Rāhula. It is said that Gautama, when he was 29 years old, one day persuaded his groom, Channa, to drive him down to the nearby town, where he had not been till then. In all, he was to make four trips to the town, which were to totally change his life. On the first trip, he met an old man, on the second a sick man, and on the third he met a party of people carrying a corpse to the cremation ground. Not having seen old age, sickness and death before, he was naturally deeply shocked. In fact so shocked, that palace life was no longer pleasant or even bearable for him. He became very concerned with the fact of suffering and with finding a way of ending it. On a fourth trip to the town, he came upon a possible way of finding an answer to his problem. He met an ascetic,
a holy man: one who had given up everything to follow the religious life. Despite having nothing, this man radiated a calmness that suggested to Gautama that he had somehow come to terms with the unpleasant fact of suffering.6

This account should not be taken literally. It is difficult to believe that by the age of 29 Siddhartha had not seen an old man or a sick man, even if the sight of a corpse is excluded, though he was brought up within the protective and luxurious walls of the palace. The human situation however, should be taken into consideration: a commonly occurring incident may through a convergence of circumstances become striking and impressive. Old age, sickness, and death, in this account, symbolically represent human suffering in general. Siddhartha, touched by the suffering of humanity and out of compassion for the world, decided to leave home and go in search for a solution to the problem of suffering.7

The Search Begins

Gautama decided to follow the example of the ascetic whom he had met on the fourth trip. He is said to have stealthily slipped out of the palace in the dead of night, leaving his sleeping wife and little child in bed. He exchanged his splendid silken robe for the simple orange one of an ascetic, and cut off all his shining black hair. Then, carrying nothing but a food bowl, he set off on his great search of a solution to the problem “in quest of the supreme security from bondage, in quest of Nibbāna.”8

Gautama’s first experiment was with systems of meditation. He placed himself under the guidance of two well-known yogi teachers of the time, Ālāra-
Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. Buddha profited from his training in yoga and acquired a facility in meditation, but he did not attach an all-inclusive importance to the techniques of yoga nor did he look approvingly at the preoccupation of these yogi teachers with the meditational states known as trances. He was not interested in meditation simply for the sake of meditation. For him, the right type of meditation had to lead an individual not just to an ephemeral experience but to an insight into the deeper realities of life.  

The second stage, the real struggle in his search for the truth consisted of an experiment with asceticism. After leaving the yogi teachers Gautama joined a monastery or ashram at Uruvelā, in which five ascetics lived together. These monks practiced the strictest asceticism. They believed that self-mortification and self-torture had in them a liberative power. They believed mainly in fasts, living exclusively on leaves and roots. Gautama followed all these disciplines very rigorously. He subjected his body to great hardship and torment. He lived in terrifying forests, burning in the heat of the midday sun and freezing at night; he slept on beds of thorns; sometimes he lived in cemeteries; he starved himself until he became so lean that his pressing his stomach it is said he could touch his backbone. These austerities were vividly described in detail by the Buddha himself in several discourses e.g. in the Majjhima Nikāya. What it looked like and what happened to him as a result of these austerities is depicted in the following words from the ancient text: “Because of so little nourishment, all my limbs became like some withered creepers with knotted joints; my buttocks like a buffalo’s hoof, my
back-bone protruding like a string of balls; my ribs like rafters of a dilapidated shed; the pupils of my eyes appear sunk deep in their sockets as water appears shining at the bottom of a deep well; my scalp became shriveled and shrunk by sun and wind;...the skin of my belly came to be cleaving to my backbone; when I wanted to obey the calls of nature, I fell down on my face then and there; when I stroked my limbs with my hand, hairs rotted at the roots fell away from my body...”

It was not long before he realized the utter futility of such self-mortification to achieve liberation. He soon saw that what is required for liberation is not self-mortification but self-discipline or self-mastery. As soon as he discovered that pure asceticism could not give the deeper form of mental liberation he sought after, he bade his companions’ good-bye and began to pursue his search all by himself.12

**Enlightenment**

After leaving the ascetical school, Gautama continued his search, reflecting on liberation and the path to it in total solitude under the Bodhi tree, literally meaning the tree of enlightenment, at a place nowadays called Bodh Gaya. He was determined to sit there until he found an answer or die trying. During the night of the full moon of May, Gautama passed into deep meditation; he meditated on his past life and on the non-liberated lives of others. He discovered the real nature of human suffering, the cause of it, the possibility of escape from it and the path for such an escape. In his own words: “My mind was
emancipated … Ignorance was dispelled, science (knowledge) arose; darkness was dispelled, light arose.”\textsuperscript{13}

He expressed this experience of enlightenment in a spirit of joy and humility: “Being myself subject to birth, aging, disease, death, sorrow, and defilement, seeing danger in what is subject to these things, seeking the unborn, unaging, diseaseless, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, supreme security from bondage – Nirvana – I attained it. Knowledge and vision arose in me. Unshakeable is my deliverance of mind.”\textsuperscript{14}

Thus at the age of 35, Gautama attained the Enlightenment or Awakening and became a Buddha. He was no more Gautama but the \textit{Buddha}, the \textit{Awakened One}. He had seen things as they really are. Sometimes he is spoken of as having attained Nirvana. Nirvana is - the extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion. Its true nature cannot be put into words; a person must know it for himself in his own heart\textsuperscript{15}. This discovery was his enlightenment.

\textbf{Preaching}

The Buddha’s conviction about his own liberation and enlightenment was so powerful that he felt urged and impelled to preach it to the whole world. At first he was reluctant to tell other people about what he had discovered. He felt they would not understand. He is reported to have thought to himself: “I have realized this Truth which is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand … comprehensible by the wise. Men who are overpowered by passion and surrounded by a mass of darkness cannot see this Truth which is against the current (patisotagāmin), which
is lofty, deep, subtle and hard to comprehend.”

He was persuaded, however, that there were some 'with but a little dust in their eyes' who might benefit from being told. He therefore went to Isipatana (modern Sarnath, near Benares) where he delivered his first sermon in a deer park. Thus began a forty-five year teaching career.

The Buddha taught all classes, conditions and types of men and women, and, indeed, all beings. The way that he taught is often called The Middle Way, Ādhyāma Pratipāt because it teaches that we should try and keep to a middle path between all extremes:

“These two extremes, monks, are not to be approached by him who has withdrawn from the world. Which two? One is that which is linked and connected with lust, through sensuous pleasures, because it is low, of the uncultured, of the mediocre man, ignoble and profitless. The other is that which is connected with mortification and asceticism because it is painful, ignoble and incapable of achieving the target. Avoiding both these extremes, monks take the Middle Path which is the Eightfold Path, namely, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation. It is this which brings insight, brings knowledge and leads to tranquility, to highest awareness, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana.”

The Buddha also preached about the Four Noble Truths that he had discovered: The first one is that man’s existence is dukkha, full of conflict, dissatisfaction, sorrow and suffering. The second is that all this is caused by man’s
selfish desire, i.e. craving or *tanha* (thirst). The third is that there is emancipation, liberation and freedom from all this which is nirvana (*nibbāna*). The fourth one, the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to this liberation. In the following pages we shall be dealing with these themes in greater detail.

**The Founding of the Sangha**

Soon the Buddha gathered around himself a following ready to give up everything to hear his teachings and put them into practice. The disciples who gathered around him made up the *Sangha* (community). They possessed nothing and lived on alms. The Buddha was the teacher (*sattha, sastra*). The *sangha* was the group of properly ordained disciples. Its members comprised neophytes (*samanera, sramanera*) and fully ordained monks (*bhikku, bhiksu*). The most excellent member was the *arahant, arhat* (“saint” or “worthy one”) who had achieved the complete detachment that leads to Nirvana. Thus was born the Sangha: the community of Buddhist monks and nuns, which from the start was supported by a large lay community. And very soon the Buddha had 60 disciples who were perfected ones who went in various directions to spread the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha himself set out for Uruvela; on the way he converted thirty young men and in Uruvela he converted three leading ascetics along with a large number of their disciples; from there he moved to Rājagaha, the capital of Magadha, where large numbers of people, including the King, became his lay disciples. Thus the number of his followers among all classes of people increased
very rapidly even as the Buddha set out on his last journey, from Rājagaha toward the north.\(^2\)

As a man, the Buddha's life had eventually to end. He passed away when he was about eighty at Kushinara. Naturally, his followers were deeply grieved. His final words to them were: ‘Impermanent are all compounded things. Strive on heedfully.’ All individual things pass away. Search for liberation with diligence.’\(^2\) Afterwards, he passed into what Buddhists call his parinirvana or Full Nirvana, a state that can no more be conveyed in words than his first nirvana or enlightenment.

**Personality and Character**\(^2\)

We do not have much information about the physical appearance of Gautama Buddha. Canki\(^2\), a highly respectable Brahmin leader is reported to have said that “the recluse Gotama is lovely, good to look at, charming, possessed of the greatest beauty of complexion of a sublime colour, a perfect stature, and noble of presence.”

He had a unique reputation as a great teacher and trainer of men. His conversion and taming of Angulimāla, a murderer and bandit, who was a terror even to the King of Kosala, is an example of his great powers and abilities. People who went to see and hear him were fascinated and so quickly converted to the new teaching that his opponents described him as having some “enticing trick” (āvattani-māyā). The king of Kosala is said to have said that those which went with the idea of confounding the Buddha in debate became his disciples at the end.
Full of compassion (karunā) and wisdom (pannā), he is recognized as knowing how and what to teach each individual for his own benefit according to the level of his capabilities. He is known to have walked long distances even if it was to help one single person.

Affectionate and devoted to his disciples, the Buddha was always enquiring after their well-being and progress. When he was staying in a monastery, he paid daily visits to the sick. Once he himself attended a sick monk neglected by others and on that occasion said: “He who attends on the sick attends on me.”

As a social reformer, the Buddha condemned the caste system that was a long established and respected institution in India and recognized the equality of human beings. He also perceived the connection between economic welfare and moral development. Trying to suppress the crime through punishment according to him was futile. Poverty (dāliddiya), according to him, was the cause of immorality and crimes; therefore, the economic condition of people should improve.

He appreciated both natural and physical beauty. On several occasions, he was moved aesthetically, as he told Ānanda, how delightful certain places were to him. At Vesāli, he told the monks that if they had not seen the devas (gods), they should look at the handsome Licchavis,26 beautifully and elegantly dressed in different colours.

The Buddha was a strict disciplinarian. King Pasenadi could not understand how the Buddha maintained such order and disciple in the community
of Bhikkhus, when he, a king, with the power to inflict punishment, could not maintain it as well in his court. Gautama, however, kept order and discipline on the basis of mutual love, affection, and respect that exists between teacher and pupil.

Many miraculous powers were attributed to the Buddha, but he did not give them much importance. Once, when one of his disciples performed a miracle in public, Gautama reproached him and laid down a rule that his disciples should not perform miracles before the laity. The greatest miracle, in his view, was to explain the truth and make a person realize it.

Behind his philosophy and strict ethics, Gautama had a quiet sense of humor. A conceited Brahmin who was in the habit of discrediting others, questioned him as to the qualities of a true Brahmin. In a list of such high qualities, as freedom from evil, purity of heart, etc. Gautama gently included “not discrediting.”

The portrait of the Buddha, as can be inferred from the ancient texts, is one of a man of both great wisdom (mahāpannā) and great compassion (mahākarunā) moved by the spectacle of human suffering and determined to free human beings from its fetters by a rational system of thought and a way of life.

According to the Buddha, there were four basic qualities that characterized any Buddhist saint or liberated person. They are:

1. Mettā – friendliness or loving kindness
2. Karunā – compassion
3. Muditā – Gentleness

4. Upekkhā – Equanimity

These four qualities, which he recommended to others were also qualities that he practiced himself. There is a little incident that shows how seriously he practiced such virtues in his own life. As the sangha or order grew and established itself in different places, he made it a point to visit the monks residing in these places and inquired about their wellbeing. One monastery that he visited had a monk, who was very ill. The monk was suffering from an advanced skin disease. The eczema had spread so much that his entire body seemed one single sore. Blood and pus oozed out to the extent that his clothes were stuck to his body. His companions, because of the filthiness of his state, had kept aloof and abandoned him to suffer alone.

The Buddha visited this monk in the company of his close associate, Ānanda. Taking a basin of water and a towel, he washed the patient and cleaned him. After doing whatever was possible to bring relief to him, he walked out to the little huts of the other monks. He asked them why they had neglected to look after him. They replied that as he was sure to die, he was of no use to the order. With the intention of opening their eyes, to the heartlessness of such behaviour, the Buddha said: ‘Monks, you do not have a mother, you do not have a father here who can tend you; if you, monks, do not tend one another, who is there to tend you? Remember that whoever tends a sick person, as it were, tends me.’

128
Thus the Buddha showed himself to be a person, who practiced what he preached.

**Teachings**

There are no records of Buddha’s having put down anything in writing and it appears that like Socrates his teaching was exclusively oral. Oral transmission was the custom of the time. It may be about a century after the death of the Buddha that his teachings began to be put down in writing. We may believe that it was the councils organized by his disciples that promoted and encouraged the recording in writing of his teachings. It requires further research to account for the diversification of the schools through the interpretation of what he had taught.

“The teaching attributed to the Buddha was transmitted orally by his disciples prefaced by the phrase, *evam mayā srutam* (“Thus have I heard”); therefore it is difficult to say whether his discourses were related as they were spoken. They usually allude, however, to the place, time, and community where he preached; and there is concordance between various versions. An attempt was made by Buddhist councils in the first centuries after the Buddha’s death to establish his true and original teachings.”

**Buddhist Schools**

About 140 years after the Buddha’s death, the Buddhist community, which had long been divided into many informal factions, became openly divided between two sects, the Mahāsāṅghika (Great Council) and the Sthaviravāda (which stood for the tradition of the elders at the council of Pataliputra). These
were the forerunners of the great split of Buddhism into Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) and Theravada (Way of the Elders), called Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) by the Mahayanists. These made their own respective efforts occasionally through “councils” to define more precisely the teachings of the Buddha and draw up canons as criteria of authenticity. A lot of historical uncertainty surrounds these early “councils”. Other later schisms and splits resulted in a variety of movements and schools branching out in the course of time in South-East Asia.30

**Buddhist Scriptures**

There are a vast number of Buddhist scriptures and religious texts, which are commonly divided into the categories of canonical and non-canonical. The former, also called the *Sutras* (Sanskrit) or *Suttas* (Pāli) are believed to be the actual words of the Buddha. The latter are the various commentaries on canonical texts, other treatises on the Dharma, and collections of quotes, histories, grammars, etc.

This categorization is not universal, however: there will always be texts that cross boundaries, or that belong in more than one category.

**Tripitaka (Pāli Canon)**

The Tripitaka (*Tipitaka* in Pāli) is the earliest collection of Buddhist teachings and the only text recognized as canonical by Theravada Buddhists. Many commentaries have been added over the centuries, however. Tripitaka means “three baskets”, from the way in which it was originally recorded: the text was written on long, narrow leaves, which were sewn at the edges then grouped into
bunches and stored in baskets. The collection is also referred to as the *Pāli Canon*, after the language in which it was first written.\(^{31}\)

The Tripitaka was handed down orally, and then written down in the third century B.C.E. According to Buddhist tradition, the contents of the Tripitaka were determined at the First Buddhist Council, shortly after the Buddha's death. As many as 500 of Buddha’s disciples were said to have assembled, and at the direction of Mahākāsapa, Buddha's successor, the teachings of the Buddha were recited in full. They were then verified by others who had also been present and organized into the Tripitaka (although not written at the time).\(^{32}\)

The Tripitaka are respectively known as the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the *Sutta Pitaka*, and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*.

The *Vinaya Pitaka* deals with the rules of the monastic order (for monks and nuns). It is attributed to a monk named Upali. It deals with rules and regulations for the monastic community (the sangha), including 227 rules for monks, further regulations for nuns, and guidelines for the interaction between the sangha and the laity. Most of these rules are said to derive from the Buddha's responses to specific situations in the community.\(^{33}\)

The *Sutta Pitaka* (Discourse basket) deals with the accounts of the Buddha's teachings. It was allegedly recited by Ānanda, Buddha's cousin and closest companion. It contains the Buddha's teachings on doctrine and behaviour, focusing especially on meditation techniques.\(^{34}\)

The *Sutta Pitaka* is divided into five *Nikāyas* (collections):\(^{35}\)
i. *Digha Nikāya* (collection of long discourses) – It contains 34 texts including the Mahaparinibbāna Sutta and the Brahmajala Sutta; it ranges almost up to 95 pages.

ii. *Majjhima Nikāya* (collection of middle-length discourses) – It has 152 suttas.

iii. *Samyutta Nikāya* (collection of thematically linked discourses) – It contains more than 2800 suttas.

iv. *Anguttara Nikāya* (gradual collection discourses grouped by content enumerations) – These comprise over 2300 suttas.

v. *Khuddaka Nikāya* (minor collection) – It has several well-known texts including:

Dhammapada: a collection of sayings and aphorisms

Udana: a collection of inspired sayings in verse usually with a prose introduction

Sutta Nipāta: parts of it such as Atthakavagga and the Parayanavagga

Jataka: poems related to the so-called birth-stories, which recount the former lives of the Buddha.\(^{36}\)

The *Abhidharma* (Abhidhamma) *Pitaka* (Higher Knowledge or Special Teachings Basket) is said to have been recited by Mahākasyapa, the Buddha's successor. It is essentially a collection of miscellaneous writings, including songs, poetry, and stories of the Buddha and his past lives. Its primary subjects are
Buddhist philosophy and psychology. Also within the Abhidharma Pitaka is the Dhammapada\textsuperscript{37} (Dharmapada in Sanskrit), a popular Buddhist text. The Dhammapada consists of sayings of the Buddha and simple discussions of Buddhist doctrine based on the Buddha's daily life.\textsuperscript{38}

Apart from these canonical texts, there are various non-canonical texts accepted by different schools of Buddhism.

According to Donald Lopez, criteria for determining what should be considered buddhavacana was developed at an early stage, and that the early formulations do not suggest that the Dharma is limited to what was spoken by the historical Buddha.\textsuperscript{39}

The most reliable sources for the sayings of Buddhavacana seem to scholars some of the texts already mentioned above belonging particularly to Theravada. For China, the most reliable canon is Taisho Tripitaka. This is also applicable to much of East-Asian Buddhism. East-Asian and Tibetan Buddhism usually combine buddhavacana with other Buddhist literature.

**The Spread of Buddhism**

As we have seen above when dealing with the schism within Buddhism and with the councils, the canons and the texts, the teachings of the Buddha made considerable impact on people not only in the lower strata of society but also on rulers like Asoka (304-232 BC) who is said to have taken so much to Buddhism that he even went so far as to subsidize their efforts at prosletization. There are the pillars of Asoka, a series of columns dispersed throughout the northern Indian
subcontinent, erected or at least inscribed with edicts by the Mauryan king. All the pillars were placed at Buddhist monasteries or other important Buddhist sites and places of pilgrimage. Some of the columns carry inscriptions addressed to the monks and nuns. There are also the *Edicts of Asoka*, a collection of thirty three inscriptions on these pillars as well as boulders and cave walls, made by Asoka during his reign from 269 BCE to 232 BCE. These inscriptions are dispersed throughout the areas of modern-day Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan and represent the first tangible evidence of Buddhism. The edicts describe in detail Asoka’s view about *dhamma*, an earnest attempt to solve some of the problems that a complex society faced. According to the edicts, the extent of Buddhist proselytism during this period reached as far as the Mediterranean, and many Buddhist monuments were created. These inscriptions proclaim Asoka’s adherence to the Buddhist philosophy and show his efforts to develop the Buddhist dharma throughout his kingdom. The edicts focus on social and moral precepts of Buddhism.

There is Pure Land Buddhism which is also called Amidism, which is a broad branch of Mahayana Buddhism. It is one of the widely practiced traditions of Buddhism in East Asia – China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Tibet. It is a tradition that focuses on Amitābha Buddha. According to Andrew Skilton, the Pure Land teachings were first developed in India and were very popular in Kashmir and Central Asia where they may have originated. Amitābha or Amida
or Amitayus is a celestial buddha described in the scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism. According to these scriptures, Amitābha possesses infinite merits resulting from good deeds he performed in the countless past lives as a bodhisattva. He is also called “Infinite Light” or “The Buddha of Immeasurable Life and Light.”

With the spread of Buddhism it was inevitable that his teaching should receive new interpretations and commentaries so that in the course of time more schools and trends should appear. The Buddha’s basic interests were practical and ethical. The human mind however, particularly in some cultures, asks more questions in other fields of knowledge than the merely practical and ethical. Does the practical not postulate some theoretical foundation and backing? Can the ethical stand without any theories of knowledge? Moreover, should people not know something about the physical and metaphysical nature of the world in which they live? Furthermore, what is the use of being ethical if there are no sanctions for good or evil? If indeed there are sanctions what is their nature?

Since the Buddha left some of these questions wholly or partially unanswered someone or other who came after him might have to provide the necessary solutions. The probability also has to be taken into account that the new cultures that heard of the discourses of the Buddha had already their own systems of beliefs – religious, moral, social. Such a situation would lead to some sort of fusion of horizons between the new and the old.
**St. John of the Cross**

St. John of the Cross (*San Juan de la Cruz*) (1542–1591), was a major figure of the Counter-Reformation, a Spanish Mystic, Roman Catholic Saint and a Carmelite priest. He is the reformer of the Carmelite Order along with St. Teresa of Avila. He is also known for his writings. Both his poetry and his doctrine on the journey of the human soul towards union with God are considered the summit of Spanish mystical literature. He was canonized as a saint in 1726 by Pope Benedict XIII. He was declared Doctor of the Church in 1926.

**The Socio-Cultural Milieu**

St. John of the Cross lived the forty nine years of his earthly existence in a particularly dazzling moment of Spanish history, the sixteenth century. More specifically, he lived in its second half, the period of Philip II (1556-98), a less expansive but more intensive and creative one. The period is commonly called “the golden age” on account of its exuberant vitality and valuable creations in those fields most representative of life: socio-political, cultural and religious. It is the indispensable framework for understanding the life and work of John of the Cross.45

In those times Spain was reaching across the entire world: Europe, Africa, America and the Philippines. It had a dominion that gave it the feeling of power and glory, although the cost was exorbitant and the sacrifices innumerable. A new world had been won for the Catholic Kings by Christopher Columbus and wealth
from the Americas soon began pouring into Spain, while missionaries from Spain were carrying the Good News to the Americas. Friar John appeared on the stage of the Spanish world half a century after the discovery of the Americas. Culture and the arts were flourishing. The printing press had been invented by Gutenberg in Germany a century earlier and this invention brought about a cultural revolution in Europe. After the Bible, which was the first book to come out of the press hundreds of books were printed, many of them translations into the vernacular. In literature, the century marked the zenith of Castilian poetry and prose: Fray Luis de Leon, St. Teresa of Jesus, Gongora, Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Cisneros, Osuna, St. Ignatius, St. John of Avila, Fray Luis de Granada et al. These few names are sufficient to give distinction to a century. This period coincides with the glorious reigns of Akbar and the Moguls in India. Whereas Buddhism had been eradicated by the Islamic rebellion in India in the fifteenth century, in Sri Lanka persecution and virtual eradication of Buddhism took place during this period.

In spite of all the progress, what was most universally felt and cultivated throughout the century was the world of faith and spirituality, especially after the unification of Spain under the Catholic Kings. That was also the world that most intimately affected John of the Cross. There was a great longing for spiritual renewal: initiatives were taken on all levels, among the ordinary people as well as within organized and established groups. The preferred themes were prayer, recollection, evangelization, rites and ceremonies, asceticism and mysticism.
This gives us an overall view of the setting in which John of the Cross lived and breathed. Not all of the elements entered his life with the same immediacy or proportion. The political factors reached him only from afar; the cultural and religious ones affected him continually and closely. We also observe that his experiences occurred in gradual steps. The entire picture was not revealed at once as though by a single stroke. His first contacts were with poverty and the lower social strata. In the second phase, the world of culture opened before him – the study of literature in Medina, of theology in Salamanca. Finally, he entered fully into the preferred field of his life and literary creation, the renewal of religious life, contemplation and mysticism.48

In the rest of Europe unimaginable religious confusion and upheavals were taking place. Since 1519 Lutheranism had begun the tearing apart of European Christendom. Zwingli and Calvin continued that process in Switzerland and France; and finally, Henry VIII in the 1530s broke England away from the Church. To meet this unprecedented crisis, an ecumenical council was convened at Trent when John was a boy of three. In the very year of John’s birth, Francis Xavier a fellow countryman of John reached India. All these events would certainly have an effect in Spain in general and on the life of Friar John in particular.

**Early Life and Education**

Juan de Yepes y Alvarez49 was born into a Jewish converso family in Fontiveros, near Avila, Spain. His father Gonzalo was an accountant to richer
relatives who were silk merchants. However, when in 1529 he married Catalina who was an orphan of Moorish ancestry, Gonzalo was cut off from the family inheritance and forced to work with his wife as a weaver. He died in 1545, while John was still only about 3 years old. Two years later, John’s elder brother Luis died, probably as a result of malnutrition caused by the poverty to which John’s family had been reduced. After this, John’s mother Catalina took John and his surviving brother Francisco, and moved first in 1548 to Arevalo, and then in 1551 to Medina del Campo, where she was able to find work weaving.

In Medina, John entered a school for poor children, mostly orphans, receiving a basic education, mainly in Christian doctrine. While studying there he served as a young assistant sacristan at a nearby monastery of Augustinian nuns. Later as a teenager, John worked at a hospital as cleaner and studied humanities – grammar, rhetoric, Latin and Greek at a Jesuit school from 1559 to 1563. In 1563 he entered the Carmelite Order and was given the religious name, John of St. Matthias.

In 1564 John made his profession of the religious vows as a Carmelite and travelled to Salamanca, where he studied theology and philosophy at the prestigious University there. Some modern writers claim that this stay would influence all his later writings, as Luis de Leon taught biblical studies (Exegesis, Hebrew and Aramaic) at the University; Luis de Leon was one of the leading experts in Biblical Studies then and had written an important and controversial translation of the Song of Songs, one of the books of the Bible, into Spanish.
Associate of St. Teresa

John was ordained a priest in 1567 but was already intending to enter a life of greater asceticism, silence and prayer in the Carthusian Order, not being satisfied with the way in which the Carmelites at the time dedicated themselves to contemplation. He went to Medina del Campo to celebrate his First Mass for his mother and dear ones the same year. There he met Teresa, the great reformer of the Carmelite Order.

St. Teresa born in 1515, and professed as a Carmelite nun in 1537 had experienced extraordinary divine interventions in her life and been led to reform the feminine branch of the Order in 1562. Now, she had obtained the permission from the superior general of the Carmelites to reform also the friars. It was when she came to Medina del Campo in 1567 in order to make a second foundation for the reformed sisters that she met John of St. Matthias. She immediately talked to him about her reformation projects for the Carmelite Order, and asked him to delay his entry into the Carthusians and pointed out to him that he could find what he was seeking without leaving the Carmelite Order. John agreed on condition that things would move fast. The following year i.e. 1568, on 28 November, the foundation of the reformed friars was laid at Duruelo. On that same day John of St. Matthias changed his name to that of John of the Cross.

However, the reform movement soon ran into trouble, one reason being that the superior general had permitted only two communities of the reform and both of these in the Castilian province. It so happened however, that the king of Spain
Philip II along with the papal nuncio Ormaneto wanted to have an active part in the reform of the religious in Spain. They obtained faculties from the pope for the same, and considering themselves to have more authority than the Carmelite superior general, extended the friars’ reform beyond the limits imposed by the superior general. This situation of double jurisdiction created a great deal of misunderstanding and ill-will till in 1575 at the general chapter of Piacenza (Italy) Fr. John of the Cross and his group were condemned as disobedient, rebellious and stubborn. Hence immediate action would have to be taken against them, for the execution of which a certain Fr. Jerome Tostado was appointed. However, on his arrival in Spain he was prevented for the time-being from executing his mandate, by the papal nuncio Ormaneto. But when Ormaneto expired in 1577 the opponents of the reform kidnapped Fr. John and other Teresian leaders and had them imprisoned. John was captured on the night of December 2 and frisked away to a monastic prison in Toledo where he was penalized for disobeying the superior general’s injunction. It is said that when the group halted at an inn along the road between Avila and Toledo, the inn-keeper having compassion on the emaciated friar John, made a plan with the caravan drivers for the escape of friar John, who however, while thanking them, declined the offer. 

John was jailed in Toledo, where he was kept under a brutal regimen that included lashing in the community at least once or twice a week and severe isolation in a tiny stifling cell barely large enough for his body. His food was very
frugal – a piece of bread and water and apparently at times of left-overs. He had no change of clothing for about six months. To crown his sufferings was the gnawing question about whether or not he had done the right thing by joining the Teresian reform and promoting it in the face of so much opposition. A darkness as of night enveloped his spirit, a night darker than that, without the light of moon or stars, in which his body lay.\(^{63}\)

He patiently underwent the ordeal with a view to attaining the union with God that had been the one goal of his desires since youth. During those months of his captivity, his mystical experience gets matured and he composed a great part of his most famous poem the *Spiritual Canticle* in the prison. His harsh sufferings and spiritual endeavours are then reflected in all of his subsequent writings. Nonetheless he had been convinced, from the outset that he ought to get away if he had an opportunity. And on a night of mid-August 1578 he did manage to escape.

Before the end of 1578 we find him in southern Spain once again serving the cause of the reform which was gradually being consolidated notwithstanding its many adversaries. He held various important responsibilities in the reform as local superior, spiritual director and also as a major superior. The reform movement made strenuous efforts to wriggle out of the old Order. New misunderstandings arose within the reform itself several years later. Friar John becomes a victim of rejection and severe persecution. He was ‘thrown into a corner’ as he himself had desired and foretold. But it did not matter to him whether he was despised or honoured. One of his confreres\(^{64}\) initiated against him
a process of calumny of threats and of falsification of documents. All this was out of grudge for some light corrections given by the Saint. John faced this entire storm with undisturbed serenity of mind.

In the midst of persecution and calumny John’s physical frame became further enfeebled and he was compelled to retire when he was scarcely 49 years of age. The sickness followed its own course; the swelling in one leg spread and an operation became necessary. In order to avoid cancerous infection, his wound was cut open and bones scraped while the patient maintained imperturbable tranquillity. Consumed physically by the cancerous ailment, he in the early hours of 14 December 1591 finally surrendered his spirit into the hands of the Most Holy Trinity to be united with God forever.

**Personality and Character**

The portrait drawn of Friar John of the Cross by P. Eliseo de los Martires begins with these words, “I knew Fray John of the Cross and spoke with him and was in contact with him many times and often…He was a man in body of medium size, of grave and venerable countenance, somewhat swarthy, and of good features; his bearing and conversation were peaceful, very spiritual, and full of profit for those who listened to and talked with him. In this, he was so outstanding and helpful that those who came in contact with him, men and women, came away made spiritual, full of devotion and with a love for virtue. He had deep knowledge and experience of prayer and contact with God, and to all the questions, which were put to him on these points, he replied with the deepest wisdom, leaving those
who consulted him very satisfied and full of profit. He was fond of recollection and of little speaking; his laughter was rare and very controlled. When as superior he rebuked, which was often, it was with sweet severity, exhorting with fatherly love and with admirable serenity and gravity.”

This is the best portrait we have of Saint John of the Cross, a firsthand picture of both his appearance and his character, which will be found to be confirmed by numerous references from those he knew and came into contact with him.

Friar John of the Cross was thin and frail, as he was frugal in food and sparing of sleep, a constant chastiser of his body by severe and prolonged penance and the victim of constant persecutions, which penetrated to his very soul. Even before his imprisonment from which he came out no more than skin and bone, he was so thin even though he was in his youthful prime of a man of thirty, that St. Teresa of Avila wrote to King Phillip II “And this friar so great a servant of God, is so thin from the much he has suffered that I fear for his life.” Although not handsome, the expression of the features taken as a whole, of his look and his gestures, gave Friar John of the Cross’ face a sweet attractiveness, which stands out in all the early portraits. “Something shone through him…something of God.”

A combination of high moral qualities persistently outstanding for those who lived with him gave his countenance an attraction not explained by the features of his face. No one ever saw him angry, impatient, or not master of himself; he never said one word in a higher tone than another; unalterably serene
as if he had no passions, absolute master of all the impulses of soul and body. An abiding though quiet joy constantly lit up his countenance. He was the enemy of spiritual melancholy and when he saw one of his subjects sad, he would take him by his hand and carry him off for a walk with him in the garden and would not leave him until he was cheerful and optimistic again. Fond of simplicity and straightforwardness, he shunned all ostentation of authority, sharing with his subjects in the most humble tasks such as sweeping and washing the dishes. He was kind towards all and never gave orders imperiously, faithful to his saying that 'in nothing does one show oneself so unworthy to command as when one does so with imperiousness,' because 'one must try to bring it about that subjects never leave the superior's presence sad'. 'He had a rare prudence and a most sweet manner of ruling ' said one of his subjects. It can thus be understood why his subjects, finding themselves governed by the heart of a father, asked their superiors to assign them to the monastery where Friar John of the Cross was the prior.

This kindness took on the form of maternal affection and solicitude when it was a question of the sick. He would go to any length to look after and relieve them. Most austere towards himself, even to the point of denying himself things most necessary, it did not matter to him, on the other hand, how costly the medicines for his sick brothers were, even when he knew they could not recover. It was sufficient for him to know that they could give them some relief. He looked after the sick personally, visiting them, spending long time at their bedsides,
making their beds, performing the most humble tasks of cleanliness for them, even prepared their food and gave it to them with his own hand. If anyone brought him some present, he could not be quick enough in taking it to his sick friars.

Nobody heard him speak unfavourably of the others, even though they were opposed to him, nor allow murmuring in his presence a thing he would correct severely. Even for his persecutors, he always had words of excuse saying they acted in good faith. He always sought a suitable occasion to praise the virtues of others, speaking highly of the good qualities of the absent.

Apart from these characteristics of his life, there are other elements which complete the portrait of the Saint John of the Cross in the intellectual and moral order – his books. He is supreme intelligence in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and in the *Dark Night*, oriental fantasy in *The Spiritual Canticle*, and a heart of fire in *The Living Flame of Love*.

*The Ascent* and *The Dark Night* reflect the intelligence. It is the strong, certain, logical, and clear quality, which sees all the possible consequences inherent in a principle and goes forward implacably and without the slightest deviation even to the final consequence. The *Canticles* shows clearly that through that intelligence and fresh and exuberant fantasy, shot through with oriental colours and richness, shone out. A fantasy which gathers together all the beauties of visible creation in meadows, wooded mountains, and river banks, night and early morning, love expressed in the whispering of the waters, wounded hearts and white doves, rivers and vineyards…apple trees and fields of lilies, to weave with
threads of light, the nuptial cloak of the beautiful bride of love. Finally, there is the outpouring of the *Living Flame of Love* where everything – ideas, images, and words – seems to be incandescent. All creatures appear to be bathed in the light of lamps of fire which illumine even the deepest caverns of sense.

Thus was St. John of the Cross – small and graceful in body, a giant in intellect, kindly and loving towards all. He was a reformer, master, saint, doctor, poet. His unshod feet, which trod nothing but thorns, made the path behind him burst into flowers. His lips which tasted so much gall breathed forth only poetry. In the end, after having suffered and sung so much, he was able to repeat as he died in Ubeda, the final strophe of his *Dark Night*:

*I abandoned and forgot myself,*

*Laying my face on my Beloved;*

*All things ceased; I went out from myself,*

*Leaving my cares,*

*Forgotten among the lilies.*\(^69\)
Influences on John of the Cross

i) Scripture

In the first place, John was clearly influenced by the Bible. Scriptural images are common in both his poems and prose – in total, there are 1,583 explicit and 115 implicit quotations from the Bible in his works. The influence of the Song of Songs on the Spiritual Canticle has often been noted, both in terms of the structure of the poem, with its dialogue between two lovers, the account of their difficulties in meeting each other, and the ‘offstage chorus’ that comments on this action, and also in terms of the imagery of pomegranates, wine cellar, turtle dove, and lilies, for example, which echoes that of the Song of Songs.

In addition, John shows at occasional points the influence of the Divine Office. This demonstrates how John, steeped in the language and rituals of the Church, drew at times on the phrases and language here.

However it is to be noted that whereas the scriptures may sometimes help St. John of the Cross to interpret his experience, there are instances where St. John of the Cross does interpret the scriptures in the light if his own experience.

ii) Early Studies

In order to gain a better understanding of the intellectual influences to which John was exposed in his formative years (and so to isolate what shaped his unusual theology), many scholars have tried to reconstruct John’s likely course of studies while he was at Salamanca between 1563 and 1567, living at the Carmelite College of San Andrés and studying at the University of Salamanca. It has been
widely acknowledged in the twentieth-century to be most likely that John would have received teaching both from the College of San Andrès and from Salamanca University.\textsuperscript{75}

If taught at the College of San Andrès, John would have been exposed to the teachings of both Michael of Bologna\textsuperscript{76} and John Baconthorpe (c.1290-1347),\textsuperscript{77} with the Spanish Carmelites of the day concentrating more on Baconthorpe’s thought.\textsuperscript{78} There are, however, no clear signs of the influence of either writer in John’s works. Perhaps no more can be said of the influence of Baconthorpe than that, given that he was a ‘subtle and eclectic scholar who did not hesitate to disagree with St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)\textsuperscript{79} on many important issues’, it might be ‘that acquaintance with his works may have helped John to avoid any slavish adherence to Thomistic doctrines’.\textsuperscript{80}

In the University itself, there is widely acknowledged to have existed a range of intellectual positions. Academic positions in John’s time included Chairs of St Thomas, Chairs of Scotus and Durandus.\textsuperscript{81} Typically, it is assumed that John would have been educated here in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, explaining the influence of Thomas on much of the scholastic framework of his writings.

\textbf{iii) Pseudo-Dionysius (the Areopagite)}

It has rarely been disputed that the overall structure of John’s mystical theology, and his language of the union of the soul with God, is influenced by the pseudo-Dionysian tradition.\textsuperscript{82} We must bear in mind however, the role of his own personal experience on the road to union. It is not clear whether John might have
had direct access to the writings of pseudo-Dionysius, or whether this influence may have been mediated through various later authors.\textsuperscript{83}

Whether John of the Cross was influenced or not by the Rhineland mystics\textsuperscript{84} or the medieval Islamic mystics is a matter of dispute. However, it seems probable that John of the Cross was influenced by the \textit{Cloud of Unknowing}.\textsuperscript{85}

\textbf{Writings}

John of the Cross is considered one of the foremost poets in the Spanish language. Although his complete poems add up to fewer than 2500 verses, two of them – the Spiritual Canticle\textsuperscript{86} (\textit{Cantico Espiritual})\textsuperscript{87} and The Dark Night\textsuperscript{88}(\textit{Noche Oscura})\textsuperscript{89} are widely considered masterpieces of Spanish poetry, both for their formal stylistic point of view and their rich symbolism and imagery. His theological works often consist of commentaries on these poems.

It is to be noted that John spontaneously opts for poetry as his medium for communicating his ineffable mystical experiences. He seems to have had a series of these experiences beginning from his youth and continuing till he reached union with God. The nature of the experiences divinely communicated to him impressed on him the conviction that these experiences that at least some of these experiences were ineffable in the sense that human words and human language could not communicate their content. John however, despite this limitation of human language had a wish to tell his brethren and share with them some of the deep revelations of God’s love. Poetry became his preferred medium of sharing his experience because poetry makes allowances which prose does not make.
Poetry has ample room for similes, metaphors, analogies, symbolisms and other figures of speech. Poetry can also be suggestive and evocative.

While different mystics inside and outside Christianity have different preferences concerning the symbols they use, John’s experience appears to move him to use the symbolism of marriage in his tentative descriptions of the soul’s relations with God – the soul being the bride and God being the bridegroom. Friar John takes it for granted that marriage in this spiritual context is to be understood spiritually and has nothing physical or carnal about it. Remember Shakespeare’s sonnet where he says “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments”! Shakespeare who was a contemporary of Friar John uses the word “marriage” analogously, applying the term not to bodies but to minds. John likewise applies the word “marriage” in his canticle not to bodies but to minds and spirits, following the Bible itself in its statement “he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.”

The major works of John of the Cross are primarily and basically poems on which he subsequently wrote commentaries on being personally requested to do so.

i) **The Spiritual Canticle**

As already mentioned above, he composed most of his *Spiritual Canticle* in the Toledo prison in 1578. About 30 verses of this poem he is said to have composed in his mind during the first six months of his imprisonment. After six months there was a change of guard and the second guard being of a milder
disposition, provided a change of clothes and allowed Friar John restricted freedom of movement around the prison cell. On being asked whether he needed anything Friar John requested pen and paper. He put in writing about 30 of the stanzas he had composed in his mind – stanzas that had been written in the rhyme and rhythm of perfect Spanish verse. He did not forget to take these pieces of paper with him when he escaped from the prison.

Later in his spiritual talks and conferences to the sisters and to others he quoted freely from his own verses making doctrinal and spiritual commentaries on them. The request for a written commentary on the canticle as a whole came from Mother Anne of Jesus who was prioress of the community in at Granada in southern Spain. This came to be known as the first redaction of the *Spiritual Canticle* after a second redaction had been made two or three years later – in which a few lines are added and others transposed.

*The Spiritual Canticle*, is an eclogue in which the bride (representing the soul) searches for the bridegroom (representing Jesus Christ), and is anxious at having lost him; both are filled with joy upon reuniting. It can be seen as a free-form Spanish version of the *Song of Songs* at a time when translations of the Bible into the vernacular were not easily available.

**ii) The Dark Night – the Poem**

The poem called *The Dark Night* speaks of the soul as a lover who stealthily escapes under cover of night from her home and family to where her Beloved viz. God is waiting for her. This rich symbolism is further explicated in the prose
commentary. (By the way it may remind some attentive readers about how
Gautama Sakyamuni stealthily came by night to kiss farewell to his young bride
and child before departing in search of wisdom.) The poem was written between
1579-81 at Calvario-Baeza.

a) The first prose commentary on the poem The Dark Night is called The
Ascent of Mount Carmel (Subida del Monte Carmelo). It is a more
systematic study of the ascetical endeavour of a soul looking for perfect
union with God, and the mystical events happening along the way. It was
written between 1579-85 at Calvario-Baeza-Granada.

The contents of the prose commentary are distributed into three books. Book I
deals with the mortification of the appetites and the perfect subjection of the
senses to reason. All disorderly desires are to be eliminated. Book II deals with
faith: the meaning and practice of faith in God. Faith has a special connotation for
a mystic who may have experiences of extraordinary phenomena such as
locutions, visions, revelations etc. Book III cc.1-15 deals first with the virtue of
hope and the emptying of the memory. Chapter 16 to the end of the work treats of
the purification of the will and the manner in which the will is to be educated so
that becoming detached from everything that is not God it may be attached to God
alone.

b) The second prose commentary on the poem The Dark Night is divided into
two sections. The first part is entitled the dark night of the senses and deals
with the purification of the senses that is required for union with God. The
second part goes deeper and treats of the purification to be undergone by the spirit before union can be attained.

iii) The Living Flame of Love\textsuperscript{95} \textit{(Llama de Amor Viva)}\textsuperscript{96} – the Poem

The poem is a mighty effort to put into words spiritual and ineffable mystical experiences that defy linguistic expressions. These experiences take place after the soul has not only reached union with God but is being transformed into the divine. It was composed somewhere between 1582-85 at Granada. The prose commentary is extant in two versions or redactions – the first written between 1585-87 at Granada and the second one somewhere between 1586-91 at Granada-Segovia-La Penuela.

Apart from these, Friar John has several minor works to his credit.\textsuperscript{97}

\textbf{Essence of John’s Teaching}

St. John of the Cross was a great lover of God and his love for God seems to have been born from remarkable and even extraordinary experiences for God’s love for him. This love enkindled a desire for union with God which eclipsed and surpassed all his other needs and desires and ambitions. From where else, other than from the example of Jesus Christ, would the inspiration for such ideas as these come? “Love does not consist in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved”\textsuperscript{98} (Maxims, 36). Or again, “This is how we can recognize the person who truly loves God; if he or she is content with nothing less than God. Satisfaction of heart is not found in the possession of things, but in being stripped of them all and in poverty of spirit.”\textsuperscript{99}
Love is at the heart of the spirituality of St. John of the Cross. Oftentimes, however, people read his writings and become frightened by the absolute, stark, and radical language he uses, such as: all or nothing, self-denial, mortification, emptiness, renunciation, nakedness, contempt for self and creatures, and detachment. All these terms form a rich vocabulary to express the theme of negation and can appear repellent and inhuman if not understood correctly. They recur throughout John's works and are often the source of misinterpretation and fear that have distorted the beauty, depth, and humanness of his person and doctrine.¹⁰⁰

For instance, no.3 of chapter 13 of Book I of The Ascent of Mount Carmel contains a series of counsels that may seem disturbing and masochistic if not understood in the proper context:

Endeavour to be inclined always:

not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;
not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;
not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;
not to the consoling, but to the un-consoling;
not to the most, but to the least;
not to the highest and most precious,
but to the lowest and most despised;
not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing;
do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst … desire to enter into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world – all this with the sole aim and goal of making room and preparing the way for union with God.

14 MN, I, 166, 26 as quoted in Antony Fernando, *Buddhism Made Plain An Introduction for Christians*, p. 15.
18 *Vinaya Pitaka*/MV10, i, 6:17 as quoted in Antony Fernando, *Buddhism Made Plain An Introduction for Christians*, p. 16.
24 I have relied heavily on Robert P. Gwinn et al., *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 15, pp. 273-274, for this section, till further indication.
25 Canki, a highly respectable Brahmin leader who lived during the reign of King Pasenadi of Kosala.
26 The Licchavis were the most famous clan amongst the ruling confederate clans of the Vajjimahajanapada of ancient India. Vaishali, the capital of the Licchavis, was the capital of the Vajjimahajanapada also. It was later occupied by Ajatashatru, who annexed the Vajji territory into his kingdom. Manudev was a famous king of the illustrious Lichchavi clan of the confederacy, who desired to possess Amrapali after he saw her dance performance in Vaishali. Cfr. *Licchavi (clan)* in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Licchavi_(clan), accessed on 22.12.2013.

27 For the following details, cfr. Antony Fernando, *Buddhism Made Plain An Introduction for Christians*, pp. 18-19.


37 It can be noted here how some sources include the Dhammapada in the *Sutta Pitaka* while others include it in the *Abhidharma Pitaka*.


44 The day is unknown. The parish registers were destroyed by a fire in 1546 and the only serious evidence is an inscription on the font in the church, dated 1689. Midsummer Day is sometimes cited as the date of John’s birth, but since this is also the Feast of St John the Baptist, this may simply be conjecture. Cfr. E. Allison Peers, *Spirit of Flame: A Study of St John of the Cross*, SCM Press, London, 1943, p. 11.


Sacristan is a person charged with the care of a church and its sacristy (sacristy is part of every church where the clergy vest for sacred functions and where the vestments, books and vessels for use in liturgical services are kept), as well as preparation for all its liturgical celebrations.

The Carmelite Order had its origins on Mount Carmel in Palestine during the time of the crusades. Some of the crusaders from England, France and other western countries had the experience in the Holy Land of being converted from ambitions for earthly kingdoms to the quest for spiritual achievements. Taking Prophet Elias as their model some of them settled on the slopes of Mount Carmel to a life of constant prayer and meditation while working for their livelihood. Because of political upheavals in the thirteenth century they migrated again to Western Europe from where they had come. They took Mary as their model in pondering day and night on the Law of the Lord. This Order had spread to Spain by the time of John who had experienced already in his earlier youth the gift of supernatural contemplation. The Order can be more or less compared to the Sangha founded by the Buddha.

At that time the University of Salamanca was one of the four biggest in Europe, alongside Paris, Oxford and Bologna.


The chapter is an organ of governance within a religious institute constituted in accord with the proper law of the institute, corresponding more or less to the ideals of the Buddhist general councils mentioned above.


Confrere is a fellow member of the same fraternity or profession, a companion; here, a fellow Carmelite.


I have relied heavily on Crisogono de Jesus, O.C.D., The Life of St. John of the Cross, Translated by Kathleen Pond, Harper & Brothers, New York, pp. 306-313 for this section.
Divine Office (the Liturgy of the Hours), composed of Psalms, hymns, scriptural, patristic and hagiographical readings, and prayers, is the public liturgical prayer of the Catholic Church, destined by her for the sanctification of specific parts of the day.


College of San Andrés was the Carmelite Study House attached to the university.

This is contrary to the seventeenth-century biographies, which do not mention any classes at the College of San Andres. This thesis was proposed by both Jean Baruzi, Saint Jean de la Croix (1924) and Crisogono de Jesus Sacramento, San Juan de la Cruz (1929); Cfr. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of_the_Cross, accessed on 18.2.2013.

Michael of Bologna or Michael of Cesena was a Franciscan Friar. He taught theology at Bologna and wrote several commentaries on the Holy Bible.

John Baconthorpe was a learned English Carmelite monk, theologian and scholastic philosopher. He is believed to have taught theology at Cambridge and Oxford.


St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican Friar and a Catholic Priest, was an influential philosopher and theologian of the Scholastic period. He is acclaimed as the most influential medieval western scholar who tried to synthesize Aristotelian philosophy with the principles of Christianity. He was the foremost classical proponent of Natural Theology. He is best known for his work Summa Theologica.


John mentions Pseudo-Dionysius explicitly four times – 2A 8, 6; 2N 5, 3; SC14-15, 16; LF 3, 349. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was a Christian theologian and philosopher of the late 5th century to the early 6th century, probably a Syrian. He is the author of the set of works commonly referred to as the Corpus Areopagiticum or Corpus Dionysiacum.


Rhineland mysticism or German mysticism, sometimes called Dominican mysticism, was a late medieval Christian mystical movement that was especially prominent within the Dominican order and in Germany. Although its origins can be traced back to Hildegard of Bingen, it is mostly represented by Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and Henry Suso. Other notable figures include Rulman Merswin and Margaretha Ebner, and the Friends of God.

This movement often seems to stand in stark contrast with scholasticism and German Theology, but the relationship between scholasticism and German mysticism is debated. Cfr. German Mysticism in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_mysticism, accessed on 8.3.2015.


1 Cor 6:17

In the Bible, there is a book called The Song of Songs. It is a series of love poems, for the most part in the form of songs addressed by a man to a woman, and by the woman to the man. It gives "the voices of two
lovers, praising each other, yearning for each other, proffering invitations to enjoy” (Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry, Basic Books, 2011, p. 232). In some translations, the book is called The Song of Solomon, because it is attributed to Solomon in the Hebrew. These songs have often been interpreted by Jews as a picture of the relationship between God and his people, and by Christians as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church. It is further personalized in mystical traditions where mystics experience so deeply God’s love for them that they don’t hesitate to consider God as the bridegroom of their souls. One of these mystics was John of the cross himself who composed his spiritual canticle on the model of the Song of Songs.


97 The minor works are: The Precautions, Counsels to a Religious on How to Reach Perfection, Sayings of Light and Love, Maxims and Counsels, Censure and Opinion on the Spirit and the Attitude in Prayer of a Discalced Carmelite Nun, Letters and other poems.

98 Maxim 36.

99 SC 1, 14.
