

# Nada vs sunyata. The Notion of Emptiness in John of the Cross and in Zen Buddhism

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**Abstract:** It is not seldom that some authors try to compare the doctrine of Zen Buddhism with the doctrine of Saint John of the Cross with the intention of finding some parallels. The most striking similarity seems to be the term “emptiness” (*nada* – John of the Cross and *sunyata* – Zen Buddhism). The difficulty of the comparison stems from the fact that in both cases this term has an experiential meaning, i.e. it describes subjective feelings one has while following the spiritual path. Therefore, the intent of the paper is to capture the metaphysical and epistemological meaning of this term in order to facilitate the comparison. This effort has led to the conclusion that in both doctrines the essentially different meaning of emptiness reflects their different understanding of the ultimate reality. Consequently, meditational techniques which both forms of spirituality adopted to achieve the ultimate reality exclude each other, and the semantic proximity of Zen Buddhism and John of the Cross is misleading.

**Keywords:** God, ultimate reality, contemplation, nothingness, mystical experience, Zen Buddhism, John of the Cross

It seems that in the recent decades finding parallels between the spiritual doctrine of Saint John of the Cross and Zen Buddhism<sup>1</sup> has been in vogue. In fact, there are some more or less similarly close-fitting expressions or parallel topics in both spiritual ways. There are even Christian communities which try to combine both paths, stressing the parallelism of their doctrines.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at the spectrum of the attitudes taken by various authors in this inter-religious dialog, we can notice they are fairly different. Some center on the notion of nothingness – *nada* in John of the Cross and *sunyata* in Zen. According to some authors, these concepts are not antagonistic, even though they represent different metaphysical and spiritual perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Some like to emphasize the usage of similar words, like the inner light or the hidden internal person's treasure.<sup>4</sup> Others focus on the uniqueness of the ultimate reality or love,<sup>5</sup> and still others are convinced that both forms of spirituality refer to the same “deep reality.”<sup>6</sup> In turn, some authors seem to

<sup>1</sup> Zen Buddhism is a form of Mahayana Buddhism.

<sup>2</sup> Puglisi – Carini, “Monjas y sacerdotes.”

<sup>3</sup> Guerra, “Zen y Juan de la Cruz,” 1562. Cf. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 76–77.

<sup>4</sup> Schlüter Rodés, “La Experiencia”; Schlüter Rodés, “Las religiones,” 245.

<sup>5</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 176–177; Guerra, “Zen y Juan de la Cruz,” 1561.

<sup>6</sup> Puglisi, “El encuentro del catolicismo,” 60.

want to find some similarities at all costs.<sup>7</sup> And finally, there are those who come to the conclusion that both doctrines are at variance because they believe in quite different ultimate realities.<sup>8</sup>

In my view, this diversity of opinions stems from the conceptual difficulty to understand the crucial term – emptiness (*nada*, *sunyata*). Therefore, my aim is to establish its precise meaning, without which we cannot proceed in the interpretation without falling into the trap of false parallelism. The conclusion, to which I will come, is that both traditions are essentially different and only superficially similar because they understand this term otherwise.

One of the difficulties we have to face when analyzing both ways is the experiential language adopted by Zen-Buddhist masters and John of the Cross. Therefore, I have to go beyond the linguistic expressions in order to find their metaphysical meanings.

## 1. Emptiness in Zen Buddhism

### 1.1. The Ultimate Reality in Zen Buddhism

I think that to the Westerners the notion of the Absolute (Buddha-nature) or *sunyata* can be somehow accessible through the notion of *apeiron*, introduced to the western philosophy by Anaximander. We may draw an analogy between *apeiron* and *sunyata*. Giovanni Reale describes it as something that is infinite, unlimited and indefinite.<sup>9</sup> In this description of *apeiron* the key word for us is its indefiniteness. Ultimate reality in Zen – *sunyata*, is indefinite. “There is no Buddhist Absolute in the sense of a metaphysical entity or immutable essence.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the Absolute is indefinite.

There are epistemological consequences of the indefiniteness of the Absolute. The human mind, which operates using notions, has no access to it. Another consequence is that there is no word that expresses *sunyata*. Therefore, in Zen *sunyata* is also rendered by word “voidness” or “emptiness.” This can be misleading for the Westerners, because it forces us to think that *sunyata* is absolute nothingness or non-being. On the contrary, for Zen masters, *sunyata* is the fullness of reality, also called Buddha-nature. This reality is without essence.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, when mov-

<sup>7</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 176–177.

<sup>8</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, iii; 209; 350,

<sup>9</sup> Reale, *Historia filozofii*, I, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> As Jakov Mamić (*San Giovanni della Croce*, 136) argued: “*Sunya* non è la negazione dell’essere ontologico, ma concettuale; esso (*sunya*) è «perfetta pienezza.» [...] La natura de questo essere «unificato» non conosce né limiti, né determinazioni, né negazioni, né affermazioni, né pensieri, né pienezza, né vuoto.”

ing on the metaphysical ground we should say that *sunyata* is the fullness of reality (Buddha-nature). On the epistemological level, the set of notions, which corresponds to *sunyata*, is empty – void.<sup>12</sup> The western distinction between the epistemological and metaphysical realm is sometimes neglected in the expressions used by Zen masters, who say that *sunyata* is emptiness without adding that it is also the fullness of reality, because they use an experiential language.<sup>13</sup> It means that they express the state of mind of a Zen practitioner, who experienced the ultimate reality realizing that its nature is indeterminate. Consequently, we can experience *sunyata* but are unable to talk about it.<sup>14</sup>

When Buddhists say that *sunyata* is void, they also stress that it is beyond the realm of logic. According to the rules of logic, the notion of cat can be contradicted by the notion of non-cat. Thus, under the standards of logic we could say that the universe consists of cat and non-cat. *Sunyata*, however, is beyond affirmation and negation: being and non-being, existence and non-existence. Consequently, the mind and its logical approach are inadequate means to approach the Absolute. The Western “nothingness” or “non-existence” does not correspond to the Zen emptiness.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Buddhists consider their doctrine about the Absolute to be the Middle Path.<sup>16</sup> And again: we are unable to think about the Absolute, i.e. reasoning does not help to achieve it, because we can only experience it.<sup>17</sup>

We can draw another analogy between Anaximander’s *apeiron* and *sunyata*. If *apeiron* is infinite, unlimited and indefinite, it means that it is not anything solid, which in turn means we ought to understand it as unsubstantial. The same we can say about *sunyata*: it is not a metaphysical entity or being. A Chinese Buddhist scholar illustrates the most important characteristics of *sunyata*:

1. Emptiness implies non-obstruction. . . like space or the void, it exists within many things but never hinders or obstructs anything.
2. Emptiness implies omnipresence. [...].
3. Emptiness implies sameness... [...].
4. There is no limitation. [...].
5. It has no appearance. [...].
6. It has no defilement. [...].
7. It is unmoved and permanent. [...].
8. It is empty of being.

<sup>12</sup> If we describe the Absolute, we negate it somehow and therefore, our language about it is only relative (Cf. Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 171).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> In Zen, any language about the ultimate reality has relative value because it corresponds to the realm of world that we see but cannot apply to the ultimate reality (cf. Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 171–172).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Suzuki, *Essays* [1958], 23.

<sup>16</sup> Chong Hun Choi (*A Comparative Study*, 146) noted: “From this ‘Middle Way’ perspective, self is simultaneously both self and not-self. Both being and not-being are affirmed as they belong together. Thus the Middle is neither mere nothing nor nothing negative. In this sense, it does not exist, yet nor does non-emptiness exist.”

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Suzuki, *Essays* [1961], 23–24.

It means that it is impossible to measure. 9. It is empty without emptiness. This means that it does not attach to itself. 10. It has nothing.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2. True Nature of Things

Let us use another word that Anaximander introduced to the Western philosophy – *arche*. For the pre-Socratic philosophers, *arche* is the first metaphysical principle, primordial and ultimate reality. All things have their origin in it and eventually turn into it.<sup>19</sup> It also accounts for all the phenomena that we recognize as things and people.<sup>20</sup> In other words, *arche* is the true “stuff” of all that exists. *Sunyata* is something similar to *arche* meant as the unsubstantial, boundless and indefinite principle of everything.

At this level, the analogy we intended to draw should stop because it is here where we meet the first difference between Anaximander’s cosmogony and Zen. *Sunyata* is not the cause of things and phenomena. For Anaximander, the things and phenomena we perceive are real. For Zen masters, they are just illusions because there is only *sunyata* – the only and ultimate reality. If by form we understand a being, a Zen master can say: “Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form.”<sup>21</sup> In this way *sunyata* cannot be the cause of things. The world we know, the things we know and the individual self are empty, i.e. they lack substantiality and individual essence. “*Sunyata* suggests therefore that although things in the phenomenal world appear to be real and substantial outside, they are actually tenuous and empty within. They are not real but only appear to be real [...] all things are empty in that they lack a subsisting entity or self-being.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, in the visible things there is invisible ultimate reality – *sunyata*.<sup>23</sup>

The illusory reality of the beings and of the self consists in the false sense of duality we live in, or better said, we are responsible for. Commonly, we experience the division of the reality into subject-object duality, which is false and is a sign of ignorance.

For Dogen, however, ignorance does not mean simply “not knowing.” It is not merely an intellectual lack of knowledge. Instead, ignorance pertains to our fundamental attitude toward life or experience of life. In this regard, ignorance involves duality. The basic duality is that of the ego and that which the ego conceives of as totally other than itself. The ego, however, not only conceives of itself as separate but also as final, as ultimately responsible for all deeds, thoughts, and speech. The ego takes itself to be an absolutely independent

<sup>18</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 150.

<sup>19</sup> Reale, *Historia filozofii*, V, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Reale, *Historia filozofii*, I, 76–77.

<sup>21</sup> *Heart Sutra*: Liang-Chieh, *The Record of Tung-shan*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Suzuki, *Essays* [1961], 25–26.

entity. This is the fundamental problem of human existence: duality. Everything is seen to be in opposition to something else. In this respect, ignorance is as Suzuki defines “another name for logical dualism.”<sup>24</sup>

The world and its beings lack any substantiality, they are emptiness – *sunyata*. “In other words, to say that everything is devoid of selfhood is to indicate that it has no definitive nature, or determinateness. Nothing, then, can be truly existent if it is indeterminate or indefinite.”<sup>25</sup> The beings in their visible and individual aspect have status of something transient or of an event. “All things flow and nothing is permanent. [...] The self is no less impermanent or transient than the world. [...] «When the transient nature of the world is recognized, the ordinary selfish mind does not arise.» Thus, one is nothing other than one’s change; to exist as anything is impermanence. There are no basic, enduring facts of existence.”<sup>26</sup>

### 1.3. Suffering and the Way Out – *satori*

In other words, we can say that the individual things and the ideas that we have correspond to the human mental activity and ego-centeredness, and thus the individual self is responsible for their “existence.”<sup>27</sup> Also, this existence is the realm of human language. The individual self attaches itself to the concepts and so, it lives in illusion, which causes suffering and reincarnation – which is the essential credence of Buddhism.<sup>28</sup>

An adept of Zen is the one who wants to discover his or her true self and break the circle of suffering.<sup>29</sup> The way of getting out of this is stopping the conceptualization.<sup>30</sup> There is a meditational technique (*zazen*),<sup>31</sup> which helps extinguish mental activity in order to make possible the “achieving” of the Buddha-nature (emptiness-*sunyata*), which is attaining awakening or enlightenment (*satori*), giving a new insight into reality.<sup>32</sup> Apart from *zazen* the practitioner has to exercise a set of virtues and feel compassion towards all the sentient forms he knows, which forces him to

<sup>24</sup> Dogen: founder of Soto school of Zen; one of Zen masters who transmitted Chinese tradition to Japan. In many aspects, his doctrine is an example of the Zen doctrine as such. Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 114; 215–216.

<sup>25</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 144–145.

<sup>26</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 133; Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 225.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 52–53; Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism*, 117–118.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, chapter I; Sutta: *Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*.

<sup>30</sup> Williams – Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, 136–137.

<sup>31</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 195. Chong Hun Choi (*ibidem*, 192–197) also noted: “[Zazen] It is beyond both thinking and not thinking. [...] It is at least mind-filled-with-nothingness.” “From without-thinking/enlightenment, therefore, we see things as they really are” (*ibidem*, 201–202).

<sup>32</sup> Suzuki, *Essays* [1958], 261.

delay the final liberation from mortality after having reached *satori* in order to help all other sentient beings to overcome the illusion (*bodhisattva*).<sup>33</sup>

We might be tempted to say that the person who stopped the conceptual activity of mind reaches the true insight (awakening) in the ultimate reality. This cannot be true because the existence of the individual person (self) is a part of the illusion. Therefore, there is neither a union of the individual self with the ultimate reality, nor does the self reach the truth. The self as a subject has to drop off because its “existence” belongs to the realm of duality, which is false.<sup>34</sup> “The self-awareness that emptiness is self, is for Dogen’s Zen Buddhism the most fundamental or original meaning of man’s existence.”<sup>35</sup> Zen masters say “I am Buddha-nature,”<sup>36</sup> which means “I am the ultimate reality.” This creates quite a new insight into the entire reality perceived as a set of individuals until now. The truth has been achieved. Therefore, it is called awakening.<sup>37</sup>

That is why it is impossible, according to Zen, to contemplate the Absolute, because contemplation requires the subject-object duality.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, in *satori* there is just gazing without the subject-object duality, without space-temporal distinctions. “This non-thinking experience shows a moment of experience as a unitary experience which has neither internal differentiation nor external boundary.”<sup>39</sup>

The people who reached *satori* testify that they experienced that everything has the same nature and that everything is in unity.

One day I wiped out all notions from my mind. I gave up all desire. I discarded all the worlds with which I thought and stayed in quietude. I felt a little queer – as if I were being carried into something, or as if I were touching some power unknown to me. [...] I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the center of the cosmos. I spoke, by my words had lost their meaning. I saw people coming towards me, but all were the same man. All were myself! I had never known this world. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the cosmos; no individual Mr. Sasaki existed.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 118.

<sup>34</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 160; Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 136, n. 62; 176.

<sup>35</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 154.

<sup>36</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 260.

<sup>37</sup> Suzuki, *Essays* [1958], 261–263. As Chong Hun Choi (*A Comparative Study*, 184) noted: “Enlightenment is generally defined as incommensurable with psychological activities. Traditionally enlightenment is generally viewed as realization of a universal truth that necessarily transcends psychological activities. The Chinese word Wu means «to awaken to the fact,» or, loosely, «to understand.»”

<sup>38</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 127, 162.

<sup>39</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 197.

<sup>40</sup> Sokei-an, “Sokei-an Says.”

This witness does not describe Buddha-nature but only the fact that all phenomena are one.<sup>41</sup> After having reached *satori*, the mental activity returns, and the sense of individuality and substantiality reappears, but now the person knows that all this is illusion.<sup>42</sup>

Let us consider *sunyata* as *mind*.<sup>43</sup> The self in *satori* does not dissolve entirely but it gains a new perspective. The individual mind becomes transcendental, which means it realizes its true nature.

In fact, Dogen has classified three different kinds of mind: conscious mind, cosmic mind, and transcendental mind. The conscious mind is generally said to be the *citta*, as mentioned above, which refers to discriminating mind (as normal consciousness). The cosmic mind is said to be “unconsciousness.” And the transcendental mind is said to be the Bodhi-mind or enlightened mind.<sup>44</sup> Thus, for Dogen the entire universe of the external world is mind. He equalizes mind with mountains, rivers, the sun, the moon, and the stars. Yet it is not just coextensive with them nor in proportion to them, but transcends the sum total of them.<sup>45</sup>

As follows from the aforementioned context, we may say that the Absolute is the all-aware, unreflective mind without any thoughts.<sup>46</sup> “The essence of Mind is free from thoughts.”<sup>47</sup> We should remember that this quotation has an experiential and not speculative character, which means that this mind is not to be understood as a concept within a conceptual system, but as what is experienced by a practitioner of Zen.

Buddhists reject the notion of the Christian God because it delimits the Absolute.<sup>48</sup> The Christian God is considered a remarkable obstacle in the liberation of the mind. *Sunyata* transcends all the categories, and therefore, it is neither a supreme being, nor a person who acts, creates and performs other activities.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Suzuki, *Essays* [1958], 263.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Suzuki, *Essays* [1958], 264.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 129.

<sup>45</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 132; 134; Cf. Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> As Jakov Mamić (*San Giovanni della Croce*, 136) noted: “Uno si trova in un atteggiamento de guardare, di essere uno con l'essere totale.”

<sup>47</sup> Asvaghosha, *The Awakening of Faith*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Suzuki, *Essays* [1958], 263.

<sup>49</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 176.



## 2. The Context of Emptiness in Saint John of the Cross

### 2.1. The Ultimate Reality

For John of the Cross, the universe consists of God, the supreme being, and beings created by him out of nothing. If we describe Zen as monistic, then the system of John of the Cross is dualistic (spirit–matter) and theistic (God–creatures). The God of John of the Cross is personal, i.e. knowing and willing. He is absolute, which means he is perfect ontologically, morally and personally. He is a community of three divine persons. His essence John could define as personal love, which wants to share itself with people in order to make them eternally happy as the participants of this love. “In the first place it should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more.”<sup>50</sup>

### 2.2. The Beings and Human Person – Self

All creatures, including people, are beings partially ontologically separated from God. It means that they are neither God nor his emanation, because there is not any ontological continuity between God and them. They are independent beings, which means that their and God’s existence are different, but God is within them sustaining their existence. All that the beings are is given to them by God, i.e. they participate in the divine perfection. Beings have some real, yet non-essential similarity to God. The perfection of God surpasses the human capability of knowing. There is no notion by which the divine essence could be known and expressed.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, God reveals something about himself using human language. In this revelation, he uses examples and images from the world in order to make himself understandable for humans who he is. This means that he translates into human language the ineffable mystery of his being, i.e. he says something about himself in human language. Accordingly, we know with certainty who he is but how it realizes in the divine essence remains an inaccessible (inconceivable) mystery for us.

According to John, a human person as the ontological unity of a soul and a body is a relational being. It means that by nature a person is called to be in an amorous relationship with God but it is possible only by the aid of the divine grace. The destiny of human life is to be in communion with God, where God is the only object of human love and knowledge<sup>52</sup> and other creatures are known and loved through the participation in the divine knowledge and love. It is possible to achieve the fullness

<sup>50</sup> John of the Cross, “The Living Flame of Love” 3,28.

<sup>51</sup> John of the Cross, “*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*” II,8,3. Cf. García, “Teología mística,” 1380; García, “Creación,” 344–347.

<sup>52</sup> John of the Cross, “The Living Flame of Love” 3,18.



of this kind of relationship with God after death. It is also possible in this life after having undergone purification and illumination. Saint John of the Cross calls this intimate closeness of relationship with God in this life the mystical union. The union is the peak of the spiritual life. On the other hand, it is an anticipation of the vision of God after death but in a different state because of the corporal dimension of the human person in this life. John, in accordance with the Catholic vision of man, regards human body as good, and therefore the nature of the body has to be taken into consideration as the participant of the mystical union. In the state of union, all human spiritual faculties (by which the soul acts) are centered on God only, and the purified human body in its activity depends only on the soul influenced entirely by God.<sup>53</sup> In this union, God and the human person are separate beings but united through the divine love, which is one in God and in the human person who accepts this love as his or her own.<sup>54</sup> We could say that the two wills want the same and act as one will. As said by John of the Cross, this is “the union and transformation of love,” where the person becomes divinized in his or her acts, but their human essence remains always unchanged.

### 2.3. The Real State of the Human Person

Although the union with God is the goal of spiritual life, the real state of humans prompts us to something quite opposite. There are two factors which inhibit the process of the mystical union. The first is the body, which – with its sensual activity – hinders the soul from turning entirely towards God. In its acts of knowledge and love, the soul depends on the body, i.e. senses and their impressions.<sup>55</sup> The mind operates only on the stuff provided by the senses. Therefore, the mind can move only in the realm of the material world and of the notions that derive from it. Thus, all the notions of God that can be created by the mind are somehow creature-like. We should remember that for John the mind plays the leading role in spiritual activity because the will – the second spiritual faculty – can only love what is known by the mind. The third spiritual faculty, which is the memory, stores only this, which was formerly in the body, in the mind or in the will. As John suggests, these three spiritual faculties in the spiritual union ought to unite with God alone, but on the natural level of their activity it is impossible.

The second factor, which hinders the process of union with God, is the original sin, which causes some kind of disorder in people. We might say that senses are inclined towards some goods in an instinctive way, which, if not regulated by the mind and the will, becomes disordered. Disordered in this case means that the goods are

<sup>53</sup> John of the Cross, “The Spiritual Canticle” 40,1.

<sup>54</sup> John of the Cross, “The Spiritual Canticle” 12,7.

<sup>55</sup> John of the Cross, “The Ascent of Mount Carmel” I,3,3.

not always in accordance with people's nature, making them deviate from the final destination, which is God. The result of the disordered attachments is a waste of energy squandered in an unproportioned way on the goods that are not God. In this case, the sensual life is centered on the finite goods, and the spirit is paralyzed in the things concerning God.<sup>56</sup>

## 2.4. Purification – the Active Part

In order to make God the only object of human acting, Saint John of the Cross teaches how the senses should be freed from disordered attachments.<sup>57</sup> In his asceticism, he does not advise putting the sensuality in the state of complete vacuum but shows how to reeducate the sensual sphere in order to curb all that is disordered.<sup>58</sup> In this context, he uses the Spanish word *nada*. The word *nada* – nothingness – has an experiential meaning: it describes the way one feels and not what objectively is going on in the senses (and spiritual faculties). In this case, since the senses have to reject all the disordered attachments and use only these sensual goods which allow one to pursue God, there is the subjective feeling of emptiness in them. Objectively, there is something in them but because of the goods the senses got used to, they feel empty and thirsty, as John states.

As a tool of elevating the mind to God, at the beginning of the spiritual journey John allows one to use the creation as a kind of image, in which there are traces of God.<sup>59</sup> Yet, as the world has only an inessential similarity to God, and the soul longs for a direct union with him, these traces do not suffice to fulfill the soul's desire to unite with God.

In order to achieve this goal, John advises undertaking efforts to center the three spiritual faculties on God. The mind, which leads the two other faculties, focuses on God if it accepts the truths revealed by God. Faith as a means is a true, certain (infallible) but dark way to him.<sup>60</sup> Because faith is formulated in notions and images, its content has a mentally accessible dimension, which leads the mind to the reality of inconceivable God. The words which we understand and the situations that we can imagine – like God acting as a good father – say something true about the divine perfection, which transcends our comprehension. Therefore, accepting the revealed

<sup>56</sup> John of the Cross, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" I,15,1; III,16,6.

<sup>57</sup> Jakov Mamić (*San Giovanni della Croce*, 105) noted: "il vero problema sono le affezioni disordinate di queste forze appetitive."

<sup>58</sup> John of the Cross, "Letter 13: To a discolored Carmelite friar, Segovia, April 14, 1589"; de Haro Iglesias, "Virtud/es," 1533–1534.

<sup>59</sup> John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle" 6,1.

<sup>60</sup> John of the Cross ("The Ascent of Mount Carmel" II,6,2) noted: "faith is the substance of things to be hoped for and that these things are not manifest to the intellect, even though its consent to them is firm and certain. [...] For though faith brings certitude to the intellect, it does not produce clarity, but only darkness."

truths about God, we have some notions and images in the mind, but they are just signs of something mysterious, which transcends our cognitive abilities. Living in faith helps us abandon our human way of thinking about God and opens us up to the mystery, which is God. John states it firmly and clearly that in order to unite the mind with God we must always, i.e. at every level of our spiritual development, have the attitude of faith.

For the likeness between faith and God is so close that no other difference exists than that between believing in God and seeing him. Just as God is infinite, faith proposes him to us as infinite. [...] And just as God is darkness to our intellect, so faith dazzles and blinds us. Only by means of faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest himself to the soul.<sup>61</sup>

He uses the word *nada* (*tiniebla-oscuridad, Dios escondido*) – nothingness – also to describe the feelings one has when living in faith. And here too, the word “nothingness” has only the experiential meaning because in such circumstances the person abandons the purely human way of conceiving God for the sake of the truths revealed, of which it cannot have a clear and distinct idea. Objectively, the mind is always filled with something: first – its own ideas, embracing faith – the notions provided by the revelation and the reality they relate to – namely God. On the other hand, the amorous relationship with Christ (God-man – the essence of the Christian faith) is a privileged means to live in faith and eventually to unite with God.<sup>62</sup>

The other two faculties must exercise respectively similar supernatural acts in order to center on God, who is known through the mediation of faith. The memory in its acts of hope should possess God only and through the acts of love, the will ought to put all its joy solely in God, too. Again, also in this case we cannot talk about the objective nothingness dwelling in these two faculties because nothingness or emptiness is but the impression one has after having left things, which are not God. Objectively, in these faculties there is God transmitted to them in faith.

## 2.5. Purification – the Passive Part

Because of the two aforementioned impediments (the dependence of the spirit on the senses and the effects of the original sin causing sensual and moral disorder), it is impossible for humans to reach the mystical union with God with natural resources. It is impossible, even practicing severe renouncement, to extirpate the disordered desires dwelling almost naturally in the human sensual sphere, which dominates the spiritual faculties of the soul. Also, living in faith does not sufficiently cleanse

<sup>61</sup> John of the Cross, “The Ascent of Mount Carmel” II,9,1.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. John of the Cross, “The Ascent of Mount Carmel” II,22,3.

our mind from the anthropomorphic understanding of God. Therefore, God himself comes with his help. When God notices the readiness of the person to deepen his or her purification towards the union with him, the process of the passive purification done by God begins.<sup>63</sup>

A steady condition that one has to cultivate is the attitude of faith, as John stresses. It is so because faith not only teaches about God but also gives him: "God is the substance and concept of faith."<sup>64</sup> It means that the person who lives in faith opens up to the real presence of God. This is an indispensable condition which must be fulfilled in order to be purified by God and be united with him.

With passive purification, contemplation begins. "For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God."<sup>65</sup> Contemplation is a real expression of the fact that God is love sharing himself to other rational beings. John ascribes two symbols to contemplation: light and fire. Contemplation as light illuminates the mind in order to concentrate it solely on God, and fire symbolizes love, which inflames the will. In the state of the vision of God "face to face" (only possible after death), God is the only object for these who participate in the contemplation. However, the situation is different in this life. There are at the same time things and God in those, who are following the spiritual path. In such a case, the divine presence, i.e. the contemplation, removes all that is not God from the senses and faculties of the soul, causing feelings of pain, darkness, emptiness and dryness respectively to the faculty. It is so because, as John says: "two contraries [God and creatures] cannot coexist in one subject."<sup>66</sup>

Summing up, the same contemplation plays different roles at different stages of people's lives. It inflames with sweet flavor and illuminates with clear light in heaven. For these who step on the path towards the mystical union with God in this life, contemplation firstly purifies, removing everything which is not God-centered from the senses and faculties. Secondly, it illuminates the mind with light and inflames the will with love. This secret inflow of God in the person initially causes darkness in the mind, because we are not used to God's direct presence and we do not recognize him as such. The more intense his presence is, the deeper darkness/emptiness one suffers. When one gets used to it, one begins to notice the new presence of God, but this time it is subtle and general.<sup>67</sup> Something similar happens to the will.

This flame [of contemplation] of itself is extremely loving, and the will of itself is excessively dry and hard. When the flame tenderly and lovingly assails the will, hardness is felt beside the tenderness, and dryness beside the love. The will does not feel the love and

63 John of the Cross, "The Dark Night" I,1,1.

64 John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle" 1,10.

65 John of the Cross, "The Dark Night" I,10,6.

66 John of the Cross, "The Dark Night" II,9,2.

67 John of the Cross, "The Dark Night" I,9,4.

tenderness of the flame since, because of its contrary hardness and dryness, it is unprepared for this until the love and tenderness of God expel the dryness and hardness and reign within it. [...] It feels this until the flame, penetrating within it, enlarges, widens, and makes it capable of receiving the flame itself.<sup>68</sup>

## 2.6. The State of the Mystical Union with God

In the mystical union with God, the person reaches the state of total God-centeredness, which equals complete purification of the person, who is now totally passive. Now the same contemplation illuminates the mind giving some knowledge of God. This knowledge is still dimmed, because it is impossible to see God in this life. Firstly, the person has some very imperfect understanding of God. Mostly it is an anthropomorphic way of conceiving. For the life of faith, the point of reference is the Christian revelation. It provides certain (infallible), general, dark and mediated knowledge of God. With contemplation, God himself begins to fill the mind with his direct presence, which gradually purifies the mind from all false understanding of God, cleansing the person's faith. The peak of the knowledge of God in this life, according to John, are very rare visions, which are never clear and precise but give some understanding of the divine attributes.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the knowledge of God undergoes a process in which the human understanding of God falls apart, causing the sensation of darkness and emptiness in the mind. When the process of purification is finished, the darkness softens and the mind receives some light, but now not in a notion-like form, because the direct presence of God in the mind is above any notion. Only seeing God in heaven, "face to face," will provide the clear and detailed vision of God.<sup>70</sup>

The central role in the passive period of purification and afterwards in the mystical union with God plays love. "For it is only love that unites and joins the soul to God."<sup>71</sup> If we may say that the essence of God is love, the person who opens up to this love becomes in this aspect similar to God and becomes God-like. It is love and not knowledge that gives the mystical experience of God, because it makes the person God-like and allows savoring God. Therefore, John describes the mystical union with God as "the transformation of the soul in God through love."<sup>72</sup>

The person has the experience of God because they together have one love. It is love which enters the soul through the contemplation (inflow of God), transforms the person uniting him or her with God. As a result, God loves himself in the person with love that suits him as the Absolute. If at the beginning the mind and its acts of

<sup>68</sup> John of the Cross, "The Living Flame of Love" I,23.

<sup>69</sup> John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle" 14–15,15.

<sup>70</sup> John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle" 37,1.

<sup>71</sup> John of the Cross, "The Dark Night" II,18,5.

<sup>72</sup> John of the Cross, "The Ascent of the Mount Carmel" I,2,4.

faith was the guide for all human activity, now it is love which guides both the mind and the memory, which profit from the proximity with God caused by love.

When there is union of love, the image of the Beloved is so sketched in the will, and drawn so intimately and vividly, that it is true to say that the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. The reason is that in the union and transformation of love each gives possession of self to the other and each leaves and exchanges self for the other.<sup>73</sup>

John of the Cross expresses this amorous attitude in spousal terminology: man or woman is the bride, and God (or Christ) is the bridegroom. John says that the person becomes divinized, because God provides the only light to the mind, he becomes the only possession of the memory and also he is the one, who loves God in the person.<sup>74</sup>

## 2.7. The Soul-Body Renewed Relationship

One of the requirements of the mystical union is the total God-centeredness. Therefore, the role of the body and of the senses must be reversed. Previously, the soul depended on the stuff provided by the senses. The impulses come from the material world. Only later can the mind think and the will can decide. Now, in the state of the mystical union, the direction of acting is contrary. God is the one who directly touches the soul in contemplation. And so, all the first motions in the soul come from him. From here the motions go further to the body, which in accordance with its nature participates in the spiritual goods, that come with the direct inflow of God in the soul. This reversed psychological dynamicity takes place in the purified and united with God person. Every movement begins from God and the last instance, which receives divine impulses through the soul, is the body. Now every part of the human person is God-centered. The split, which took place in humans after the original sin, is overcome now. The person acquires total freedom, which is engaged in the love of God. The person is elevated to a higher level of his or her humanity, enhanced by the divine, direct presence of God. The union is the divinization of the person, but still the longing to see the essence of God remains in him or her, therefore the fulfillment of this mystical union will take place after death.

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<sup>73</sup> John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle" 12,7.

<sup>74</sup> John of the Cross, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" III,2,8–9.

### 3. Comparison

The crucial area, which creates the most interpretative difficulties, dwells around the notion of emptiness/nothingness (*nada*, *sunyata*). Therefore, I have examined its meaning in both doctrines. As I stated in the introduction, the notion of emptiness has in both cases the experiential meaning, i.e. it denotes the subjective impression of a person. Even though both doctrines use more or less similar experiential vocabulary, their objective meaning is different.

John uses this term in the context of the person's transition from the natural to supernatural sphere, which aims at God. Generally speaking, nothingness – *nada* – indicates, among others, the subjective feeling of emptiness, which appears while the respective objects of the senses and of the spiritual faculties are being substituted either by God or by something which leads to him. The final effect of this substitution is the enhancement of the person, who through this transformation becomes an adequate partner of God in amorous relationship.<sup>75</sup> For John, the person is valuable in themselves. Therefore, there must be always an object in his or her faculties, because this is a somatic, psychologic and spiritual requirement of the person. Which means that there is no objective vacuum in a person approaching God spiritually.<sup>76</sup>

In Zen, we have a different understanding of the term “emptiness.” The person undergoes spiritual transformation of consciousness from the illusion of an independent, ego-centered substantial individual self, to the transcendental, thought-free mind as unique, all-inclusive reality, where there is no determinateness or limits (*sunyata*-emptiness). This is why Zen masters want to extinguish the mental activity of the illusory individual self, putting it into the state of inactivity, because when active, it hinders the experience of the ultimate reality. The mind has to be void of notions. In the state of awakening, the consciousness of individuality disappears, for the sake of oneness of the indefinite, ultimate reality.

#### 3.1. Emptiness Chosen as a Means of Approaching the Ultimate Reality

Now we can analyze the practical role of emptiness in the spiritual path that both doctrines adopt. The difference is subtle but significant.

##### 3.1.1. Emptying of the Senses

According to John of the Cross, during the active purification of the sensual sphere it is freed only from the disordered attachments. The feeling of being empty comes from the habits one has. Practically, it means that one is void of joy produced by

<sup>75</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 180.

<sup>76</sup> As Jakov Mamić (*San Giovanni della Croce*, 179) noted: “il «Vuoto» di Giovanni della Croce, nella sua più assoluta entità, è la presenza di Dio trascendente.”



the disordered attachments, if one rejects the object of attachment. Therefore, there is the sensation of vacuum one experiences. Objectively, there are other goods in the senses.

### 3.1.2. Emptying of the Mind and Other Faculties

The constant attitude that the person must have is living in faith. The content of faith is composed of notions and images. Faith gives some positively formulated knowledge about God. This transition from the anthropomorphically conceived God to the one presented in faith, expressed in a general and darkened way, also causes some feeling of vacuum and darkness. If one was attached to emotions during prayer, now, when the affections extinguished and there is only God in the faculties, to whom one is not used to, the sensation of emptiness and dryness appears. On the other hand, we have to remember that for John, the key point of reference of Christian faith is one's personal relationship with Christ.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, there is never a state of objective emptiness in the mind.

Some authors are tempted to make out of the content of faith something as abstract as the "cloud of unknowing."<sup>78</sup> Because of the aforementioned arguments, it is an incorrect interpretation of John's doctrine.<sup>79</sup> Faith is followed by supernatural hope and love. They also have concrete contents of their acts, since they aim at the object presented by faith.

And finally, we have to realize that this effort is done not to reach the emptiness of the faculties but to imitate Christ, the way he lived.<sup>80</sup> "First, you have habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life to know how to imitate him and how to behave in all situations as he would."<sup>81</sup>

### 3.1.3. Emptying or Putting into Inactivity the Faculties during Meditation

As regards the transition from meditation to passive contemplation, John says that as long as God is not really acting in the senses, they should be active finding some object of meditation in order not to fall into vacuum. Only when God is in them in the contemplation, one should stop meditation not to hinder God's activity. It also means that there is no meditation with no object in the doctrine of the saint.<sup>82</sup>

Summing up, John talks in the aforementioned context about moments of switching from one object to another with a subjective sensation of *nada*. As soon as one

<sup>77</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 90–91.

<sup>78</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 94–96.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Ruiz, "Unidad y contrastes," 46.

<sup>80</sup> Gaitán, "Subida del Monte Carmelo," 398–399.

<sup>81</sup> John of the Cross, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" I,13,3.

<sup>82</sup> John of the Cross, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" II,13,2–5.

learns what the new object is, the sensation of emptiness vanishes. We can say that his or her faculties are either actively or passively receptive, and there is no void in them.

Something contrary to John's strategy takes place in *zazen* – the meditational method of Zen. This method aims to put the faculties at complete inoperativeness through the elimination of every object that could keep them busy, either actively or passively.<sup>83</sup> They must be empty and inactive not to confirm the false reality of the self and of the beings, otherwise they consolidate the state of illusion, affecting the awakening to the true nature.<sup>84</sup>

If in John of the Cross there is either activity or passive receptiveness of the human faculties, in Zen there is either activity or temporal inoperativeness, which is contrary to the passive receptiveness.<sup>85</sup> In this case, nothingness in Zen is not only an experiential expression, but objective one, too. As Chong Hun Choi observes, "Thus, contrary to the discursive characteristics of John's meditation, Dogen's meditation is characterized as «not-thinking.» Dogen's not-thinking is essentially the negation of all mental acts."<sup>86</sup>

If the essence of prayer for Catholics is to be Christocentric, and Zen meditation is objectless, we must state that these two forms of relating to the ultimate reality are disjunctive.<sup>87</sup> If somebody uses the term "Christian Zen meditation," they use the expression contradictory in itself because meditation can be disjunctively either Christian (Christocentric), or *zazen* (without an object). In this context, it is impossible to agree with Santiago Guerra and Ana María Schlüter Rodés that we can talk about a kind of prayer without an object in the spirituality of John of the Cross.<sup>88</sup> It is also misleading to say that the climate of emptying is the same in both doctrines.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.2. Apophatis and Agnosticism – The Ultimate Reality as Nothingness

In this section, we intend to analyze the consequences of transcendence of the ultimate reality in both doctrines. They are epistemological and semantic.

Thomas Merton writes:

a spiritual guide worth his salt will conduct a ruthless campaign against all forms of delusion arising out of spiritual ambition and self-complacency which aim to establish the ego in spiritual glory. That is why St. John of the Cross is so hostile to visions, ecstasies and all

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*, 230–231.

<sup>84</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 271.

<sup>85</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 353.

<sup>86</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 250.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 214; 249–250; Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 158.

<sup>88</sup> Guerra, "Zen y Juan de la Cruz," 1561; Schlüter Rodés, *Zendo Betania*, 21, n. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 189, 191.

forms of “special experience.” That is why the Zen Masters say: “If you meet the Buddha, kill him.”<sup>90</sup>

This statement of Merton points out among other things that it is impossible to find an exact representation that corresponds to the ultimate reality.

The two spiritual ways presented above agree that the ultimate reality is both inconceivable and ineffable, which means it transcends the notions and words, because they are inadequate both to approach it and later on to express it. Even though the two doctrines coincide at this point, they differ in the degree of inconceivableness and ineffability.

1. For John, the ultimate reality is God that has essence, attributes and is three persons. He is a determinate supreme being. For Zen masters, the ultimate reality has no essence, i.e. is indefinite, indeterminate, undifferentiated and unsubstantial.

In John's doctrine, the mystical experience of God is contemplation, which is an inflow of God in the person. This experience is mostly dark and general in this life but not void of contents, because we can even know mystically – in a general and darkened way – the attributes of God. After death, the person will see the essence of God clearly, i.e. with details.

This inflow of God in contemplation causes in the senses and in the spiritual faculties the feeling of dryness, of darkness or of having lost God, etc., because the means one relies on are anthropomorphic and cannot be used as means through which one unites with God. Therefore, in the person the inflow of God causes the removal of all that is not him.

In Zen, the mystical experience of the ultimate reality (*satori*) is void of definite contents. Objectively, it is an experience of the oneness of reality, but as such it is indefinite. It is an experience of the unity of the ultimate reality. Everything that we know as individual beings is this reality, and it is void of individual essence and substantiality.

Summing up, according to John, we experience God who is a person in a dark way. The darkness gradually softens. In Zen, in the mystical experience there is only all-inclusive impersonal mind as unique cosmic reality, with no details concerning its nature.

2. There is no essential similarity between God and the creatures, but John acknowledges some inessential similarity between them. There are “traces” of God in beings. We can use them, at least in the beginning, to approach God. In Zen, the world is an illusion. Beings have illusory essence and substantiality. Therefore, there is no similarity between the ultimate reality and the world. We have to reject beings on the way of approaching the ultimate reality.

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<sup>90</sup> Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 76–77.

For John, God reveals some mysteries about himself in a human language, and this is the Christian revelation. Thanks to the revelation we know indirectly who God is, in a general and dimmed way. As seen by John, this revelation is certain (infallible) and true, although it is just indirect knowledge of God. Thus, for him God is not totally inconceivable for our mind. This knowledge is sufficient to unite with him, because mysticism is something additional in the human way to God. In Zen, there is no indication about the ultimate reality unless one experiences it, and there is no revelation of the ultimate reality; thus, we are either mystics or agnostics.

3. From John's point of view, our talking about God actually corresponds to his reality but not to his essence. Thus, we can express something true about God after the mystical experience has finished.<sup>91</sup> In Zen, there is no correspondence between our words and the ultimate reality.<sup>92</sup> Any description of the ultimate reality is putting a curb on something which is indistinctive. For example, "[it] is impossible to say in Zen that the ultimate reality is personal God as Christians understand it, because it introduces some negation to the ultimate reality."<sup>93</sup> The only thing Zen dares say about the ultimate reality is that it is absolute thought-free mind. Saying that *sunyata* is infinite, eternal, unchanging and without thoughts, we do not say anything about it that would describe it and thus delimit it. We just say what it is not. I think that to say that Buddha-nature is mind in Zen means that there are no space-temporal boundaries of the ultimate reality, and everything is oneness, totally transparent to itself.

The ineffability of the ultimate reality is a point of view, according to which we cannot express this reality with words. And here again there is a difference between both doctrines. For John, there is a real and not just symbolic correspondence between the ultimate reality and human language, thus a mystic can really say something about what he experienced. For him the ineffability of God is not total, and we cannot say that John is an enthusiast of apophasis. If apophasis is a view according to which we cannot affirm anything positive about God, John finds a certain and true way to know God in faith.

Here too, the Zen's point of view is different. For Zen masters, the only possible way of expression of the ultimate reality is silence.<sup>94</sup> There is no correspondence between the words and the ultimate reality. It leads to apophasis in Zen.

As a sum of the aforementioned analysis, let us quote Choi: "John, for example, maintained a similar distinction between ratio, the knowledge of natural truths, and *intellectus*, the wisdom which gazes upon supernatural truths. John could thus intelligibly speak of the development of a new «organ» of mystical insight. Dogen regards ordinary thinking as deluded and productive only of suffering, and illusion."<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Cf. John of the Cross, "The Living Flame of Love" II, 21.

<sup>92</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 172–173.

<sup>93</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 176.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 283.

<sup>95</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 349.

For John in, the mystical experience, which is not void of contents, we taste what we believe in. In Zen, there is either illusion or mystical undifferentiated gazing.

### 3.3. The Final Result of the Spiritual Development: Mystical Union vs *satori*

The last key area I want to examine is the scope, to which both spiritual ways dealing with the notion of emptiness lead.

1. For John, the spiritual journey to the union with God begins, because God wants it for the sake of the person. His amorous luring corresponds to the ontological structure of the person. The luring of God creates in the person the desire to have an amorous relationship with him. Only then does the person reach personal fulfillment. Another desire that John mentions is to see the essence of God. Consequently, this spiritual journey is not seeking for the true self or knowledge but for true love and definitive meeting.<sup>96</sup> This desire is reciprocal.<sup>97</sup> According to John, the union with God first of all has to do with the moral perfection of the person. Again, the imitation of Christ and spousal relationship with him plays an essential role here. This is the ultimate context, in which *nada* has to be understood.

After having reached the mystical union with God, the person is still ontologically separated from the ultimate reality and remains in its ontological integrity. Even though the person is transformed by God and seems to be like him, John explicitly states that it is impossible to become God because of the ontological gap. Therefore, those who try to find same traces of panentheism in the doctrine of John of the Cross are wrong.<sup>98</sup> For John, the only criterion of the similarity between God and a person is love. As the final result of the spiritual transformation, the person in his or her spiritual and bodily dimension is totally God-centered, and there is nothing that hinders this God-centeredness of the entire person. Therefore, expressing John's *nada* (emptiness/nothingness) in other words, we could say that "there must be only God or something, which leads to him in the faculties and in the senses, and nothing else."

In the Zen Buddhism perspective, there is only the ultimate, indefinite reality, void of substantiality and essence, i.e. impersonal thoughts-free transcendental mind.<sup>99</sup> Its oneness and lack of determinateness is the key perspective, which allows us to understand the role of emptiness in Zen. There is also the state of suffering of the individual self, caused by ignorance, which consists in the unawareness of the oneness of the reality. Thus, in Zen – as it is in Buddhism – the reason to begin a spiritual journey is suffering.

<sup>96</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 310.

<sup>97</sup> Mamić, *San Giovanni della Croce*, 167–168; Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 214.

<sup>98</sup> Panentheism is an ontological view, according to which the world is a necessary part of God's nature. If we understand panentheism in this way, there is neither pantheism nor panentheism in the doctrine of John of the Cross. Choi in this respect is a bit unclear (Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 102, 324, 338–340).

<sup>99</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 228–229.

The state of illusion comes from the mental activity and ego-centeredness of the individual self. The way out is to stop it. Therefore, the desired state is the non-thinking one. The mind must be objectively empty. The emptiness of the mind is also desired due to the void of the determinateness of the ultimate reality. The final result of awareness reached in enlightenment is the oneness of the thought-free transcendental mind. Then the true, unmoved, boundless, undifferentiated, beyond time and space, all-inclusive self becomes what it has always has been – the only reality. Consequently, we have to state that in Zen emptiness is a tool through which the person overcomes illusion (putting the mind in the state of inactivity) and becomes what he or she truly is (*sunyata* – void-of-essence reality). Thus, in Zen it is all about reaching the true identity attained through the dissolution of the empirical self in the transcendental mind.<sup>100</sup>

As the final conclusion, we can repeat what we have already said: there must be no-object meditation in Zen, and there cannot be the same type of meditation or contemplation in John's doctrine.

2. There is yet another consequence. According to Zen, when a person comes back from the state of *satori*, they know their true nature. What remains is the cosmic love to other sentient beings, because the person knows that everything is one reality. In this case, love is another name for the metaphysical oneness of the undifferentiated reality. It also means that this love is impersonal. Contrary to this, for John of the Cross, the love that one reaches is understood as participation in the divine love, i.e. giving oneself entirely as a gift to others for the sake that they also may achieve the amorous relationship with God. This leads to the conclusion that both spiritual doctrines talk about love, but understood it differently and as somehow dissimilar, as some authors would suggest.<sup>101</sup> A Zen practitioner helps others to overcome the illusion of the individual self, i.e. to overcome the notion of the person. John's understanding of love aims to reinforce the other in his or her spiritual and ontological personal identity in order to answer God's luring to love him.

## Conclusion

Certainly, there are some general similitudes between both doctrines, like meditation, detachment, ethical virtues, personal experience instead of reasoning or the experience of emptiness. But when we come to the details, the differences are fundamental due to the different understanding of the ultimate reality. The metaphysical difference between Christian God and Buddha-nature is more than essential. The impersonal

<sup>100</sup> Choi, *A Comparative Study*, 229; 354.

<sup>101</sup> Guerra, "Zen y Juan de la Cruz," 1561–1562.

and unsubstantial ultimate reality excludes the personal and substantial one and *vice versa* since they are understood as ultimate. Consequently, adepts of both spiritual ways want to achieve something effectively different, at some level using methods that exclude each other. In this comparison, no wonder, *nada* and *sunyata* refer to something different even though there is a point of convergence, which is the subjective feeling of vacuum. For these reasons, this feeling objectively means something different in both systems.

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