

The Buddhist *Jhānas* and Mystical Prayer and its Degrees

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In an essay entitled “Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa and Saint Teresa of Ávila: From virtue to the *jhānas* and mystical union,”¹ we initiated a dialogue between Theravāda Buddhism and the Carmelite tradition advancing ongoing investigations² that compare and contrast the paths described in *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, and *The Interior Castle (Castillo interior)* of Saint Teresa of Ávila. In the present paper, we intend to advance in the theme of that initial essay comparing the *jhānic* phase (i.e. the phase of meditative absorptions) of the itinerary described by Buddhaghosa in *The Path of Purification* with the mystical prayer and its degrees according to the doctrine of Saint Teresa of Ávila.

Our presentation is divided into five sections: 1) General approach to the question; 2) The *jhānas*; 3) Mystical prayer and its degrees; 4) General comparative lines; and 5) Conclusion.

1. General approach to the question

The present essay is devoted to compare the Buddhist *jhānas* and the Christian mystical prayer and its degrees in their essential and dynamic aspects. We undertake this task in view of the similarities between these religious experiences and the rather large number of scholars who, for more than a century, have found parallels between them. The testimonies of some authors, although only a sample of all the available literature, will suffice to illustrate this point.

From the beginning of Western Buddhology, Buddhologists acquainted with Christian mysticism noticed similarities between the *jhānas* and the states of mystical prayer. For example, T. W. Rhys Davids, writes: “In the descriptions of [...] the religious experiences of Christian saints and mystics, expressions similar to those used in the *jhānas* are frequent.”³ Conze observed similarities between the *jhānas* and Christian contemplation.⁴ More recently, Bodhi believes it conceivable that practitioners of religions other than Buddhism could attain *jhānic* states in the context of their own traditions.⁵ Shaw notices affinities between Christian contemplation and the second to the fourth *jhāna* which are “characterized by an internal silence, and a successive purification of feeling through joy, happiness and one-pointedness.”⁶ Gimello, while denying that Buddhist meditation has a mystical nature, points out that mystical prayer corresponds closely to *samatha* (“calming”) meditation and, particularly, to the *jhānas*.⁷

¹ This essay, published in *Dialogue (New Series), International Journal of Inter-Faith Studies*, Vol. XLIV (2017), 175-214, is a translation of an article first published in Spanish under the title “Santa Teresa de Jesús y el budismo Theravāda,” en *Teresa de Jesús: Patrimonio de la Humanidad. Actas del Congreso Mundial Teresiano en el V Centenario de su nacimiento* (1515-2015), Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín, Rómulo Cuartas Londoño y Jerzy Nawojowski (eds.), Vol. 1 (Burgos: Monte Carmelo/CITeS - Universidad de la Mística, 2015), 555-579.

² These investigations are part of a Ph.D. dissertation which the author is preparing at the Centre of Buddhist Studies (CBS) of The University of Hong Kong, entitled: “The Path and the Castle: A Comparative Study of the Dynamics of the Spiritual Life in *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, and *The Interior Castle (Castillo interior)* of Saint Teresa of Ávila.” The Director of the thesis is Dr. Toshiichi Endo, Associate Professor, at the Centre of Buddhist Studies of The University of Hong Kong. Supervision is provided by the Sri Lankan theologian and Buddhist scholar Dr. Aloysius Pieris, S.J.

³ T. W. Rhys Davids, “Jhāna,” *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids (London: Chipstead, 1921-1925), 322.

⁴ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation* (London: Unwin, 1972), 18; Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (Oxford: Cassirer 1953), 101.

⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi, the most celebrated translator of the Pāli Canon into English, specifically speaks about the possibility of Christians developing the *jhānas* based on meditations similar to that of loving-kindness (*mettā*) meditation. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Khuddaka Nikaya, Sutta Nipata, Metta Sutta - Loving Kindness*, audio digital, 2009: <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/audio/khuddaka-nikaya-sutta-nipata-metta-sutta-loving-kindness>.

⁶ Sarah Shaw, *Introduction to Buddhist Meditation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 271.

⁷ Robert Gimello, “Mysticism and Meditation,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press,

Tilakaratne considers Gimello's remarks justified, bearing in mind that the *jhānas* have "no connection with what is called mystical union with a transcendent being or an entity" and have "a value in the Buddhist practice only so far as their concentrating and calming effect on the mind is concerned."⁸ The recognition of close commonalities between the Buddhist *jhānas* and the Christian mystical prayer and its degrees is also implicit in two articles written by Bucknell on the subject of Buddhist meditation and mystical experience.⁹ For his part, Nyanaponika believes that Christian mystical union is a *jhānic* experience misconstrued as union with God.¹⁰

Speaking more specifically about the Teresian mystical prayer, Buddhist scholars versed in its phenomenology consider it has consonances with the *jhānas*. Reputed Buddhologist Cousins, a professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester states, "it is quite clear that there is much similarity between that type of consciousness [*jhāna*] and St. Teresa's Prayer of Union."¹¹ Commenting on Cousins' article, Shaw concurs with the British author saying: "Cousins has demonstrated that the stages of prayer described by St. Theresa seem to have close affinity with the stages of *jhāna* described by Buddhaghosa."¹² *Bhikkhuni* Ayya Khema believes that the *jhānas* are the "same" experiences than those reported by Christian mystics, particularly those described by Teresa of Ávila.¹³ For his part, Ajahn Brahm asserts that: "mystics such as Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, who were probably two of the greatest meditators in the Christian tradition of the middle ages [...] did attain these stages we call *jhānas*, it seems."¹⁴ Other Buddhist authors have expressed very similar ideas.¹⁵

From the Christian side, these close similarities have also been observed. Helier, for example writes that: "the mind processes that take place during the transition stages of mystical prayer are similar to those in the four-stepped *jhāna* of the Buddhists. The psychological categories with which the mental states are described, frequently concur in a surprising manner."¹⁶ Mascaró, a lecturer on Spanish mystics at Cambridge, has pointed out that "Teresa [...] describes in Christian terms four ways of prayer which can be compared to what the Yoga Sutras tell us, or to the Buddhist meditations."¹⁷ Stabile, a former *bhikkhuni* reconverted to Catholicism, also detects similarities between Teresa's descriptions of her religious experiences and Buddhist meditation.¹⁸ Meadow and her two Carmelite co-authors identify consonances between the Buddhist levels of *jhānas* and the phases of Teresian degrees of mystical prayer.¹⁹

These affinities have also been noticed from non-confessional academic perspectives. Comparing *jhānas* and the "Christian ecstasies" is frequent in the field of transpersonal

1978), 188-89.

⁸ Asanga Tilakaratne, *Nirvana and Ineffability: A Study of the Buddhist Theory of Reality and Language* (Sri Lanka: Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, 1993), 62.

⁹ Roderick S. Bucknell, *Buddhist Meditation and the Study of Mystical Experience* (Perth: Australian Association for the Study of Religion, Charles Strong Memorial Trust, 1989); and Roderick S. Bucknell, "Buddhist *jhāna* as Mystical Experience" in *Exploring the Paranormal, Perspectives on Belief and Experience*, ed. G. K. Zollschan, J. F. Schumaker, G. F. Walsh (Bridgeport: Prism Press, 1989), 131-149.

¹⁰ Nyanaponika Thera, *Buddhism and the God-Idea. Selected Texts* (Kandy: BPS, *The Wheel Publication*, No. 47, 1970), 7-8.

¹¹ L. S. Cousins, "The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification: Interior Castle of St Theresa of Avila and the Path of Purification of Buddhaghosa," in *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism*, ed. Karel Werner (London: Curzon, 1989), 111.

¹² Shaw, *Introduction to Buddhist Meditation*, 271.

¹³ Ayya Khema, *I Give You My Life. The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist Nun* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1997), 193.

¹⁴ Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond: A Meditator's Handbook* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 158.

¹⁵ David N. Snyder, *The Complete Book of Buddha's Lists – Explained* (Las Vegas, Nevada: Vipassana Foundation, 200), 165; Shinzen Young, *The Science of Enlightenment: How Meditation Works* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2016), 53.

¹⁶ Friedrich Heiler, *Die Buddhistische Versenkung. Eine Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (München: Verlag Ernst Reinhardt, 1922), 55.

¹⁷ Juan Mascaró, "Introduction" to *The Dhammapada* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 1973), 17-8.

¹⁸ Susan Stabile, *Growing in Love and Wisdom: Tibetan Buddhist Sources for Christian Meditation* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 66.

¹⁹ Mary Jo Meadow, Kevin Culligan and Daniel Chowning, *Christian Insight Meditation for Christians. Following the Steps of John of the Cross* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publication, 2007) 75-83; and Mary Jo Meadow, *Gentling the Heart, Buddhist Loving-kindness Practice for Christians* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 136-45.

psychology,²⁰ general psychology,²¹ and in the academic disciplines of religious studies and comparative religion. Rose, professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Christopher Newport University, writes: “these stages of concentration [i.e. of mystical union] unfold in the Catholic tradition in a sequence that is virtually identical to their unfolding in the schema described in the Visuddhimagga and the Yoga Sūtra.”²²

These citations should suffice to illustrate that much has been written on the close parallels between the levels of absorption described by Buddhaghosa and the mystical stages described by Christian mystics, albeit proposed on different grounds. Much also has been written to qualify or absolutely reject these parallelisms. One of the great experts in the Teresian path of prayer, the French Jesuit priest Poulain, opposed attempts to compare the prayer of union with non-Christian experiences.²³ This is also the case of Zaehner, who refused to draw parallels between Christian mystical experiences and those of other religions, arguing that the doctrinal differences are too profound.²⁴ Hollenback, from a constructivist perspective, also refuses to establish correspondences between the *jhānas* and Teresa’s mystical prayer and its degrees.²⁵

Undoubtedly, in many respects, the *jhānas* and the states of mystical prayer manifest similarities. We could list: sensory seclusion, diminution or suspension of mental faculties, contemplative absorption, the fact that they are experiences of stillness, bliss and peace, the presence of light, the stilling of the breath, and the extraordinary phenomena connected with them. These parallels could be considered “family resemblances” in the sense granted by Wittgenstein to this expression. Nonetheless, it is no less true that an insurmountable abyss separates the Christian experiences as described by the mystics, and how Buddhist authors explain experiences similar to the *jhānas* in other religions.

But, in spite of everything written, it is rather surprising that systematic and extensive comparative analysis of the *jhānas* and mystical prayer cannot be found in the available literature. This lacuna should be filled with a comparative research based on the original sources, and on their sociohistorical, religious, cultural and linguistic contexts, which, as far as we know, is carried out here for the first time in a systematic way. Our objective here is not to establish whether an equivalence between both contemplative states can be justified (an equivalence we do not believe exists). The purpose is rather to present a coherent analysis of the two experiences and to identify the extent to which the parallels and differences are present and to what extent the observed affinities are substantial.

2. The *jhānas*

The Pāli word *jhāna* (Skt. *dhyāna*²⁶), in the context of Buddhist meditation, denotes a specific state of consciousness that can be induced and experienced in Buddhist meditative practice and that can be described as profound “meditative absorption.”²⁷ According to Buddhaghosa, *jhāna* stems from the verb *jhāyati*, which in turn comes from the Sanskrit verbal root *dhī*, which means “to think about something” or “to meditate.” The word *jhāna* has been

²⁰ Michael Washburn, “Transpersonal cognition in developmental perspective,” in *Transpersonal Knowing: Exploring the Horizon of Consciousness*, ed. Tobin Hart, Peter L. Nelson, and Kaisa Puhakka (New York: State University New York Press, 2000), 185-212; and Michael Washburn, *Transpersonal Psychology in Psychoanalytic Perspective* (New York: State University New York Press, 1994).

²¹ Daniel Goleman, *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1988), 59.

²² Kenneth Rose, *Yoga, Meditation, and Mysticism: Contemplative Universals and Meditative Landmarks* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 128.

²³ Augustin Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1921), 268-277.

²⁴ Robert Charles Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

²⁵ Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 531.

²⁶ The Sanskrit word *dhyāna* is the origin of the Chinese word *chan* and the Japanese word *zen* in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

²⁷ “Jhāna,” *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, (London: Chipstead, 1921-1925), 322.

translated in different ways: “trance” (Conze, 1953), “rapture,” “ecstasy” (T. W. Rhys Davis), translations that, as we discuss later, may cause confusion. “Absorption”²⁸ is probably the most accurate translation, although it is still ambiguous. In the words of Buswell and Lopez, *jhāna* “refers to the attainment of single-pointed concentration, whereby the mind is withdrawn from external sensory input and completely absorbed in an ideational object of meditation.”²⁹ This type of absorption in a single point is progressively achieved through stages and leads to the suspension of sensory and mental activity, accompanied by sensations of great peace and happiness, experiences of light, diminution or suspension of the breathing and body animation. Mastery of the *jhānas* also allows the development of a series of paranormal abilities. *Jhāna* is therefore no ordinary absorption and hence along with Gunaratana and other authors,³⁰ we leave *jhāna* untranslated due to its specific features and religious context. *Jhāna* is related to the word *samādhi*, of which it is, in many cases, synonymous. In a restricted sense, *jhāna* is the proximal cause of *samādhi*, the goal of *jhānic* practice. In an extended sense, “the *jhānas*” may refer to the whole process of *samatha* meditation.

“*Jhāna*” is a pre-Buddhist word. The Buddha learned the technique that leads to *jhāna* in the *śramaṇic* environment of his time and adopted the term, although giving it a new meaning. It also should be noted that the *jhānas* are states that can be generated by establishing the right conditions for their occurrence,³¹ and they can occur spontaneously. The *jhānas* are discussed abundantly in the Canon.³² In the *Visuddhimagga*, they are dealt with at length,³³ mainly in its Chapter Four devoted to the earth *kaṣiṇa* (PP 4.119).³⁴ There are different interpretations about the nature of the *jhānas* as well as important differences between how they are presented in the Pāli Canon and in the *Visuddhimagga*, in which they seem to be a more powerful experience.

Regarding the position of the *jhānas* in Buddhist soteriology, these experiences are not the last station on the path of liberation, since their attainment does not imply insight into the nature of reality and the cessation of suffering, the ultimate goals of Buddhism. Nor are they an end in themselves, but training for spiritual life. In this sense, the *jhānas* have a soteriological function—to concentrate, purify and calm the mind—but, as Gunaratana says, they are “neither sufficient nor indispensable for reaching liberation.”³⁵ However, the *jhānas* are indeed a crucial aspect in the Buddhist meditation system and in the Buddha’s own experience as he experienced the first *jhāna* in his youth, and went through the fourth *jhānas* immediately preceding his awakening. The fruitful practice of the *jhānas* allows the attainment of a purified, stable, serene, ductile, adaptable, calm and focused mind, which is indispensable for the practice of *vipassanā*. But mastery of *jhānas* may only lead to liberation of the mind (*ceto-vimutti*), which is not final liberation, for that comes together with liberation through wisdom (*paññā-vimutti*).

In the path described by Buddhaghosa, the immediate goals of the *jhāna* praxis—unification of mind (*ekaggacitta*), mental purification (*citta-visuddhi*) and perfect calm (*samatha*)—are not

²⁸ Paravahera Vajirañāna, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1975), 20; and Nyānātiloka, “*Jhāna*,” *Buddhist Dictionary. Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (Colombo: Buddhist Publication Society, 1950), 137.

²⁹ Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, “*Jhāna*,” *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 960.

³⁰ Cf. Cousins, “Buddhist *Jhāna*,” Paul Griffith, “Buddhist *Jhāna*: A form-critical study,” *Religion* 13 (1983): 55–68.

³¹ It is generally recognized within Buddhism that the *jhānas* are not exclusively Buddhist, but experiences that may be present in other traditions. See Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199–200.

³² Grzegorz Polak, *Reexamining Jhāna: Towards a Critical Reconstruction of Early Buddhist Soteriology* (Lublin, UMCS Press, 2011), 25.

³³ As Gethin states “Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* provides what is the most detailed and comprehensive account of how to develop *jhāna* in ancient Buddhist literature” (Rupert Gethin, “The *jhānas* in the Buddhist path to liberation, the Theravāda perspective,” presentation given the 30th July 2017 in “1st. World Encounter Teresian Mysticism and Interreligious Dialogue Theravāda Buddhism and Teresian Mysticism, held from 27–30 July at the International Centre of Teresian and Sanjuanist Studies (CITeS) of the University of Mysticism in Avila, Spain.

³⁴ All quotes in English from the *Visuddhimagga* are from Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, translation first made in 1956 and published as *The Path of Purification* (hereinafter, PP) Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010. As per Buddhist abbreviations in this essay we use the following: AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, DN *Dīgha Nikāya*, MN *Majjhima Nikāya*, SN *Samyutta Nikāya*, KN *Khuddaka Nikāya*, DhP *Dhammapada*, Kv *Kathāvatthu*, Dhs *Dhammasaṅgāṇī*, Mil *Milindapañha*, Vibh *Vibhaṅga*, and Vin *Vinaya Piṭaka*.

³⁵ Henepola Gunaratana, “The *Jhānas* in Theravada Buddhist Meditation” (Kandy: BPS, *The Wheel*, No. 351/353, 1988), 3.

attained all at once. They result from a sequence of progressively more refined states of absorption in which the attainment of each *jhāna* paves the way for the next (PP 4.140). The *jhānas* are reckoned as eight.³⁶ The eight *jhānas* are of the same nature (absorption) and, experientially, can occur sequentially. The first four are called “fine-material *jhānas*” (*rūpa-jhānas*). The last four are called “immaterial” or “formless *jhānas*” (*arūpa-jhānas*). Collectively, the eight *jhānas* are known as the eight attainments (*samāpattis*). But the Buddhist tradition usually speaks of “the four *jhānas*,” as the four immaterial *jhānas* are understood as developments of the four material *jhānas*. With practice, the *jhānas* can occur as a continuum. The first *jhāna* is accompanied by the five *jhāna* factors (*jhānaṅgas*), which are mental qualities already present in access concentration but not strong enough at that stage for full *jhāna* to arise.³⁷ Without these factors, there is no *jhāna* (PP 4.106). In each *jhāna* the *jhāyin* or *jhāyī* (the practitioner of *jhānic* meditation) becomes familiar with that state until he masters it. Then, seeing its flaws, the *jhāyin* abandons its grosser *jhānaṅgas* and begins to practice the next *jhāna*.

3. Mystical prayer and its degrees

The degrees of mystical prayer are supernatural states infused by God in the soul. These “infused” states are called “supernatural” and “passive” because they cannot be triggered naturally, nor actively acquired by sheer human effort. The mystical states of prayer are a subject matter of Spiritual Theology and can be defined as experiences of union without mediation between God and the soul. It should be pointed out that Teresa does not use the phrase “mystical prayer” in her works; she speaks of “contemplation.”³⁸

It is also relevant to point out, as Sancho does, that when we speak of mystical prayer and its degrees, we refer to a didactic or prototypical model in which the soul reaches union with God through a series of stages that occur successively and linearly. But, in fact, as Sancho notes, “Teresa goes beyond this distinction. And while it makes a pedagogical presentation marking the characteristic of each level, the truth is that it presupposes a spiral ascent, where one stage precedes not necessarily always the other, but can intermingle, anticipate or overcome.”³⁹

It should be also emphasized, as Teresa does insistently and often in her works, that mystical prayer, as extraordinary phenomenon, is not the only way to achieve the union of love and will with God. There is also the more “sure way” of what Teresa calls “true union” (union verdadera) that consists of the perfect cultivation of the virtues and faithful fulfillment of the will of God.⁴⁰

Christian mystical prayer has its roots in the Bible,⁴¹ where references to union of the soul with God abound, as the erotic symbolism of the *Song of Songs* well illustrates. Specifically, Teresa is the “Mystical Doctor” par excellence. She wrote about mystical prayer as few Christian mystics have done, in terms of abundance of experiences, detailed descriptions and analytical depth. In *Castillo interior*, the “mystical mansions” cover from the prayer of infused recollection in Third Mansions to the fullness of mystical life in the Seventh Mansions.⁴² The

³⁶ In the Pāli Canon there are several enumerations of the *jhānas*. For example, the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (MN 26, 34-42).

³⁷ These five *jhāna* factors, in Nānamoli’s translation, which we adopt provisionally here, are: “applied thought” (*vitakka*), “sustained thought” (*vicāra*), “happiness” (*pīti*), “bliss” (*sukha*) and “one-pointedness of mind” (*cittassa ekaggatā*).

³⁸ Salvador Ros García, “Mística Teología,” *Diccionario de Santa Teresa de Jesús* (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2006), 429-48.

³⁹ Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín, “La oración ‘mística’ y sus grados a la luz del Castillo Interior de Teresa de Jesús” presentation given the 30th July 2017 in “1st. World Encounter Teresian Mysticism and Interreligious Dialogue Theravāda Buddhism and Teresian Mysticism,” held from 27-30 July at the International Centre of Teresian and Sanjuanist Studies (CITeS) of the University of Mysticism in Avila, Spain.

⁴⁰ Ibid. “True union” (*union verdadera*) is described in section three of Chapter Five of *Castillo interior* (“The Fifth Mansions”).

⁴¹ Rómulo Cuartas Londoño (coord.), *La Biblia. Libro de Contemplación* (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2010).

⁴² As Álvarez noted, the mystical mansions match specific periods in Teresa’s life: passive recollection (1553-1554), prayer of quiet (1554-1555), prayer of union (1560-62), spiritual betrothal (1562-1572), and spiritual matrimony (1572-1582). See Álvarez, “*Santa Teresa de Jesús contemplativa*,” *Ephemerides Carmeliticae* (1962), 11. See also Salvador Ros García, “Mística Teología,” *Diccionario de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, 429-48. They include the unitive experiences Teresa categorizes as “mística teología” (V 10,1); Groot writes: “Teresa uses the term

Carmelite devotes much of *Castillo* to the mystical mansions, which comprise two-thirds of the work. This is because Teresa is most interested here in describing the experiences she had lived since writing *Vida* (fourteen years earlier).⁴³

Teresa affirms that these mystical or unitive states are “supernatural” (*sobrenaturales*) (V 14.5),⁴⁴ but their supernatural condition is not the only aspect that defines them. She explains that mystical states are experiences of God and can only be granted by Him. Even if someone died of yearning for them, it would be useless, because only God can bestow them. Teresa says that she can testify to the divine origin of these elevated states not only by how they are felt in the soul, but by the effects they leave on it.

The Teresian degrees of mystical prayer, for most Teresian scholars, consist of the prayer of passive recollection⁴⁵ (*oración de recogimiento*) of the Third Mansions; the prayer of quiet (*oración de quietud*) of the Fourth Mansions, which bridges the ascetical and mystical mansions and coincides with the *via iluminativa*; and three stages of union with God, namely, the prayer of union (*oración de unión*) of the Fifth Mansions; the spiritual betrothal (*desposorio espiritual*) or “ecstatic union” of the Sixth Mansions; and the spiritual marriage (*matrimonio espiritual*), or “transforming union” of the Seventh Mansions.⁴⁶ These three stages of union constitute the *via unitiva*.

It is important to bear in mind that the difference between these states of prayer is not of nature but of degree. Teresa describes the mystical degrees as levels of closeness and love with God and the soul. There is a progression in intensity and duration between these mystical states,⁴⁷ and also important differences between them. The prayer of passive recollection is very brief in which there is withdrawal of the senses but no suspension of the faculties. In the prayer of quiet the suspension is only of the will. In Fifth Mansions the soul experiences the first proper “union:” the prayer of union, of which the soul had a first fleeting glimpse in the prayer of quiet.

By “union” Teresa means here not only “union of the soul with God,” but also “union,” or “suspension,” of the soul’s faculties (i.e., understanding, will, memory). In contradistinction to the prayer of passive recollection and the prayer of quiet, in union there are no interruptions during absorption. The prayer union is followed by the ecstasies of the Sixth Mansions. Unlike the prayer of union of the Fifth Mansions, where the unions are temporary and sporadic, ecstatic unions they are more intense, prolonged, and frequent. In the spiritual marriage of the Seventh Mansions, the soul is continually united with God and ecstasies and supernormal phenomena cease for the most part.

4. Comparison of the *jhānas* and mystical prayer and its degrees

mystical theology to refer to all the states of infused contemplation, the prayer of quiet, the prayer of union, and rapture” Jean de Groot, “Teresa of Avila and the Meaning of Mystical Theology,” in *Hispanic Philosophy in the Age of Discovery*, ed. Kevin White (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 145.

⁴³ Also, in contributing to a greater understanding of this stage of spiritual life (V 17.5). In Teresa’s time there was little literature and much confusion about mystical prayer, and the Inquisition viewed it with reluctance and distrust.

⁴⁴ All quotes from Teresa come from: *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, published in 3 volumes by the Institute of Carmelite Studies (Washington, DC, 1987, 1980, 1985). Abbreviations for Teresa’s works: C *Camino de Perfección*, CAD *Conceptos del Amor de Dios*, F *Fundaciones*, M *Castillo interior o Moradas*, MC *Meditaciones de los Cantares*, R *Relaciones* (also known as *Cuentas de Conciencia*), and V *Libro de la Vida*.

⁴⁵ For Arintero mystical prayer includes the prayer of passive recollection. Cf. J. González Arintero, *Cuestiones Místicas* (Madrid, BAC, 1956), 59. Some scholars do not consider the prayer of passive recollection as a form of mystical prayer.

⁴⁶ This nomenclature is not unanimous. There are numerous designations for the degrees of union.

⁴⁷ Regarding this progression Teresa writes: “The Lord comes to take this tiny bird from one degree to another” (V 18.9). In the prayer of quiet there is the briefest suspension (*suspensioncilla*) of the faculties. In the prayer of union, the suspension is over quickly (*pasa presto*) (R 5.6). In the Sixth Mansions, the suspensions are more intense and deeper. In the Seventh Mansions union is permanent.

4.1 Introduction

As indicated in opening remarks to this essay, the phenomenological similarities, or “family resemblances,” between the *jhānas* and the states of mystical prayer described by Teresa have not escaped the attention of numerous authors. These parallels, however, have limits: there are essential differences in the nature of these two states.

The existence of relative agreement between the *jhānas* and mystical prayer fits well with Buddhism, which does not rule out that the *jhānas* can occur in traditions other than Buddhism,⁴⁸ allowing for their attainment in theistic traditions.⁴⁹ It also connects with the Buddhist understanding that the *jhānas* may occur naturally, even spontaneously. These widespread ideas would explain the similarities from a Buddhist perspective.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as has been observed, in Hinduism and Jainism there is a phenomenology similar to the *jhānas*.⁵¹ From a Christian perspective, however, correspondences between *jhāna* and mystical prayer are more difficult to explain. Certainly, both are usually preceded by similar segments of spiritual life (i.e., cultivation of virtue, asceticism, reflective meditation), are states that may occur during meditation or contemplation, where a deep absorption is a common denominator, among other affinities already mentioned. But, the nature of the Christian experience, as described by Christian mystics, quashes further similarities within the experiences themselves.

In the present paper, we trust that a comprehensive and systematic comparative analysis will reveal the actual extent of these parallels, but also significant departures. In undertaking this analysis, we shall look primarily at the main features of these two phenomena as presented in the selected literature—in the *Visuddhimagga* and *Castillo interior*—but also in other works on the *jhānas* and mysticism. But before we attempt such a direct comparison, we will begin with a terminological analysis of the main concepts involved, as a philological approach may help us in clearing the ground for a proper comparison.

4.2. Terminology and conceptual analysis

4.2.1 Translations of “*jhāna*”

As noted earlier above, the early translations into English and other Western languages of Pāli *jhānic* terms such as *pīti*, *sukha*, *samāpatti*, *samādhi* and *pharaṇatā*⁵² were based on the lexicon of Christian mystical theology and mystical experience adapted to a Buddhist environment, in the absence of a more appropriate or theologically neutral vocabulary.⁵³ The borrowing of English words such as “ecstasy,” “rapture,” and “trance” to render *jhāna*, already suggests phenomenological affinities between the *jhānas* and Christian mystical prayer.

⁴⁸ As Gethin points out: “the *dhyānas* can thus even be seen as in a sense not characteristically ‘Buddhist’, since they can be attained in the absence of the liberating insight which brings direct knowledge of nirvana” (Gethin 1998, 199-200). In fact, “*jhāna*” is a pre-Buddhist term and it is said in the Canon that laymen can experience the *jhānas* (i.e., SN 4.301).

⁴⁹ Polak, *Reexamining Jhāna*, 20. In fact, Siddhārtha Gautama learned the *jhānas* in the context of the *Śramaṇic* culture of his time and, after attaining Buddhahood, adopted the term, but gave it a new interpretation.

⁵⁰ Although, in this understanding, other traditions misinterpret the experience. As Gethin points out, “[there is a] Buddhist tradition of seeing the highest understanding of other religions as based on misinterpreted *dhyānas* experiences” (Gethin 1998, 199-200).

⁵¹ There are studies that compare *jhānas* and states of *samādhi* in the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, with interesting results: S. N. Tandon, *A Re-appraisal of Patanjali’s Yoga-Sutras in the Light of the Buddha’s Teachings* (Igatpuri, Maharashtra: Vipassanā Research Institute, 1995); and Koichi Yamashita, *Patanjala Yoga Philosophy with Reference to Buddhism* (Calcuta: Firma KLM Ltd., 1994).

⁵² T. W. Rhys Davids left the word *jhāna* untranslated but defined rendered “*pharaṇatā*” as a “state of being pervaded with joy, joyous rapture, ecstasy” (“*Pharaṇatā*,” *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, (London: Chipstead, 1921-1925), 529).

⁵³ Johannes Bronkhorst, *Absorption. Human Nature and Buddhist Liberation* (Paris: UniversityMedia, 2012), 202. Heiler wrote: “it is not rarely that we are met, in the description of the different prayer steps, with the same or similar terms and concepts, as those we learnt about in the canonical *Jhāna* formulation” (Heiler 1922, 51).

However, there is a clear need to differentiate between these Christian terms and *jhāna*, which we shall attempt in the present section.

The word “ecstasy” is often used to convey the meaning of *jhāna*.⁵⁴ Poulain, an expert in mystical theology, defines ecstasy as “a state which, while it lasts includes two elements one, interior and invisible, when the mind rivets its attention on a religious subject; the other, corporeal and visible, when the activity of the senses is suspended, so that not only are external sensations incapable of influencing the soul, but considerable difficulty is experienced in awakening such sensations.”⁵⁵ Teresa’s use of the word ecstasy (*estasi*, in her spelling) refers to the union in spiritual betrothal of Sixth Mansions (*desposorio espiritual*) (V 20,1), the stage preceding the final stage of mystical life or Seventh Mansions (spiritual matrimony). It does not thus refer to all forms of mystical union. As we shall see, a diminished sensory awareness and an expanded interior consciousness are elements common to the *jhānas* and ecstasy, as well as happiness and spiritual joy. However, in Christianity, “ecstasy” connotes a divine origin, and a surge of emotion,⁵⁶ that does not match the notion of *jhāna*, which is not considered as a supernatural occurrence infused by God, but a natural phenomenon triggered by deep concentration on the object of meditation. Ecstasy also denotes a distinct feeling, arising after the experience, of having been in God’s presence,⁵⁷ and an intense religious fervor not predicated by the *jhānas*. Therefore, “ecstasy” does not suitably convey the meaning of *jhāna*.

Another word often employed for translating *jhāna* is “rapture,” although this term is often reserved to translate *pīti*. Teresa occasionally speaks of *rabto* (rapture), a term she understands as synonymous with or a modality of ecstasy.⁵⁸ “Rapture” conveys a sense of being seized and carried off forcefully. In the Christian context, “rapture” is “a mystical phenomenon in which the soul is borne out of itself and exalted to a knowledge of divine things.”⁵⁹ This sense of being seized out of oneself by God is consistent with the etymology of “ecstasy,” from the Greek *ékstasis* [*ex* (out) and *histanai* (to place)], which means “standing outside oneself.”⁶⁰ In rapture one cannot say whether or not he is in the body.⁶¹ Teresa typically uses “*rabto*” to refer to some experiences in the Sixth Mansions. Although during *jhāna* there is an alienation of the senses, there is no sense of being seized by God or outside oneself. Besides, as with ecstasy, Gunaratana comments that rapture “might suggest a degree of elation and exuberance inappropriate to the higher *jhānas*.”⁶² Therefore, the word “rapture” is not an adequate translation for “*jhāna*” either.

Jhāna has also been translated as “trance.”⁶³ Although in a religious context trance may mean “a state of profound abstraction or absorption accompanied by exaltation,” this word also evokes the idea of a state of unconsciousness, lethargy, catalepsy or hypnotic state, that has nothing to do with *jhāna* nor with mystical union. We agree then with Khantipalo when he says: “some authors have translated *jhāna* with ‘trance’ but this is very misleading as the experience of these two is quite distinct.”⁶⁴ Gunaratana similarly discards the translation “trance” as

⁵⁴ Nanayakkara writes: “Very often writers use the term ‘ecstasy’ to render into English the sense connoted by such Pāli terms as *jhāna* and *samāpatti*” (S. K. Nanayakkara, “Ecstasy,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Colombo: The Government of Sri Lanka, 1990, 10. Karunaratne defines *jhāna* as a “state of ecstasy reached in meditation” (Upali Karunaratne, “Jhāna,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Colombo, 1996, 55).

⁵⁵ Augustin Poulain, “Ecstasy,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles George Herbermann (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1909), 277.

⁵⁶ James H. Austin, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998), 26.

⁵⁷ Álvarez writes: “Ecstasy is primarily an immersion of man in the divine mystery” (Álvarez, “Éxtasis,” *Diccionario de Santa Teresa de Jesús* Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2006, 289).

⁵⁸ 6M 4, title. See also V 20,23 and V 21,8.

⁵⁹ The archetypal rapture is of Paul who was “raptured to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12,2,4).

⁶⁰ “Ecstasy,” *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁶¹ Teresa, evoking St. Paul, says, “whether all this takes place in the body or not, I wouldn’t know” (6M 5,8). Cf. V 38,17.

⁶² Henepola Gunaratana, *The Path of Serenity and Insight: An Explanation of the Buddhist Jhānas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 3.

⁶³ For example, see “Jhāna,” in *Chillers Dictionary of the Pāli Language* (BPS, 1952), 169.

⁶⁴ Khantipalo, *Calm and Insight: A Buddhist Manual for Meditators* (London, Taylor and Francis, 2003), 51.

“misleading, as it implies a sub-normal state, quite the opposite to *jhāna*.”⁶⁵ To be in the *jhāna* state is not to be “entranced.” The term “absorption,” frequently used for *jhāna*, seems more appropriate. However, a disadvantage is that it does not suggest the sense of “altered state of consciousness.”⁶⁶

If all these translations seem in one way or another inadequate, the use of the word *jhāna* should be promoted without translation, as some authors do, including Cousins.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the adoption of these English terms do indeed suggest that the *jhānas* and Christian mystical union share an intersection of cross-cultural commonalities, despite important variances. These will be further elucidated as we proceed with the comparison.

4.2.2 The *jhānas* and “mysticism”

Another conceptual issue that deserves attention—especially when comparing Christian mysticism with a non-theistic religion like Buddhism—is the tendency to relate *jhāna* to “mysticism.”⁶⁸ “Buddhist mysticism” is a label occasionally used by Buddhist and non-Buddhist authors alike.⁶⁹ As Ling notes, “mysticism” serves here to draw attention to certain similarities in religious experience in both Western and Eastern religions.”⁷⁰ Although these similarities surely exist, the use of “mysticism” in the context of Buddhism has been criticized from various angles.⁷¹ Is it desirable to speak of “Buddhist mysticism”? Is it really justified to refer to *jhāna* as a “mystical experience,” as some authors do?⁷² Before answering these questions we will analyze the meanings of “mysticism” in order to see if they are really applicable to Buddhism in general and, in particular, to *jhānas*.

“Mysticism” is an ambiguous and certainly problematic word. In Christianity, “mystical” refers primarily to the union of the soul with God and supernatural experiences closely connected with mystical union (e.g. ecstatic visions, preternatural events).⁷³ For Teresa, “*mística teología*”⁷⁴ denotes experiential knowledge of the presence of God in the soul (V 10,1),⁷⁵ and is synonymous with divine union and related phenomena commonly known as “mysticism.” In this sense, “Buddhist mysticism” is an oxymoron since the goal of Buddhism is insight into the nature of reality and not union with God or a “higher self.”⁷⁶ Hence, “mysticism” applied in a Buddhist context, would imply points in common as to the nature of *jhāna* and mystical union, which are not confirmed by scriptural evidence. Therefore, the *jhānas*

⁶⁵ Gunaratana, *The Path of Serenity and Insight*, 3.

⁶⁶ Paul J. Griffiths, “Indian Buddhist Meditation,” in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asia, Tibetan, and Early Chinese*, ed. T. Yoshinori et al., Vol. 8 (New York: Crossroads, 1997), 38.

⁶⁷ Cousins, “Buddhist Jhāna,” 116.

⁶⁸ On Buddhism as “mystical” see Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *Beyond Language and Reason, Mysticism in Indian Buddhism* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1993); Roger R. Jackson, “How mystical is Buddhism?” *Asian Philosophy* (1996): 147-53.

⁶⁹ For example: Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* (New York, Harper, 1957); and D. B. Gray, “The Mystical Dimensions of Buddhism,” in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William B. Parsons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 68.

⁷⁰ Trevor Ling, “Buddhist Mysticism” in *Religious Studies*, April 1966, 163-75.

⁷¹ Some of these criticisms are stated in this section. See Asanga Tilakaratne, “Mysticism,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Colombo: The Government of Sri Lanka, 1990), 75-6; Stepan Lisy, “Preliminary remarks for the comparative study of mysticism: Mysticism is What Unio mystica is.” *Communio Viatorum* (2012): 88-107.

⁷² Bucknell, *Buddhist meditation and the study of mystical experience*, 3.

⁷³ For valuable studies on the evolution of the concept of mysticism see Louis Bouyer, “Mysticism, An Essay on the History of the Word,” in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 42-45; and Michel de Certeau, *La Fable Mystique, vol. 1, XVIe-XVIIe Siècle* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1982).

⁷⁴ Teresa did not use “mystical” in her works, and only wrote four times the expression “*mística teología*” (V 10,1; V 11,5; V 12,5; and V 18,2) which, for her, as Ros García los explains, means “the mystical experience itself, the knowledge gained from the lived union with God and of His operations on her” (Salvador Ros García “Mística Teología,” *Diccionario de Santa Teresa de Jesús*, 429).

⁷⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas defined mysticism as “experiential knowledge of God” (*cognitio Dei experimentalis*).

⁷⁶ This can be extended to the notions of “ultimate reality” or “absolute.” Here the position taken by W. Stace and others (e.g. J. Pérez-Remon, A. K. Coomaraswamy), arguing that the Buddha did not deny the existence of a “Universal Self,” has been criticized by Y. Karunadasa—in his book *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2013), 41-45—among other Buddhist scholars.

should not be categorized as “mystical” experiences in this sense.

“Mysticism” is also understood, mainly among perennialists, as the “core experience at the heart of all religions,” an experience that James characterized by four essential marks, namely: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.⁷⁷ With this connotation, “mysticism” appears at times in literature on Buddhism.⁷⁸ Contrary to applying this term in the context of Theravāda, Gombrich categorically holds that “there is nothing in that tradition or culture corresponding to James’ idea of the mystical.”⁷⁹ Is Gombrich right? First, we must bear in mind that, when writing on mysticism, James had a theistic framework in mind that is not applicable to Buddhism.⁸⁰ Secondly, the *jhānas* are not the core experience at the heart of Buddhism. Next, analyze comparatively the features cited above that James attributed to mystical experience (i.e., ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity) to discern how they relate to *jhānas*.

As it is known, James conceptualized mystical experience as ineffable.⁸¹ It has frequently been said that ineffability is a distinctive feature of Teresa’s states of mystical union.⁸² At the beginning of the Chapter Four (the Fourth Mansions), Teresa states that, from these mansions onwards, the experiences that are given therein are unutterable, and asks God’s help to say something about them.⁸³ Ecstasy, in particular, is unspeakable. As with all her unitive experiences, Teresa doubts how to describe it (6M 3,2). She gives reasons for this ineffability: Words cannot convey the experience to those who have not lived it (4M 1,1),⁸⁴ thus these experiences remain unintelligible for those persons;⁸⁵ the understanding cannot provide “traces” of what happens in these states (4M 1,1); language is inadequate for this purpose and analogies cannot be used because the things of the world are too ‘low’ for a valid comparison (5M 1,1). However, at the same time, Teresa describes her unitive experiences profusely and in great detail.⁸⁶ Therefore, if we understand the term ineffability as indescribability, Teresa’s unitive experiences are not ineffable. How to solve this apparent contradiction? We believe that Teresa is saying something more specific here: the subjective experience, the *qualia* of these states cannot be communicated to those who have not had lived the experience for themselves.

Can we speak of ineffability in relation to the *jhānas*? For most Buddhist authors, nothing is inexpressible or mysterious about the *jhānas*; they are fully accessible, utterly comprehensible, and can be perfectly described with words.⁸⁷ For other Buddhist authors, such as Ajahn Brahm⁸⁸ and Khāntipālo,⁸⁹ *jhānic* experience is indescribable.⁹⁰ Undoubtedly in Theravāda literature descriptions of *jhāna* abound but, since the *jhānas* are characterized by the absence of sensory experience and mental activity, and the higher *jhānas* are empty of content, language cannot

⁷⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature* (Longmans, Green & Co, 1902), 367.

⁷⁸ Mahinda Deegalle, “The Theravāda Monk as a Buddhist Mystic, Mystical Attainments of a Twentieth-Century Sri Lankan Monk,” in *Mysticisms East and West, Studies in Mystical Experience*, ed. C. Patridge et al. (New York Continuum, 2003), 34–43; and D. B. Gray, “The Mystical Dimensions of Buddhism,” 68.

⁷⁹ Richard F. Gombrich, “Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?” (Eighth BASR Lecture, University of Leeds, 1997).

⁸⁰ This can be seen throughout James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The same opinion in Jonathan Bricklin, *The Illusion of Will, Self, and Time William James’s Reluctant Guide to Enlightenment* (New York: State University New York Press, 2015).

⁸¹ On ineffability and mysticism see Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability, the failure of words in philosophy and religion* (Albany, State University New York Press, 1993); and Guy Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 15–22.

⁸² Cf. R. V. Young, “Ineffable Speech, Carmelite Mysticism and Metaphysical Poetry,” In *Communio* 17, 2 (1990): 238–60; and Hans Akerberg, “The Unio Mystica of Teresa of Avila” in *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, 11 (1982): 275–306.

⁸³ 4M 1,1. See also 5M 1,1; 6M 3,2 and 6M 8,9.

⁸⁴ 1M 6,6 and 6M 8,9.

⁸⁵ 4M 1,1 and 1M 6,6.

⁸⁶ For example, in 6M 3,3, 6M 5,7 and 6M 6,10.

⁸⁷ For Tilakaratne in Theravāda “ineffability does not seem to have been an issue or a problem” (Tilakaratne, “Mysticism,” 77).

⁸⁸ Brahm writes: “With all *jhānas*, the experiences are next to impossible to describe. The higher the *jhāna* [...] the more difficult it becomes to describe. These states and their language are remote from the world” (Brahm 2006, 162).

⁸⁹ Ineffability of *jhāna* is implied in this statement by Khāntipālo: “The *jhāna*-experience is so different from the usual states of wholesome and unwholesome ‘minds’ that a meditator with a theistic background could easily identify the bliss, rapture, and sense of oneness with God, or as his true Self or Soul” (Khāntipālo 2003, 56).

⁹⁰ In particular, it is said that *jhānas* without form (*arūpa-jhānas*) are beyond words.

describe their *qualia* with words.⁹¹

As Smart notes, the purification of consciousness that occurs in a state of deep absorption is closely related to ineffability: “if the normal flow of inner experience is replaced by a ‘blank’ state, then that state is not ordinarily describable.”⁹² As these states are other than ordinary consciousness and beyond words, the experiences of the *jhānas* and of mystical unions can only be fully known by those who have experienced them. The analogies with waking consciousness do not adequately express the otherness of what, in both cases, is described as something that surpasses the things of the world.⁹³ We must conclude that the *jhānas* and the states of union are *not* ineffable experiences. What they both share is the impossibility of adequately describing the subjective experience of these states to those who have not had a similar experience.⁹⁴

Related to ineffability, James categorized mystical states as having a noetic quality, that is, “mystical experiences reveal an otherwise hidden or inaccessible knowledge” that James describes as “insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.”⁹⁵ If both deep *jhāna* and ecstatic union are “empty of a differentiated mental content,” it may seem paradoxical to consider them as sources of knowledge. What knowledge do they provide? For James, the noetic quality of mystical experience has nothing to do with a “knowledge-about” (conceptual, discriminative) but with “knowledge-by-acquaintance” (intuitive, immediate),⁹⁶ that is acquired by having experienced the object and cannot be imparted to those who have not had it.

Can it be said that both the *jhāna* and unitive Christian experiences provide such “knowledge-by-acquaintance” of the contemplative object? It is clear that, as per Teresa’s and other Christian mystics’ descriptions, mystical experience provides knowledge of God.⁹⁷ There are doubts about whether the *jhānas* confer participatory knowledge of the object. On the noetic quality of the *jhānas*, Anālayo says, “Another example of the distinct character of the *jhānic* experience is the kind of cognition operating during the first *jhāna*, which DN I 182 calls a “subtle but real” cognition (*sukhumasaccasaññā*). This expression indicates the attenuated form of cognition that takes place during absorption, different from the way in which the ordinary world is cognized.”⁹⁸ This indicates that there is some kind of knowledge that is retained after the *jhānic* experience. Thus, both *jhāna* and union confer noetic quality of the object. In both cases, this knowledge is an insight of great significance for the experiencer. However, this significance differs in both traditions.⁹⁹

James also spoke of transiency as one of the four basic features of the mystical experience, attributing a time of “half an hour, or at most an hour or two.”¹⁰⁰ It is likely that James was not familiar with the *jhānas*, which are transitory states but not in the ephemeral sense that James

⁹¹ All subjective experience is in a sense ineffable. But, contrary to ordinary experience the *jhānas* and the mystical states are inexpressible in ordinary language as this is an inadequate tool to describe an experience that is beyond words and foreign to conceptualization and distinctions.

⁹² Ninian Smart, “The Purification of Consciousness and the Negative Path,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 118.

⁹³ It must be stressed that the ineffability of *jhānic* experience should not be understood as denoting a supernatural state.

⁹⁴ Teresa’s reasons for ineffability (described above) are related to the impossibility of describing the experience.

⁹⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 295.

⁹⁶ Barnard states: “Knowledge-by-acquaintance is inarticulate, it is a pre-verbal, un-mediated knowledge of the simple ‘thatness’ of something. Knowledge-about, on the other hand, is connected with the ‘whatness’ of something” William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (New York: State University New York Press, 1997), 112.

⁹⁷ Describing ecstasy Teresa says that while in it the faculties are dead to the world one mysteriously discovers that one “was never so awake to the things of God nor did it have deep enlightenment and knowledge of His Majesty” (6M 4,4).

⁹⁸ Anālayo, *Satipatthāna: The Direct Path to Realization* (Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2010), 77, note 47.

⁹⁹ The mystical union is transformative at the vital level; it cannot be forgotten (For example, see Akerberg, “The Unio Mystica of Teresa of Avila”), which does not to happen in the same degree with the *jhānas*.

¹⁰⁰ “William James regarded transience as one of the four marks of the mystic state, but allowed only for ‘half an hour, or at most an hour or two’” (“Ecstasy,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004: 2681).

attributes to the term. Any *jhāna* can be mastered and sustained for a long period of time.¹⁰¹

Lastly, regarding the question of passivity in relation to *jhānas* and union, none of the experiences of Buddhism, including the *jhānas*, can be called “passive” in the Christian sense, that is to say that they cannot be described as being infused by God. Buddhist purification is gradual and deliberate. The *Dhammapada* reads: “Purity and impurity belong to oneself: no one can purify another” (*Dhp.* 166). Concluding, we can point out that, if we compare James’ four marks of the mystical experience with the *jhānas*, we do not find exact correspondences for all of them. Therefore, also in James’ sense, the term “mysticism” cannot be applied to the *jhānas*.

“Mysticism” has a connotation of “mysterious,” “concealed,” “enigmatic” and, as McGinn explains, the term was once used in the sense of “something hidden.”¹⁰² In Theravāda nothing is “mystical” in this sense since nothing is secret or hidden in this Buddhist tradition.¹⁰³ Mysticism has also the connotation of “supernatural,”¹⁰⁴ and in fact Teresa characterizes mystical prayer with this same qualifier. Although Theravāda has “supernormal” aspects to it, and extraordinary experiences abound, the *jhānas* occur when the proper causes and conditions concur and are not “supernatural.”¹⁰⁵ “Mysticism” has been associated with the transcendental. To speak of *jhāna* as “mystical” in this sense is unjustified since the *jhānas* do not reveal a transcendental reality.¹⁰⁶

Finally, as mentioned above, “‘mysticism’ is sometimes used ‘to draw attention to certain similarities between religious experience in Eastern and Western religions.’”¹⁰⁷ There are indeed common features between the *jhānas* and the mystical states of union as we will describe below. “Mysticism,” in this last sense, could certainly be used to refer to the *jhānas*. Nonetheless, the theistic connotations of the word make this use inadvisable in the Buddhist context.¹⁰⁸

In light of these reflections, we believe that “mysticism” is part of the lexicon of Christian lore, and applying it to Buddhism is problematic, as its referent does not match the Buddhist experience. “Buddhist mysticism” is an ill-conceived notion inviting confusion. The *jhānas* may indeed be considered religious experiences,¹⁰⁹ as they are soteriological, but not mystical ones. It is better to leave the terms “mystic” and “mystical experience,” as heuristic tools for theistic religions, and avoid their use in non-theistic contexts.¹¹⁰ Their theological connotations are alien to Buddhism. As Gombrich puts it, “Neither Pāli nor Sinhala contains any word for ‘mystical’ or ‘mysticism’ or anything remotely like it.”¹¹¹

We conclude then by saying that there is indeed a shared phenomenology between the *jhānas* and Christian states of mystical prayer,¹¹² that justifies talking about “family resemblances” and explains the use of the “mystical” for the *jhāna*, although referring to the *jhānas* as “Buddhist

¹⁰¹ Any *jhāna* can be monitored and mastered in duration and intensity.

¹⁰² Bernard McGinn, “Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, edited by Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 6336.

¹⁰³ In the Theravāda scriptures, the Buddha often says that nothing is concealed or hidden in his teachings.

¹⁰⁴ Poulain writes: “We apply the word mystic to those supernatural acts or states which our own industry is powerless to produce, even in a low degree, even momentarily” (Poulain 1921, 1).

¹⁰⁵ Even a seemingly otherworldly state like the “attainment of cessation” (*nirodha-samāpatti*) is “natural” in this sense.

¹⁰⁶ Spencer writes: “The four trances may, indeed, lead to a higher plane of being, but their characteristic quality is subjective” Sidney Spencer, *Mysticism in World Religion* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1971), 76.

¹⁰⁷ Ling, “Buddhist Mysticism,” 163-75.

¹⁰⁸ In modern times, “mysticism” is used rather loosely, almost synonymously with “spiritual” and “religious.” We consider this meaning as too general and vague to be useful for our discussion.

¹⁰⁹ Gombrich, “Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?.”

¹¹⁰ Gimello, “Mysticism and Meditation,” 173.

¹¹¹ Gombrich, “Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?,” 4.

¹¹² Gray, “The Mystical Dimensions of Buddhism,” 69.

mystical states,” as sometimes appears in the literature,¹¹³ presupposes a uniformity with mystical prayer not found in descriptions of Pāli literature.

4.2.3 Mystical union and the *jhānas*

Cousins wrote about the parallels between the *jhānas* and Teresa’s prayer of union.¹¹⁴ It is interesting to compare Buddhaghosa’s notion of *jhāna* with Teresa’s notion of union, where, the starting point would be a conceptual analysis. Within the category of mystical prayer, mystical union must be differentiated. Mystical union (*unio mystica*) has been defined as “contact with the divine presence.”¹¹⁵ As McGinn notes, the Christian mystics have used diverse “linguistic strategies” to refer to this divine contact and, among them, mystical “union” is a metaphor with a long history in the Christian tradition.¹¹⁶ The image of “union” is implicit in the biblical allegory of the marriage of God (the bridegroom) with the soul (the bride) in a nuptial symbolism that permeates the *Song of Songs*. This bridal symbolism is key to Teresa’s description of the mystical mansions, in which all states are of the same nature (union with God) experienced in ascending degrees of intensity.¹¹⁷ If the initial contacts of God with the soul in the Fourth Mansions are brief encounters (*vistas*), the union of the Fifth Mansions gives way to the spiritual betrothal of the Sixth Mansions and culminates in the Spiritual Matrimony of the Seventh Mansions.

In relation to the nature of mystical union, some of Teresa’s statements may seem pantheistic.¹¹⁸ However, as Laksi states, “Catholic theologians may explain that any seemingly pantheistic statement by an accepted Catholic mystic as not really meaning what it seems to mean.”¹¹⁹ Although it may appear sometimes that Teresa’s symbolism points to “mystical identity,”¹²⁰—as when she speaks of union as two separate things becoming one,¹²¹ as a fusion of identical substances (7M 2,4)—her unitive language should not be construed as denoting pantheism or monism but panentheism (“all-in-God”).¹²² In Christianity, God transcends the world, thus pantheism is not an accurate account of mystical union, which is a union between two persons; a relationship famously characterized by Buber as I-Thou.¹²³ Teresa’s unitive experiences are interpersonal, dialogic, a loving relationship between God and the soul that brings her to the intimate imagery of “spiritual matrimony.” They can be appropriately described as unions of man’s will with the will of God, or union by participation in God.¹²⁴

In comparing Teresa’s notion of divine union with Buddhaghosa’s definition of *jhāna*, there is an insurmountable disagreement in the nature of the two religious experiences: Buddhaghosa does not describe *jhāna* as union. It is true that the Sanskrit word *samādhi* in the context of Hinduism and yogic philosophy means “placing together,” and implies the “merging of subject

¹¹³ Barendregt speaks of “The Buddhist mystical states are called *jhānas*” Henk Barendregt, “Mindfulness meditation, deconditioning and changing view,” in *Neuroscience, Consciousness and Spirituality*, ed. Harald Walach, Stefan Schmidt, Wayne B. Jonas (Springer, 2011), 199.

¹¹⁴ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

¹¹⁵ McGinn, “Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” 6334.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 6336. What has been called “Unitive mysticism” permeates the Christian tradition. It is found in St. Paul’s letters.” (1 Cor. 6:17), Origen (d. 254 CE), Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), among many others.

¹¹⁷ Cf. “Union, in fact, is nothing more than a very great intensification of the prayer of stillness” (Gabriel de Santa María Magdalena: *El Camino de la Oración*, Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1981, 238). Poulain includes the prayer of quiet as one of four degrees of union together with semi-ecstatic union and ecstatic union saying that is one and the same grace, distinguishing them from transforming union. See Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, 53.

¹¹⁸ Walter Terence Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1960).

¹¹⁹ Marghanita Laski, *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular and Religious Experiences* (London: Cresset Press, 1961), 123.

¹²⁰ McGinn, “Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” 6338.

¹²¹ Teresa writes: “what union is we already know since it means that two separate things become one” (V 18,3).

¹²² Pantheism, from the Greek *pan*, all + *teos*, God, is the view that “the world is in God, but God is not the world.”

¹²³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 123-24.

¹²⁴ Richard H. Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable* (New York: State University New York Press, 2016), 195.

and object, the essential characteristic of the mystical state of unification to which it refers.”¹²⁵ However, this understanding of *samādhi* is not found in the Buddhist tradition, where *samādhi* means mental concentration. The notion of divine union as the communion of the soul with God, expressed so eloquently by Teresa in her nuptial symbolism, is utterly alien to Buddhism. This is, above all, because Buddhism consistently denies the notion of an eternal Creator God.

Furthermore, the human person (*puggala*) in Buddhism, in contrast with Christianity, is not a substantial entity but a conglomeration of the five aggregates (*pañca-khandha*) and, therefore, there can be no “union” between the human person and anything else, since, to begin with, there is neither a human “I,” nor a god with whom the person can unite.¹²⁶ For this reason, any attempt to equate the *jhānas* with mystical union in terms of nature is unacceptable and surely predestined to fail. It is precisely when considering the *jhānas* and mystical union in this light that both notions appear informed by paradigms that are irreducibly contrary or opposing. This irreconcilable nature is probably the most unbridgeable gap between both religious experiences.

But the fact that the *jhānas* and mystical union are irreconcilable in nature, does not mean that comparing other aspects is meaningless. Cousins states that *jhāna* and mystical union are both “ecstatic trances” that involve the suppression of sensory experience and all ordinary mental activities.¹²⁷ We can add that both states are described as entailing great happiness, spiritual bliss, calm and peace, light and during which, in their deeper states, there is a total immobility of the body and suspension of breathing, among other shared features as we will see later. In the rest of this section, we explore these shared features in the form of a comparative examination of the essential characteristics and effects of the two states. But, let us first delve a bit deeper into the nature of the *jhānas* and the Christian states of mystical prayer.

4.3 The nature of *jhāna* and mystical prayer

This section focuses on differences in nature between the *jhānas* and mystical prayer. But first note that the *jhānas*, as shown by their numerical order, “are not four separate discrete states”—as Shankman states— “[but] each is a marker along a continuum.”¹²⁸ They constitute stages in a progressive process of increasing absorption, calm and serenity in which the factors that become coarser are gradually abandoned. As per Teresa’s states of mystical union, they are also not disconnected from each other either. They are “degrees of the same experience that vary in intensity, duration and effects.

The essential nature of the *jhānas* and the states of mystical prayer are not equivalent. While the *jhānas* are defined as experiences of unification of mind and deep calm, the degrees of mystic prayer are described as states of the union with God. “*Unio mystica*” is known as a “direct and immediate transformative contact with the divine presence.”¹²⁹ Teresa speaks of union as experience (*morada*) of God: “His Majesty Himself, as He does in this prayer of union, becomes the dwelling place we build for ourselves” (5M 1,5). Our Spanish Carmelite saint knows that her unitive experiences are from God because, although the soul “neither sees, hears, nor understands” anything during them (5M 1,9), God places Himself in the soul during these experiences in such a way that, afterward, it is certain He has been in it.¹³⁰ Teresa also realizes

¹²⁵ Georg Feuerstein, “Samadhi,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1993), 8006.

¹²⁶ Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 197.

¹²⁷ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

¹²⁸ Shankman, *The Art and Skill of Buddhist Meditation* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2015), 104.

¹²⁹ McGinn, “Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” 6334.

¹³⁰ Teresa writes: “For during the time of this union [one] neither sees, nor hears, nor understands, because the union is always short and seems to the soul even much shorter than it probably is. God so places Himself in interior of that soul that, when it returns to itself it can in no way doubt that God was in it” (5M 1,9). Teresa also says that those that are uncertain if they were in God and God in them “I would not say that it

that she has been experiencing God by the feeling of love, and other beneficial effects that union leaves in the soul.¹³¹

As for the *jhānas*, they have a precisely-described phenomenology, which does not include any reference to God, as the notion of God (in the Christian sense) is precluded from the beginning, since Buddhism is not a theistic faith. Nor are the *jhānas* related to gods (as understood in Buddhism), which of course do not have any place in Christianity and *a fortiori* in Christian mysticism. In addition, the Buddhist tradition repeatedly and expressly warns that *jhānas* should not be confused with experiences of divine union.¹³² In this sense and closely related to the erroneous notion of “Buddhist mysticism,” a mistaken equivalence between *jhānas* and union with God or a higher being has been proposed.¹³³ Indeed, without a proper understanding of Buddhist teachings, the *jhānas*, particularly the *arūpa-jhānas*, could be misinterpreted as experiences of communion with a deity.¹³⁴ It is true, as Anālayo says, that the *jhānas* may feel otherworldly,¹³⁵ but they are never described as experiences of union but of purity, unification and peace.¹³⁶ Thus, in their reported nature, the two experiences could be more different. Teresa’s mystical prayer is, above all, an experience of God, whereas the *jhānas* are experiences of deep absorption on the meditative object and unification of the mind.¹³⁷

Another essential difference that sets the *jhānas* and mystical prayer apart is the reported cause or origin of these experiences. It may seem a truism to say that the *jhānas* are the result of sheer individual effort, while mystical prayer is infused by God. The *jhānas* take place by the concurrence of the right conditions for their occurrence. These includes, the removal of the Five Hindrances,¹³⁸ and deepening of concentration on the meditative object, while excluding everything else from the field of consciousness. The meditator alone takes on the attempt as no outer power intervenes in its realization. Consequently, *jhānas* are attainments (*jhāna-samāpattis*), meditative absorptions naturally caused by the meditator’s effort that, with his growing skill, he must master.¹³⁹ Teresa, on the other hand, knows that her mystical experiences are not only experiences of God, but come from Him and through Him. They are “favors” (*favores*) or “gifts” (*donees*) granted by God to the soul for its purification and elevation. Teresa insists that these unitive states are supernatural and infused by God. There is nothing the soul can do to induce them,¹⁴⁰ though much can do to receive them by being well disposed to them.

It remains now to analyze how *jhāna* and mystical prayer actually occur in practice. Causation by self-effort versus God’s grace is an unbridgeable gap between the *jhānas* and union.¹⁴¹ As J. Hollenback states:

was ‘union of all the soul with God’” (5M 1,9).

¹³¹ Hollenback states that each mystical experience “either conveyed to the individual who experienced it an acute sensation that God stood beside him as a loving companion or else it deepened the individual’s love of God” (Hollenback 1996, 528). Teresa writes that during mystical union, God impresses upon the soul by His true wisdom (5M 1,9).

¹³² Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, 158.

¹³³ The *jhānas*, especially the *arūpa-jhānas*, can easily be misinterpreted as experiences of union with a deity.

¹³⁴ Khantipalo writes: “The *jhāna*-experience is so different from the usual states of wholesome and unwholesome ‘minds’ that a meditator with a theistic background could easily identify the bliss, rapture, and sense of oneness with God, or as his true Self or Soul. [...] A Buddhist is careful not to do this” (Khantipalo 2003, 56).

¹³⁵ Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 77.

¹³⁶ Indeed, “recollection of the gods” is one of the *kammaṭṭhānas* but, as Gombrich states, in terms of the development of concentration it is not considered a significant attainment. See Gombrich, “Religious Experience in Early Buddhism?,” 18.

¹³⁷ Tilakaratne, *Nirvana and Ineffability*, 62.

¹³⁸ The Five Hindrances (*pañca nīvaraṇa*) are: (1) sensory desire (*kāmacchanda*); (2) ill-will or heated (*vyapada*); (3) sloth-and-torpor (*thina-middha*); (4) restlessness-and-worry (*uddacca-kukkucca*); (5) and doubt (*vicikicchā*).

¹³⁹ In Snyder’s and Rasmussen’s words, “*jhāna* appears only when the conditions for it are ripe [...] you cannot force the awareness into full absorption or make it happen. You must be vigilant while relaxing into the process—balancing proactive and receptive effort” (Stephen Snyder and Tina Rasmussen. *Practicing the Jhānas: Traditional Concentration Meditation as Presented by the Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw*, Boston: Shambhala, 2009, 71).

¹⁴⁰ Since the Augustine-Pelagius controversy and the Council of Carthage, denying the need for divine aid is heretical.

¹⁴¹ Teresa explains that any attempt to induce mystical experiences (e.g. holding breathing, not thinking) will fail.

[Teresa's] persistent emphasis on the essential incapacity of the human being to generate beneficial mystical experiences sharply differentiates her from both the followers of Patanjali's system of Yoga and the Buddhists that not only assume that all such phenomena originate from deep within the human mind but also take it for granted that one can bring them about without any divine assistance.¹⁴²

Or, as Khantipalo put it from a Buddhist perspective:

Buddha has shown how factors give rise to other factors through repeated practice, and the culmination of this process, here *jhāna*, is the natural result of this. *Jhāna* in Buddhism is never looked on as 'a gift' or as 'supernatural, it just happens to those who patiently cultivate. And though it is so different from ordinary five-door consciousness which does not operate at all in *jhāna*, it is not something from outside oneself [...] As it is a conditionally produced dhamma, however, it cannot be forced to occur. All the other factors [...] which make for it must be present—among them, purity of virtue and effort are the most important.¹⁴³

Both the *jhānas* and mystical prayer can occur suddenly. However, they are usually preceded by meditation or contemplation.¹⁴⁴ When comparing the unfolding of the *jhānas* and mystical prayer in the terms of "active" and "passive," lose they clear contours. This is particularly when we study *vis-à-vis* the attitude of the meditator or the person praying in practices declared by both traditions as facilitators or predisposing to these states. In both cases, these states do not occur by acts of the will. The *jhānas* are not enabled but impeded by an assertive will. It is an attitude of disposition that facilitates their occurrence. As Ledoux explains: "when one attempts more closely to the sophisticated understanding each tradition has of its own doctrine, it is far more common ground between these two traditions on this question [grace versus effort] than may at first appear."¹⁴⁵

Continuing with the nature of *jhāna* and mystical prayer, we cannot lose sight of the systemic character and the contextuality of these states without an inevitable loss of their meaning. Both states are mutually exclusive in belonging to distinct religious systems that cannot be reduced into each other's vocabularies, practices or paradigms. Both are integral elements of intricate wholes, interconnected and interacting with other components of their systems, and can only be understood in their systemic contexts.

The *jhānas* and mystical union are significant experiences in their own traditions. But, none of them is liberating by itself, as they are solely means to achieving the purpose of their respective systems. Both traditions caution against confusing these states with final liberation or salvation. The *jhānas* are certainly memorable¹⁴⁶ and crucial events in the transformation of the mind. However, they do not constitute the experiential core of Buddhism¹⁴⁷—which is

¹⁴² (Hollenback 1996, 528).

¹⁴³ (Khantipalo 2003, 53-54).

¹⁴⁴ The *jhānas* are preceded by preliminaries of *samatha* meditation and access concentration. For Teresa, the prayer of recollection is the best way to dispose to infused contemplation.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 93.

¹⁴⁶ The Buddha entered *jhāna* spontaneously in his youth while sitting under a rose-apple tree watching his father ploughing croplands, and he remembered clearly the experience after his near-death ascetic struggle of six years.

¹⁴⁷ The formless were climactic experiences in the *śramaṇic* systems of the Buddha's teachers who understood them as absorption into Brahman. Buddha considered these attainments wrongly conceptualized and insufficient for liberation.

liberation from suffering¹⁴⁸—but are a means to attaining it.¹⁴⁹ If we speak of Christianity, some people assume that mystical union (and mysticism in general) is the heart of this religion. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of mystical union for the mystic.¹⁵⁰ Unitive experiences totally transform the person and impact his life.¹⁵¹ But Teresa did not consider that mystical union to be the essence of her faith,¹⁵² which in reality is to have one's will so totally united to that of God that in no way can anything separate them, rather than the mystical experiences themselves. Both the *jhānas* and mystical union lead the person who experiences them beyond ordinary consciousness, and they have a cathartic function when it comes to purifying the person, but neither of them constitutes the nucleus of their respective religious systems.

Another crucial issue is whether the *jhānas* and mystical union are indispensable in the economy of liberation or salvation within the context of their systems. The role of *jhāna* in Buddhist soteriology is a controversial subject in Buddhist academicism. This scholarly controversy has scriptural bases and is related to the relation between *samatha* and *vipassanā*. Summarizing, in Buddhaghosa's account purification of the mind is always needed as preparation for *vipassanā*, while *jhānic* training is not required if the mind has been purified in previous lives.¹⁵³ If we focus on Teresa, and as Martin del Blanco puts it, the phenomena of mysticism “are not necessary for sainthood nor are they constitutive elements of Christian perfection.”¹⁵⁴ Mystical unions are favors granted by God as passive purification to perfect the virtues¹⁵⁵ but, as Teresa often says, they are not essential to the Christian way of salvation.

To conclude this point, we agree with Cousins when he writes that the *jhānas* and Teresa's prayer of union coincide in being “in a slightly ambiguous position in relation to the larger path: the prayer of union is really only a kind of shortcut and not the direct route which is the union of the will with that of God's will, while the *jhānas* are sometimes portrayed as a side-track to the more direct development of insight.”¹⁵⁶ Certainly, “shortcut” and “side-track” do not bring to mind the idea of indispensability.

4.4 Comparison of the essential features of the *jhānas* and mystical prayer

In this section, we will focus our attention on essential characteristics common to the *jhānas* and the states of mystical prayer with the purpose of examining if their phenomenology justifies the use of similar expressions when defining both states.¹⁵⁷ Methodologically, we will in

¹⁴⁸ T. W. Rhys Davids: “The *jhānas* are only a means, not the end. To imagine that experiencing them was equivalent to Arahantship (and was therefore the end aimed at) is condemned as a deadly heresy” (“*Jhāna*,” *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, 322).

¹⁴⁹ Brasington clarifies that “the *jhānas* themselves are not awakening, but they are a skillful means for concentrating the mind in a way that leads in that direction” Leigh Brasington, *Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhanas* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2015), 158-159. The *jhānas* lead to a mind ductile and able to for *vipassanā*. A sutta reads: “Bhikkhus, just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines towards the east, so too a bhikkhu who develops and cultivates the four *jhānas* slants, slopes, and inclines towards Nibbana” (SN 53.1).

¹⁵⁰ Teresa, for example, calls divine union “the greatest earthly good possessable” (V 18,3).

¹⁵¹ Teresa had her first union at an early age, although she didn't know what it was and remembered it all her life.

¹⁵² Teresa warns not to confound ecstatic union with salvation. Even those who are not “in grace” may have unitive experiences (R 29,1). The true goal of the Christian life is union of the will with God's will.

¹⁵³ The analysis of the true nature of reality cannot be done by a distracted and restless mind. One-pointedness and calm are essential requisites that must be attained for the acquisition of *paññā*. This is the goal of *samādhi* (purification of mind), which can be subsumed by the Noble Eightfold Path and corresponds to Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. However, they are what is needed to attain an undistracted, ductile and calm mind. The *jhānas* contribute the goal of *samādhi*, but the *jhānas* are not indispensable when this kind of mind already exists (e.g. obtained in previous lives). Therefore, *paññā*, or even arahantship, can be attained without practicing *jhāna*.

¹⁵⁴ Martín del Blanco calls these experiences “epiphenomena” of the spiritual life. See Mauricio Martín del Blanco, “Los fenómenos extraordinarios en la mística de Santa Teresa de Jesús,” *Teresianum* 33 (1982), 366.

¹⁵⁵ E.W. Trueman Dicken, *The Crucible of Love* (Darton: Longman and Todd, 1963), 402-03.

¹⁵⁶ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

¹⁵⁷ Apart from W. James, several authors have put together compilations of essential characteristics of mystical union and mystical experience which will be used here as references in the comparison of the *jhānas* with the mystical states prayer.

They include: Arthur J. Deikman, “Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience,” in *Psychiatry*, Vol. 29 (1966): 324-38; Frederick C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), 45-50; Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 43-79; Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London, Methuen, 1967), 70-94; Louis Dupré, “Mysticism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 10 (London: Collier Macmillan, 1987), 245-261; Austin,

parallel consider the aspects in which these states differ. Having already discussed, in 4.2.3, the four essential features of mystical experience mentioned by William James (i.e., ineffability, noetic quality, transitivity and passivity) it will not be necessary to repeat them here.

4.4.1 Altered states of consciousness

The *jhānas* and mystical prayer are described in modern psychological literature as “altered states of consciousness.” They are states removed from ordinary consciousness. Referring to the *jhānas* Shankman writes: “*jhāna* is dramatically different from the ordinary daily consciousness in which most of us spend our lives.”¹⁵⁸ Some scholars of Buddhism specifically speak of the *jhānas* as “altered states of consciousness.” Brasington writes: “the *jhānas* are eight progressive altered states of consciousness.”¹⁵⁹ Focusing now on Teresa, she mentions how different the states of infused contemplation are from the ordinary waking state.¹⁶⁰ Nor is it strange that scholars of Christianity refer to the states of mystical union with the expression “altered states of consciousness. McLean, for example, refers to Teresa’s mystical states as states of “altered consciousness.”¹⁶¹ Therefore, without judging whether the psychological notion of “altered state of consciousness” is an entirely appropriate appellation for both the *jhānas* and mystical prayer and its degrees, we conclude that both states are, indeed, other (*alter*) than the state of waking awareness.

4.4.2 States of absorption

Both the *jhānas* and the mystical union can be described—and indeed usually are—as states of “absorption.” Needless to say, “absorption” here is a metaphor. To absorb is to suck or swallow something completely.¹⁶² In the figurative sense that we often find in religious contexts, “absorption” denotes “occupation of the mind with the contemplative object.” “Religious absorption” can then be defined as a state in which the person’s attention is fixed, stably and without distraction on the object of contemplation for religious purposes, with the exclusion from awareness of any other phenomena. In this sense both the *jhānas* and the states of union are, indeed, states of absorption since, in both cases, the person’s attention is absorbed in the object, in a stable manner, for a period of time, to the exclusion of everything else.

As mentioned previously, *jhāna* is usually translated as “meditative absorption,”¹⁶³ “absorption concentration,”¹⁶⁴ “full absorption” or simply “absorption.” The expression *appanā-samādhi* (“absorption concentration” or “full concentration”¹⁶⁵) similarly denotes a state of complete absorption. During *jhāna*, the counterpart image (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*) occupies the totality of the meditator’s consciousness, which remains fixed on it.

Mystical union is an infused state—i.e., induced by divine power—in which the soul is fully absorbed in the contemplation of God. Teresa uses the qualifier “absorbed” (*absorto*) several

Zen and the Brain, 19-30; Gimello: “Mysticism and Meditation,” 170-99; and Juan Martín Velasco, *El fenómeno místico: estudio comparado* (Madrid, Editorial Trotta, 1999), 160, and 319-56.

¹⁵⁸ Shankman, *The Art and Skill of Buddhist Meditation*, 103; King typifies the *jhānas* as “those meditative states most radically separated from ordinary consciousness by their deep inward abstraction from outer stimuli” (Winston L. King *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga*. University Park, Penna: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980, 41).

¹⁵⁹ Brasington, *Right Concentration*, xi; Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, 152; Roderick S. Bucknell, *The Meditative Way: Readings in the Theory and Practice of Buddhist Meditation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 204.

¹⁶⁰ Thus, substantially, throughout the first section of the chapter on the Fifth Mansions.

¹⁶¹ Julienne McLean, *Towards Mystical Union* (London: St Pauls Publishing, 2003), 49.

¹⁶² Etymologically, “absorption” comes from the Latin *absorptionem*. Nominative *absorptio*. *Absorbere* means “to swallow up” [*ab-*+ *sorbēre*: to suck in, to swallow up something].

¹⁶³ Nyānātīloka, for example, translates *jhāna* as “absorption” or “meditative absorption” (Nyānātīloka, “Jhāna,” *Buddhist Dictionary*, 83).

¹⁶⁴ Henepola Gunaratana, *Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2011), 13.

¹⁶⁵ *Appanā* from *appeti*, “to fix” (“Appeti,” *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, 58).

times in her writings to refer to the faculties of the soul during contemplation. For example, when she writes: “after the time is past in which the soul is in union (for when it is in union the faculties are totally absorbed [*absortas*])...” (V 40,7), or when she asks: “if the faculties are so absorbed [*absortas*] that we can say they are dead, and likewise the senses, how can a soul know that it understands this secret?” (6M 4,4).¹⁶⁶ Teresa similarly uses synonyms of “absorption” common in her time, such as *embebecimiento*,¹⁶⁷ or *embelesamiento* when describing the state of mystical union.¹⁶⁸ Teresian experts and other Christian scholars also normally describe mystical union as a state of “absorption,”¹⁶⁹ (in the contemplation of God), and the term is commonly used in religious studies.¹⁷⁰

4.4.3 The *jhānas* and mystical union as states of great moral purity

The *jhānas* and mystical union share what is described as being states of great purity. The attainment of complete absorption (*appanā-samādhi*)—and access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*) before it—is conditioned by the total seclusion from consciousness, although temporary, of the Five Hindrances which are unwholesome states that hinder concentration. During *jhāna*, these defilements are temporarily removed through concentration and subside (PP 4,31).¹⁷¹ As Teresa starts to describe the Fifth Mansions, she says that from these mansions onwards, they are states of great perfection and the entrance into them requires absolute disposition of the soul, because God “does not give himself wholly until He sees that we are giving ourselves wholly to Him” (5M 1,3).¹⁷² Nonetheless, Teresa insists that God can grant these favors even when undeserved.

Interestingly, in both cases it is said that these are states “the Devil” cannot enter. As Anālayo says, according to the Pāli Canon “already the first absorption ‘blindfolds’ Māra, since on entering this state one goes beyond the range of Māra’s vision (M I 159).”¹⁷³ Teresa also states: “if the prayer is truly that of union with God the Devil cannot even enter or do any damage. His Majesty is so joined and united with the essence of the soul that the devil will not dare approach, nor will he even know about this secret” (5M 1,5).

4.4.4 The withdrawal of the external senses

Both in *jhāna* and union, the withdrawal of the senses from external things and their internalization towards the “object” are the reverse (negative) aspects of absorption. In both states, the senses are oriented inward and absorbed in the object, or in God, until, in deep states, they cease to function and there is a complete absence of sensory stimuli.

¹⁶⁶ Teresa writes: “When His Majesty desires the intellect to stop, He occupies it in another way and gives it a light so far above what we can attain that it remains absorbed (*absorto*)” (4M 3,6). Cf. C 31,3; 6M 4,4; V 25,4; and 4M 3,6.

¹⁶⁷ “*Embebecimiento*” means to be totally immersed or absorbed in something (e.g. a task or an image). Teresa speaks of “some absorptions (*embebecimientos*) however delightful they may be, that have been given the name ‘union’” (F 5,13).

¹⁶⁸ *Palmireno en el Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (“Diccionario Covarrubias”) by Sebastián Covarrubias Orozco (Madrid: Imprenta Luís Sánchez, 1611), which is the closest dictionary of the Spanish language to Teresa’s times, defines “embelesar” as to remain without senses or movement; and “embelesado” as to be stunned or dumbfounded.

¹⁶⁹ See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Vol 1, trans. M. Timothea Doyle (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1989), 873.

¹⁷⁰ Throughout his study, Arbman refers to mystical union as a “state of absorption”. See Ernst Arbman, *Ecstasy, or Religious Trance: Essence and Forms of Ecstasy* Vol. 2 (Bokförlaget, Stockholm: Scandinavian University Press, 1968), 8.

¹⁷¹ “*Jhāna* (from a root meaning ‘burning-up’— of defilements)” (Khantipalo 2003, 51).

¹⁷² Teresa states that even among the nuns of the *Convento de San José de Ávila* few have what is required to receive these elated states (5M 1,3). Arbman explains how, according to Saint Augustine, ecstatic absorption “had reduced all its normal operations and activities to silence and in which there are neither any lusts to be checked or any adversities to overcome nor any unrighteousness to be punished nor any evil thing to avoid and where the senses no longer meditate any impressions from the body and the outer world” (Arbman 1968, Vol. 2, 136).

¹⁷³ Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 77, note 47.

In Pāli literature, *kāma* denotes both “sense-objects” and the desire for such objects.¹⁷⁴ The phrase “quite secluded from sense desires” (*vivicc’eva kāmehi*), as it appears in the pericope of the first *jhāna* (PP 4.79), refers to the isolation of the person’s attention from both the objects of the senses and the desire for such objects during *jhāna*. Buddhaghosa says that, while the meditator is in *jhāna* there is no sensory awareness,¹⁷⁵ because “consciousness at that time does not occur by way of the five doors” (PP 10.17). The states of mystical union are likewise characterized by the alienation of the senses. Such alienation starts with the prayer of passive recollection and gradually deepens. In ecstatic absorption, the ability of the senses is fully suspended.¹⁷⁶ Teresa writes that while in ecstasy, God “removes the soul from its senses” (*la saca de los sentidos*) (6M 4,2).

Interestingly, as we will see in the next subsection, Theravāda and Teresa use analogous images to describe this withdrawal. The image of a tortoise pulling its limbs into its shell,¹⁷⁷ as a metaphor for guarding the senses from Māra, is usual in the *suttas*.¹⁷⁸ Although Buddhaghosa does not illustrate withdrawal with this simile, we agree with Cousins when he says that, “his [Buddhaghosa’s] description of *jhāna* do[es] imply such a withdrawal.”¹⁷⁹ In describing the prayer of passive recollection, Teresa employs both the simile of a turtle drawing its limbs into the shell and that of a hedgehog curling up.¹⁸⁰

Buddhaghosa declares that during *jhāna* the physical senses do not arise (PP 10.17), an opinion stated in most *suttas*.¹⁸¹ However, according to some *suttas*, it is still possible to hear sounds while in *jhāna* when this state has not been sufficiently purified. Anālayo, notes that in Vin III 109, some monks accuse Moggallāna of falsehood because he claimed that while in the deep *jhāna* he had heard sounds. The Buddha, however, explains that it is possible to hear sounds, even in deep *jhāna*, if the attainment is impure (*aparissuddho*).¹⁸² In deeper states, however, the *jhāyin* is not able to sense anything.

Teresa’s description shows a gradation. The inhibition of the senses increases in intensity and duration according to the depth of the mystical union. In the prayer of quiet, the senses can still register outer sensory stimuli, although with great difficulty (4M 2). In the absorption of the mystical union of the Fifth Mansions, the inhibition of the senses occurs at the peak phase of the experience. In ecstatic absorption, the sensory faculties are inhibited to a point of almost ceasing to be active during the whole experience.¹⁸³

4.4.5 Reduction or suspension of ordinary mental activities

Apart from reducing or suppressing sensitivity to impressions and external stimuli, as Cousins observes, both the *jhānas* and Teresa’s prayer of union “are ecstatic trances involving

¹⁷⁴ “Kāma,” Nyānātiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, 87-8; and “Kama,” *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, 203-6.

¹⁷⁵ The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN 16) reads that while the Buddha was fully conscious and awake in deep meditation, he “neither saw nor heard the great rainfall and floods and the thunder and lightning” (Walshe 2005, 259).

¹⁷⁶ Arbman writes: “the ecstatic absorption leads to a complete cessation of all sensory functions” (Arbman 1968, Vol. 2, 159).

¹⁷⁷ As Griffith explains, “The tortoise’s limbs usually represent the practitioner’s senses (including the mind, the organ of thought): their proper place, the image suggests, is within, turned away from the potential disturbances and disruptions of contact with sensory objects external to the practitioner.” (Griffith 1997, 38).

¹⁷⁸ The *Kumma Sutta* (“The Discourse of The Tortoise”) reads, “When you dwell with the doors to your senses well-guarded, Māra, not getting any opportunity, will lose interest and leave, just as the jackal did with the tortoise. Like a tortoise with its limbs withdrawn in its shell, so the monk, the thoughts of the heart. Not dependent, harming no others, totally unbound, he would berate no one” (SN 35.199). Cf. The *Kummōpama Sutta* (SN 35.204).

¹⁷⁹ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 110.

¹⁸⁰ 4M 3,3. Francisco de Osuna uses similar similes in Book Sixteen, Chapter 2, of his *Third Spiritual Alphabet*.

¹⁸¹ Ajahn Brahm *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, 25

¹⁸² Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 77.

¹⁸³ Arbman writes: “[n]ot even in the still more advanced form of suggestive absorption she [Teresa] calls ecstasy may this paralysis of the activity of the senses be said to be absolute, as long as the state in question has not attained its full depth” (Arbman 1968, Vol. 2, 157).

[...] the suppression of many of the ordinary mental activities.”¹⁸⁴ Heiler also notes that in both the third *jhāna* and the prayer of mystical union there is a “reduction and binding of normal mental life.”¹⁸⁵ Indeed, a reverse (negative) aspect of absorption (apart from the sensory withdrawal) is the total or partial inhibition of the person’s conceptual, reflexive, recollective, intellectual and volitional capabilities. As both the states of *jhānas* and of mystical prayer deepen, these non-sensory capacities are gradually absorbed until they fully cease to function.

Referring to the *jhānas*, Griffiths states that the “concentrative techniques are aimed at the progressive reduction of the contents of consciousness.”¹⁸⁶ Similarly, Cousins explains that “when Buddhaghosa declares that in *jhāna* absorption it is possible for the mind to remain for long periods with the semblance *nimitta* as its object, this is equivalent to saying that there is no articulated thought, no sense perception, no remembering the past and no awareness in the ordinary sense.”¹⁸⁷ If while in *jhāna*, all mental activity is quieted or stopped, in Teresa’s works, *unión* is often used as abbreviation for “union of all the powers of the soul with God” (*unión de todas las potencias del alma con Dios*), a well-known mystical phenomenon that Catholic theologians refer to as “ligature”¹⁸⁸ (when the inhibition of the faculties is weak) or “suspension”¹⁸⁹ (when the inhibition is strong).¹⁹⁰ In *Relaciones*, Teresa describes such union of the powers of the soul with God.¹⁹¹

Commenting on the inhibition of the faculties in the states of ecstatic union described by Teresa, and with words that resemble those used by Cousins in the quote above, Arbman writes: “the ecstatic trance manifests itself in a systematic inhibition of all the normal expressions or functions of the mind successively increasing in strength with the depth of absorption, and finally, where it has reached its culmination, resulting in their complete suppression, i.e. in a total extinction of the entire waking life of the mind.”¹⁹²

In both states, the inhibition of mental activity occurs gradually, in increasing degrees of completeness, intensity and duration. The deeper the *jhāna*, or the state of union, the more restricted or silenced are the ordinary workings of the mind. It is said that there is no place for thought in “any *jhāna*,”¹⁹³ but, as we will see when discussing the first *jhāna*, some thinking activity (*vitakka* and *vicāra*) occurs during this meditative experience, although we cannot speak of “reflection” in a strict sense.¹⁹⁴ As *jhāna* becomes deeper the activity of the mind is further reduced until, at the deepest point of absorption, all mental activity comes to a halt.¹⁹⁵ Also in Teresa, the suspension of powers of the soul is not uniform throughout all the degrees, but progressively increases. While in the prayer of quiet there is still some thinking activity, in

¹⁸⁴ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

¹⁸⁵ Heiler, *Die Buddhistische Versenkung*, 53.

¹⁸⁶ Griffiths, “Buddhist Jhāna,” 55-68.

¹⁸⁷ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

¹⁸⁸ “Ligature” derives from the Latin *ligatus* (to tie or bind). Poulain states: “The word *ligature* indicates that the soul is in the condition of a man whose limbs are *bound* [...] and who can only therefore move with difficulty” (Poulain 1921, 151).

¹⁸⁹ “‘Suspension’ is not here suppression but that the faculties no longer apply to their ordinary object” (Poulain 1921, 151).

¹⁹⁰ “Ligature,” or “suspension, of the faculties during divine union, is a phenomenon reported by many Christian mystics (e.g., St. Catherine of Siena). See Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, Chapter 15; and Arbman, *Ecstasy*, Vol 2, 1-3.

¹⁹¹ Teresa declares: “When there is union of all the faculties [...] none of them is able to function. The intellect is as though in awe; the will loves more than it understands, but it doesn’t understand in a describable way whether it loves or what it does; there is no memory at all, in my opinion, nor thought; nor even during that time are the senses awake” (R 59).

¹⁹² Arbman, *Ecstasy*, Vol. 2, 157.

¹⁹³ Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond*, 25.

¹⁹⁴ Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, 77.

¹⁹⁵ King explains how “*jhāna* [...] signifies a state of trance in which all sensory input, aside from the subject of meditation, is totally excluded from awareness. At the higher *jhānic* levels the meditator is also incapable of speech or movement, and in the highest possible, attention is said to be without ordinary consciousness and to reach the trance of cessation” Winston L. King, “Theravāda in Southeast Asia,” in *Buddhist spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and early Chinese*, ed. Takeuchi Yoshinori, Jan Van Bragt, James W. Heisig, Joseph O’Leary and Paul L. Swanson (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995), 88; Polak also states that by the time the *jhāyin* experiences the base of neither perception-nor-non-perception (*nevasaññānāsaññāyatana*) “the activity of perception has been reduced to such a subtle level, that one cannot anymore say whether one is still percipient or not” (Polak 2011, 51).

the intense union of the Fifth Mansions and during ecstasy, as Merkur puts it, “sustained reasoning or discursive reflection form no part of the experiential moment.”¹⁹⁶ If in the prayer of quiet the will is “tied,” or “united,” while memory and understanding are free (because the absorption is not strong enough), this is not the case in union where the activity of both faculties is suppressed. In summary, in union “the faculties are unable to occupy themselves with anything other than God.”¹⁹⁷ In Teresa’s terminology, in the prayer of quiet the memory and understanding are “free” (*libres*), “sedate” (*sosegadas*), “dormant” (*adormecidas*), whereas during the prayer of union they are “united” (*unidas*), “suspended” (*suspensas*), “tied” (*ligadas*), “bound” (*atadas*), “lost” (*perdidias*), “asleep” (*dormidas*), “dead to the world” (*muertas al mundo*). In unitive states the person remains *as* if unconscious (*sin sentido*), unable to speak, incapable of understanding or remembering what is happening (V 18,6; V 18,14; 5M 1,4). To conclude, in view of the intrinsic phenomenology of these two contemplative states, we agree with Cousins in that, also with respect to reduction or suspension of mental activity “it is quite clear that there is much similarity between that type of consciousness [*jhāna*] and St. Teresa’s Prayer of Union.”¹⁹⁸ Rose also identifies this similarity with respect to mental activity.¹⁹⁹ The main difference is that in mystical union, the ligature or suspension is generated by God’s gravitational influence on the soul, while the *jhānas* unfold by the confluence of the necessary and adequate conditions for their occurrence.

4.4.6 Three additional essential characteristics

Shankman identifies three additional characteristics essential to all the *jhānas*: “for anyone in *jhāna* the mind is utterly undistracted and incapable of wandering even for a moment, it is extraordinarily lucid and clear, and the meditation proceeds entirely on its own, with no sense that you are doing anything to sustain it. Whenever these three aspects are present, regardless of the experiences accompanying them, *jhāna* has been reached.”²⁰⁰ Are these attributes distinctive properties of union? Let’s analyze them in turn.

On the sustained undistractedness or unification of mind during *jhāna*, Shankman asserts that one of the qualities of the *jhānas* is “sustained, unbroken mindfulness.”²⁰¹ Khāntipālo says that during the *jhānas* “[the mind] does not wander. It has one subject continually.”²⁰² Teresa, writing about the steadiness or unbrokenness of the attention during mystical union, says that only God can make the mind stop wandering when He unites with it (4M 3,4-6). In both cases, this non-distractibility of the mind is imperfect at first but deepens over time. At the beginning of the *jhānas* practice the mind is easily distracted but, as *jhāna* deepens, all instability disappears.²⁰³ During the prayer of quiet, the mind still wanders, but it stops when God puts it in simple union or in ecstasy (V 17,6).

The second quality stated by Shankman is “heightened clarity and mental lucidity.” Although the activity of the senses and the mind is diminished or completely suspended both in deep *jhāna* and union, in neither case does this mean unconsciousness. Quite the contrary, our two authors agree in describing these states as an enhanced awareness and heightened

¹⁹⁶ Dan Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 13.

¹⁹⁷ See V 18,13 and 5M 1,4.

¹⁹⁸ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

¹⁹⁹ Rose writes: “As defined by Poulain [...] the “ligature of the faculties,” [...] arises suddenly as a novel experience after a period of actively cultivated recollection (*recueillement actif*), a practice that can be assimilated to *dhāraṇā* in the *Yoga Sūtra* and the sequence of *parikamma-nimitta* and *uggaha-nimitta* in the *Visuddhimagga*” (Rose 2016, 129-30).

²⁰⁰ Richard Shankman, *The Art and Skill of Buddhist Meditation*, 108.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Khāntipālo, *Calm and Insight*, 51.

²⁰³ Shankman writes: “Once you are in *jhāna* all of that movement is gone. The mind cannot wander or even have an impulse to wander at all as long as you are in that meditative state” (Shankman 2015, 108).

mental clarity compared to normal states of consciousness. *Jhāna* is not a state of trance,²⁰⁴ but of “enhanced vitality and efficacy of the mind, for it is *samādhi* which is attained through *jhāna* that enables one to intuit the truth which leads to the realization of freedom.”²⁰⁵ Cousins says that during any *jhāna* “the mind remains [...] alert, lucid and qualitatively superior to ordinary consciousness.”²⁰⁶ He adds that “stripped of the technical terminology [...] this is to say that the state of *jhāna* is not merely conscious, it is much more conscious than the normal state of mind.”²⁰⁷ Khāntipālo writes: “the Commentaries do rightly emphasize that in the *jhānas* there is no experience of sensual consciousness. [...] But their mind-door consciousness is super-concentrated and bright, so that *jhāna* cannot be mistaken for a hypnotic or cataleptic trance.”²⁰⁸

According to Teresa’s description, an increased lucidity and purity also occur in union. Speaking of the prayer of passive recollection, Teresa says that here “the senses and exterior things seem to be losing their hold because the soul is recovering what it had lost” (4M 3,1).²⁰⁹ And, about ecstasy, she states that it is not a swoon, nor a state of unconsciousness (V 20,13), nor catalepsy, but rather a state of increased awareness, and absorption of the attention into God (6M 4,3). Teresa emphasizes that, in this state, “the soul was never so awake (*despierta*) to the things of God nor did it have such deep light (*gran luz*) and knowledge (*conocimiento*) of His Majesty” (6M 4,4). Teresa adds that all the unitive experiences are to “awaken” (*despertar*) the soul (6M 2,2 and 6M 8,4).

The last of Shankman’s three additional defining features common to all *jhānas* is that when the experience begins “*jhāna* is self-sustaining, proceeds entirely on its own.”²¹⁰ The fact, described by Teresa, that the soul cannot initiate, maintain, modulate, or stop the experience of mystical union by itself is an essential characteristic of mystical union. Although in the prayer of quiet the person can still do something to resist the experience, in the prayer of union there is nothing the person can do to maintain, modulate or stop it.

4.4.7 Exceedingly pleasant feelings

In relation to the subjective feelings of the *jhānas* and union, Cousins observed that “both [the *jhānas* and Teresa’s prayer of union] are characterized by peace and joy.”²¹¹ Indeed, in the descriptions of the *jhānas* and the states of mystical union references to extremely pleasant feelings are frequent.²¹² As stated earlier, some of the translators of the Pāli words that appear in Buddhaghosa’s definition of *jhāna* in relation to such highly pleasant feelings and emotions—such as *pīti*, *sukha* or *somanassa*²¹³—often employed terms and expressions that could have perfectly been extracted from any glossary of mystical theology, to describe similar feelings of joy and extreme happiness during union.

²⁰⁴ We refer here to trance as “a state of partly suspended animation or of inability to function; a daze; a stupor” or “a sleeplike state such as that of deep hypnosis” (“Trance,” *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield: Merriam-Webster 1973).

²⁰⁵ Upali Karunaratne, “Jhāna,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Colombo: The Government of Sri Lanka, 1996), 50-55.

²⁰⁶ Cousins adds: “for Buddhists this is the consciousness of the Brahma gods” (Cousins 1995, 111). On this heightened clarity, Shankman writes: “Heightened Clarity: The second quality universal to everyone in *jhāna* is increased clarity of mind. [...] Once you have entered *jhāna*, that clarity of awareness is heightened to a whole new level that was previously inaccessible. [...] It is like bringing a light to a darkened room. Where you previously could only make out shadows or vague forms, now you see everything in sharp detail” (Shankman 2015, 109).

²⁰⁷ Lance S. Cousins, “Buddhist: Its Nature and Attainment according to the Pali Sources,” *Religion*, Vol. 3, 2 (1973), 123.

²⁰⁸ Khāntipālo, *Calm and Insight*, 56-57.

²⁰⁹ See also 6M 4,4.

²¹⁰ Shankman, *The Art and Skill of Buddhist Meditation*, 108.

²¹¹ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

²¹² Bronkhorst writes: “expressions such as joy, rapture or ecstasy are frequent in descriptions of mystical and meditative experiences” (Bronkhorst 2012, 202).

²¹³ *Somanassa* (*su+manas+ya*), literally “happy-minded-ness,” means happiness, joy.

The word *pīti* has been rendered as “happiness,”²¹⁴ “gladness,” “delight,” and “zest.”²¹⁵ And *sukha* as “bliss,”²¹⁶ “joy,” “ecstasy,” “pleasure,”²¹⁷ “pleasant feeling.”²¹⁸ These pleasurable sensations and emotions are factors that positively characterize the first three *jhānas* and are central to the definitions of the second and third *jhānas* respectively. For her part, Teresa has plentiful references in her works to the perfect contentment, spiritual joy, indescribable bliss and great consolation that the soul experiences in union with God. Her narrative includes expressions such as *grandísimo contento* (greatest happiness), *gran satisfacción en el alma* (great satisfaction in the soul),²¹⁹ *deleite grandísimo y suave* (great and gentle delight) (V 20,3). In *Vida*, Teresa describes the glory (*gloria*) and enjoyment (*goce*) that the soul feels in ecstasy (V 20,3). She also explains how in mystical union, the soul experiences a “taste” of what is in heaven and does not know whether it is in this world or in Paradise.

Both traditions also concur in saying that, compared to these spiritual emotions, all the happiness and joy that can be experienced in the world are nothing. Speaking about the *jhānas*, Polak states: “In states of deep absorption, one becomes sensitive to extremely pleasant feelings, which cannot be compared to any worldly, ordinary pleasure.”²²⁰ For Teresa, the delight and joy that the soul experiences in mystical union are far superior to the pleasures and happiness that can be experienced on earth (CAD 4, title).²²¹

Buddhaghosa and Teresa also agree that these exceedingly-pleasant feelings are experienced both in the body and the mind and use similar analogies to describe them. Buddhaghosa writes: “during *jhāna* the whole body is showered with bliss owing to pervasion by happiness. And the pain faculty has absolutely ceased in one whose body is showered with bliss, since it is beaten out then by opposition” (PP 4.187).²²² Teresa states that in the prayer of quiet “a person feels the greatest delight in his body” (C 31,3). In another place, she says that no pain is felt in any state of infused prayer (4M 1,11).

In particular, several authors have noticed the similarities between the “spiritual delights” (*gustos de Dios*) of the Fourth Mansions and the *jhāna* factors *pīti* and *sukha*.²²³ The coincidence in the parallel image of a water inundation as metaphor to describe the bodily sensation experienced in both *jhāna* and prayer of quiet is particularly surprising. Describing *pīti* in *jhāna*, Buddhaghosa explains: “when pervading happiness (*pīti*) arises, the whole body is completely pervaded, like a filled bladder, like a rock cavern invaded by a huge inundation” (PP 4.98). Teresa’s description of the sweetness felt while experiencing *gustos de Dios* (a synonym with the prayer of quiet), equates it to water that comes from the source (God) and fills everything producing “this delight with the greatest peace and quiet and sweetness in the very interior part of ourselves” (4M 2,2); “this water overflows through mansions and faculties until reaching the body” (4M 2,6).

The quasi-interchangeable use of words for labeling these delightful feelings certainly

²¹⁴ Nānamoli justifies his choice of “happiness” for *pīti* by saying that it is better than the alternatives of “joy” (needed for *somanassa*), “interest” (which is too flat), “rapture” (overcharged). See Nānamoli, 2010, in relation to PP 3.82, note 6.

²¹⁵ Gunaratana, *The Jhānas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, 351-53.

²¹⁶ “Sukha,” *Buddhist Dictionary*, 324.

²¹⁷ Shankman, *The Experience of Samadhi*, 66; and Bucknell, “Reinterpreting the Jhānas” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 16, N.º 2 (1993), 379.

²¹⁸ Gunaratana, *The Jhānas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation*, 351-53.

²¹⁹ “So glad is it merely to find itself near the fountain that [...] seems nothing left for it to desire” (C 31.3). Cf. V 14.4.

²²⁰ Polak, *Reexamining Jhāna*, 23.

²²¹ Teresa says, “It sees clearly that one moment of the enjoyment of glory cannot be experienced here below, neither are there riches, or sovereignties, or honors, or delights that are able to provide a brief moment of that happiness” (V 14,5).

²²² Describing the prayer of quiet, Teresa says that in it “the whole exterior man enjoys this spiritual delight and sweetness” (4M 2,4). In *Vida*, speaking of prayer of quiet describes it as a “feeling a “great internal and external satisfaction” (V 14,4)

²²³ Cousins “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 112; Heiler, *Die Buddhistische Versenkung*, 53.

reflects phenomenological affinities between the *jhānas* and the states of mystical union. However, the use of similar words and expressions should not suggest that we are contemplating feelings and emotions with an exact correspondence. Careful analysis also reveals some differences, despite the clear overlap. When describing the feelings of happiness associated with union with God, Teresa shows a fervor absent in the *jhānas*. Moreover, in both traditions these pleasant feelings are attributable to different causes. *Pīti* and *sukha* arise because of the very nature of the *jhānic* state. As Khāntipālo explains: “the experience of rapture and bliss arises due to its [*jhāna*] purity and concentration,”²²⁴ whereas the happiness and delight that accompanies the mystical union of the soul with God, and the intrinsic moral purity of this state, is due to the presence of God in the soul.

Although, for the most part, the pleasant feelings alluded to are integral components of all the *jhānas* and states of union, we must also consider their dynamic aspects. These spiritual feelings are not uniform during the *jhānas* or throughout all the degrees of union. *Pīti* and *sukha* are *jhānaṅgas* transcended upon access to the third *jhāna* and the fourth *jhāna*, respectively. Equanimity (*upekkhā*) replaces *pīti* and *sukha* in the fourth *jhāna*, but this does not entail the disappearance of happiness, but instead is a more balanced feeling. Mystical union seems more emotionally intense. There seems to be an *in crescendo* in feelings of elation along the degrees of mystical union. As union becomes deeper and longer-lasting it intensifies and seems more emotionally charged, culminating with the overwhelming exultation of ecstasy. Yet, also throughout the mystical mansions all the emotions are appeased and lived in a more integrated way. In Seventh Mansions equanimity sets in, and extraordinary experiences practically disappear, a sign of the integration and unity in the person.

4.4.8 Tranquility and peace

The *jhānas* and mystical union are both states of great quietness, calmness and inner peace. The word *samatha* is habitually translated as “calm,” “serenity,” or “tranquility.” The cultivation of *samatha* (*samatha bhāvanā*) consists of increasing inner tranquility and “the quietude of heart.”²²⁵ The outcome is inner silence and profound quiescence,²²⁶ the four *jhānas* are a constituent element and a crucial aspect of *samatha* meditation. “The four *jhānas*—as Shankman rightly elucidates—are described in the Buddhist texts, comprising progressively subtler stages of increasing calm, clarity, and peace.”²²⁷ The elimination of the Five Hindrances, the attainment of the five *jhāna* factors, and the gradual removal of *vitakka*, *vicāra*, *pīti* and *sukha* leave the mind quieted, calmed and in a deep peace, which is why the *jhānas* are considered to be tranquillizing. This quietness, great tranquility and inner silence increase as the *jhānas* become deeper and more stable. As Harvey says: “the fourth *jhāna* is a state of profound stillness and peace.”²²⁸

Teresa describes mystical union as a state of great peace (*paz*), quietude (*sosiego*) and rest (*descanso*). In describing the prayer of infused (passive) recollection, she writes: “From this recollection a great gift of quietude and peace comes at times” (R 5,4). The prayer of “quiet” (*oración de quietud*), as its name suggests, is a state in which the person experiences an extraordinary quietness. Teresa explains: “This quietude and recollection is something that is clearly felt through the satisfaction and peace bestowed on the soul, along with great

²²⁴ Khantipalo, *Calm and Insight*, 51.

²²⁵ “Samatha,” *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary*, 756.

²²⁶ Spencer writes: “The outcome of *samādhi* is a tranquility which renders a man immune to the disturbances of senses. The saint is called ‘the tranquil’ (*samāhita*)” (Spencer 1971, 75).

²²⁷ Shankman, *The Art and Skill of Buddhist Meditation*, 104.

²²⁸ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 330.

contentment and calm and a very gentle delight in the faculties” (V 15,1). The states of union are characterized by spiritual feelings of great tranquility, peace and rest. Teresa says that “when [God] is pleased to grant some supernatural favor, He produces this delight with the greatest peace, quiet and sweetness in the very interior part of ourselves” (4M 2,4). In *Camino*, she seems to suggest that this peace comes from the appeasement of the faculties (C 31,1), speaking of “quietude of the powers and stillness of the soul” (C 30,6).

To conclude, we can summarize by saying that both the *jhānas* and the mystical union are states of great quiet, tranquility, inner silence, rest and peace, of both the body and of the mind. In both cases, this extraordinary peace and calm increase as the absorption in the object, or the mystical union, deepens and becomes longer lasting.

4.4.9 Light, interior illumination

The *jhānas* and the states of mystical union are also both described as being filled with light. They are experiences of inner illumination. Adjectives such as brilliant, shining, luminous, dazzling, radiant and resplendent appear recurrently in their descriptions.²²⁹ The *jhānas* are said to be light-filled experiences. In the Canon, they are accompanied by flashes of blinding light. In the *Upakkilesa Sutta* (MN 128), once the stains (*upakkilesa*) are removed, the eidetic image (*nimitta*) appears surrounded by shining light (*obhāsa*).²³⁰ Bodhi writes: “At [AN] 3:102, I 257,7 the word *pabhassara* [radiant] is used to describe the mind (*citta*) that has attained concentration (*samādhi*). It thus seems that it is in deep *samādhi* that the intrinsic luminosity of the mind emerges, at least temporarily.”²³¹ The Buddha explains how, after having attained the *jhānas*, “darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute” (MN 4.18). Why does light appear in *jhāna*? The Buddha says: “Radiant, monks, is this mind. And it is freed from transient defilements” (AN I 6.1,2). During *jhāna*, a mental illumination takes place due to the removal of the mental defilements (Five Hindrances), through concentration and the ensuing shining forth of the original purity of the mind.²³²

Teresa’s states of mystical union are also associated with light.²³³ As Kapstein notes, the imagery of light suffuses Teresa’s writings.²³⁴ She perceives a divine light during her mystical experiences (V 27,3; V 28,5). Other mystics also perceive light in divine union. Teresa writes: “While I was in this state, there suddenly came upon me a recollection with an interior light so great it seemed I was in another world” (R 39). Cf. V 32,3; 5M, 7 and F 6,4. She describes this infused light as white, radiant, of a great beauty (V 28,5), very different from that of this world (6M 5,7),²³⁵ which allows the soul see its lingering imperfections (V 20).²³⁶ An analytical distinction must be made here: that both traditions describe experiences of light does not mean that the referent is the same phenomena. The light experienced by Teresa is associated with the presence of God and holiness. The light experienced during *jhāna* is related to the original

²²⁹ Kapstein remarks: “Light is a favorite color religious palate, a preferred key in the music that is mysticism” Matthew T. Kapstein “Rethinking religious experience: seeing the light in the history of religions,” in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 265.

²³⁰ Cousins, “Buddhist Jhāna,” 119.

²³¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 1598.

²³² The mind is radiant (*pabhassaram*) refers to the mind freed from defilements as it occurs in *samādhi*.

²³³ Poulain writes: “ecstatic contemplation is a mixture of light and darkness” (Poulain 1921, 64).

²³⁴ Kapstein, *The Presence of Light*, 27. For the presence of light in Teresa’s works, see María de la Concepción Andueza, *Agua y luz en Santa Teresa. IV centenario de la muerte de Santa Teresa*, Universidad Autónoma de México, 1985.

²³⁵ Teresa says that this “interior light,” a divine sun of justice (V 20), dazzles the soul and cannot be compared to that of the sun. Teresa speaks of a light that has no night and does not disturb the soul at all (*no la turba en nada*) (V 28,5).

²³⁶ It is not entirely clear if the light experienced in mystical union is the same light that shines forth from the sun at center of the diamantine castle of the soul (1M 2,14 and F 6,4)—that is, the light intrinsic to the purity of the soul as reflecting the light of God, (7M 1,3)—or if is an infused light different from it. Teresa states that, in the mystical mansions, the soul is closer to the palace of the King and, cleansed by active and passive purifications, so can reflect better the light from God.

nature of the mind.

4.4.10 Feelings of love, sacrality and awe

One of the most important distinctions between the *jhānas* and the mystical unions, counteracting the claim that they are somewhat equivalent experiences, is the intense feelings of love felt by the soul in mystical union.²³⁷ In this sublime state, Teresa explains, the love of God is felt in the depths of the soul (R 5,6). The emotional experience of the soul's sublime love for God is a shadow of the love of God of which the soul is recipient (CAD 6,11). This love is transformative, liberates the soul (V 37,4), purifies it deeply, and allows it to love even more (V 24,8). For Teresa, in union, the soul loves but it does not know how it loves: "in loving, if it does love, it doesn't understand how or what it is it loves or what it would want" (5M 1,4).²³⁸

It is true that *jhāna* has a strong emotional quality prior to the fourth *jhāna*. The *jhāyin* is immersed in spiritual feelings of sublime joy and unparalleled happiness during these experiences. Buddhaghosa also mentions that the meditator must consider the meditational object "as a treasure, building up respect for it, making it dear to him [...] thinking 'Surely in this way I shall be freed from aging and death'" (PP 4.22). Nonetheless, the affective experience of intense love felt during infused contemplation, as reported of mystical union, cannot be found in the descriptions of the *jhānas*, which are experiences not so emotionally charged.

Another important distinction between the *jhānas* and the states of mystical union is the sense of sacrality, holiness, and awe reported by the Christian mystics. The sense or feeling of the holy or sacred predicated on mystical experience by the Christian mystics themselves or by authors like R. Otto, W. James, W. Stance,²³⁹ and others, is not described of the *jhānas*.

4.4.11 Disappearance of sense of "I," oneness, and time-spacelessness

Happold mentions three further properties of mystical experience that also seem to occur in *jhānic* experience:²⁴⁰ the conviction that the phenomenal self is not the ultimate reality of the person;²⁴¹ consciousness of the unity of everything; and a sense of timelessness, to which it we add an overcoming of the sense of space. Let us analyze next these three properties.

An attribute consistently ascribed to both *jhānic* absorption and mystical union is a temporary diminution or disappearance of the ordinary or habitual sense of self, which is experienced as a loss of *self*-awareness, *self*-consciousness and/or *self*-forgetfulness. Kornfield says, "the *jhāna* states transcend our ordinary sense of self."²⁴² As identification with the senses, body, thought, speech, emotions, memory and the rest vanish along the path of *jhāna*, there is a temporary loss of the habitual sense of self by deafferentation. *Unio mystica* is also described as a state in which the empirical sense of self is temporarily transcended.²⁴³ Teresa speaks of being "asleep to ourselves" or being "dead" during mystical union (5M 1,4). In Christian

²³⁷ Arberman, *Ecstasy*, Vol. 2, 373-75; Merkur, *Mystical Moments*, 16.

²³⁸ In *Concepciones* Teresa restates this idea: "She, if she loves, does not know how, or understands what she loves" (CAD 6 11); And in *Relaciones*: "the will loves more than it understands, but it doesn't understand in a describable way whether it loves or what it does" (R 59,6).

²³⁹ Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 43-79.

²⁴⁰ See Happold, *Mysticism. A Study and an Anthology*, 45-50.

²⁴¹ In similar vein, Richter states: "Mysticism is a mode of religious experience typically involving [...] the dissolution of sense of self" (Philip Richter, "Charismatic Mysticism: A Sociological Analysis of the 'Toronto Blessing'" in *The Nature of Religious Language, A Colloquium Roehampton Institute London Papers*, ed. S. E. Porter (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 124.

²⁴² Jack Kornfield, *Bringing Home the Dharma: Awakening Right Where You Are* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2011), 94; Brahm states that "one of the features of the second, third and fourth *jhāna* is 'absence of a doer'" (Brahm 2006, 164).

²⁴³ Beauregard and O'Leary write: "Abolition of self should not be confused with abolition of consciousness" Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (Harper Collins, 2007), 192.

mystical union, *self*-consciousness or *self*-awareness²⁴⁴ is dissolved in God's love. In ecstasy, the mystic feels taken outside of himself, which is the meaning of "ecstasy."²⁴⁵

Another element commonly attributed to *jhāna* and mystical union is the feeling of oneness. Along with the temporary dissolution of the sense of "I," there is an absence of differentiation of object-subject polarity, and the disappearance of the sense of self as a separate entity, characteristically attributed to the experiences of *jhāna* and mystical union. An immediate experience of this kind is frequently labeled as a oneness with the universe and other beings.²⁴⁶ However, such consciousness of wholeness or unity is labeled differently in Buddhism and Christianity. Such oneness in Christianity is experienced as "all being in God." As Happold explains: "In theistic mysticism God is felt to be in everything and everything to exist in God."²⁴⁷ Buddhism declines the characterization of such wholesome feelings as unity in God or universal oneness preferring to speak of the interconnectedness of all things.²⁴⁸

The absence of a sense of time,²⁴⁹ and space, is also frequently reported. On timelessness, as Smart remarks: "eternity is ascribed to God; timelessness characterizes *samādhi*."²⁵⁰ In descriptions of both the *jhānas* and union, the person is not aware of the passage of time, and only after the experience knows how many minutes or hours have passed.²⁵¹ The meditators of *jhāna*, particularly in formless *jhānas*,²⁵² and the Christian mystics, also testify to a sense of spacelessness. Dissociated from the senses and mental activity, the *jhāyin* in formless *jhānas* may enter a state called "boundless space." In the *jhāna* of "boundless consciousness" even that consciousness of boundless space eventually fades away. In Teresa's descriptions of union a sense of spacelessness or unconfined space seem to be a characteristic of these states (6M 5,7).

Another parallel aspect is the otherworldliness reported of the *jhānas* and union. Being an altered state of consciousness, atemporal and spaceless, *jhāna* feels unworldly. As Khantipalo says, *jhāna* is "different from ordinary five-door consciousness which does not operate at all in *jhāna*."²⁵³ As Williams reminds us, the *jhāna* is "said to take the meditator outside, as it were, the desire realm (*kāmadhātu*) in which we humans normally live, and to pertain to the realm of (pure) form, the *rūpadhātu*."²⁵⁴ In a similar way, Christian mystics of all times have described mystical union as otherworldly.²⁵⁵ Teresa describes ecstasy thus: "It seems to him that he was entirely in another region different from this in which we live" (6M 5,7). Paradoxically, both states are said to feel more authentic, certain and immediate than ordinary consciousness.²⁵⁶

4.4.11 The externalities of the *jhānas* and mystical union

Having considered the effects of the *jhānas* and mystical union on their experiencers' mental

²⁴⁴ For Arbman, "the climactic moments of mystical union consist of a loss, not of consciousness, but of self-consciousness. It is this process that mystics have described, metaphorically as death or annihilation" (Arbman 1968, Vol. 2, 371-73).

²⁴⁵ Teresa writes: "One day, [...] I began the hymn [*Veni Creator*]; while saying it, a rapture came upon me so suddenly that it almost carried me out of myself" (*me saco de mí*) (V 24,5).

²⁴⁶ Snyder and Rasmussen write: "After *jhāna* has ended, there remains a deeply-felt peace. In our experience, the purified personal sense of consciousness merges into unobstructed, impersonal, universal consciousness" (Snyder and Rasmussen 2009, 72).

²⁴⁷ Happold, *Mysticism. A Study and an Anthology*, 46.

²⁴⁸ Scott A. Mitchell y Natalie E. F. Quli, *Buddhism beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 171-72.

²⁴⁹ Happold, *Mysticism. A Study and an Anthology*, 46.

²⁵⁰ Smart, "The Purification of Consciousness and the Negative Path," 124.

²⁵¹ In descriptions of both the *jhānas* and the mystical union, the person is not aware of the passage of time and only after the experience knows how many minutes or hours have passed.

²⁵² The fifth *jhāna* is called *jhāna* "of infinite space" (Pali: *ākāśānañcāyatana*).

²⁵³ Khantipalo, *Calm and Insight*, 53-54. Griffiths called *jhāna* an "enstatic method designed progressively to withdraw its practitioner from cognitive and affective involvement with his environment." (Griffiths 1983, 55).

²⁵⁴ Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), 55.

²⁵⁵ Otherworldliness is often predicated of mysticism in general and sometimes synonymous with it.

²⁵⁶ Teresa says that ecstasy it is felt in the innermost part of the soul (*en el fondo del alma*).

processes (4.4.1-10), let us discuss now their effects on the body and its organic functions. Buddhaghosa writes: “since upon entering any of the *jhānas* the mind becomes absorbed into the *jhāna* factors, awareness of the physical body is lost” (PP 4.175).²⁵⁷ The *Vibhaṅga*, however, says that in the third *jhāna* the person “feels bliss with his body” (*Vibh* 245). To reconcile this apparent incongruity, Buddhaghosa clarifies that in the third *jhāna* the *jhāyin* experiences “bliss associated with his mental body” and only after emerging from it “he would also feel bliss since his material body would have been affected by the exceedingly superior matter originated by that bliss associated with the mental body” (PP 4.175). The Christian mystics describe frequently how in mystical union the person loses consciousness of the body. Teresa describes the bodily sensations experienced during the prayer of quiet (6M 2,2), but in the semi-ecstatic union of Fifth Mansions, awareness or consciousness of the body seems to vanish. During ecstasy, the person even does not know if he is still in the body or not (6M 5,7).

Cousins writes: “Both [*jhāna* and Teresa’s prayer of union] are ecstatic trances involving immobility of the body.”²⁵⁸ Some authors uphold that it is impossible for the meditator to move the body during *jhāna*.²⁵⁹ Buddhaghosa does not mention the subject, but the phenomenology of *jhāna* implies such immobility. While Teresa is explicit on the issue. Bodily immobility may occur in different degrees depending on the depth of the union. As union deepens and becomes more frequent, the body is gradually quieted, and, in climactic states, there is complete immobility of the body. In the prayer of quiet, the person is still able to move, but does not dare to do so for fear of losing the state (4M 3,6). In the union of the Fifth Mansions, one can only move but with great difficulty, or not at all.²⁶⁰ Ecstasy is like a state of paralysis or catalepsy;²⁶¹ immobility of the body is absolute here.

Both in *jhāna* and union the person is temporarily deprived of the power of speech. This inability to speak is not discussed in the *Visuddhimagga*, but the absence of the power to speak and total silence during any *jhāna* are mentioned in the Pāli Canon.²⁶² SN 36.11, for example, states that, on entering the first *jhāna*, the *jhāyin* loses the power to speak. Teresa explains how in the prayer of quiet it is difficult to speak (C 31,2), and how, at its height, only a few words can be pronounced (V 15,6).²⁶³ In the union of fifth mansions, one is unable to speak. Teresa says: “In vain do they try to speak because they don’t succeed in forming a word, nor if they do succeed is there the strength left to be able to pronounce it” (V 18,10). In ecstasy one remains speechless, awestruck, dumbstruck. Along the *jhānic* path as the *jhāyin* experiences deeper *jhānas*, the breathing gradually slows down, becoming subtler and shallower until it seemingly ceases.²⁶⁴ Teresa states that in the prayer of quiet the person does not dare to breathe for fear of losing the state. In ecstasy, says Teresa, the breath becomes thin until it seems to fade away.²⁶⁵

Other common physical symptoms are deceleration of the metabolism, reduction or apparent suppression of bodily animation and circulation and drop in bodily temperature. Several *suttas* mention that in the fourth *jhāna* one is free “from breathing in and out, which is called

²⁵⁷ Shankman, *Experience of Samadhi*, 70.

²⁵⁸ Cousins “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

²⁵⁹ For example, see Brahm writes that: “within any *jhāna* not only can one not move, but also one cannot know where one is nor where to move to!” (Brahm 2006, 166).

²⁶⁰ Teresa says this union “comes about in such a way that one cannot even stir the hands without a lot of effort” (V 18,10).

²⁶¹ Teresa says that, with regard to the body, union is a kind of swoon where the person cannot move. She writes: “neither a hand nor a foot stirs, as we say here below when a person is in such a swoon that we think he is dead” (5M 1.4). Cf. Dicken, *The Crucible of Love*, 408. There are examples in mystical literature of the body remaining paralyzed in whatever position it was previous the ecstasy occurred (e.g. sitting).

²⁶² Shankman, *The Experience of Samadhi*, 39.

²⁶³ The prayer of quiet is also known as the “prayer of silence.”

²⁶⁴ “In the first *jhāna* breath becomes very subtle; in the second it becomes subtler; in the third *jhāna* it becomes even subtler; and in the fourth *jhāna* it stops completely.” Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw, *The Only Way for the realization of Nibbāna* (Singapore: PAMC, 2013), 40.

²⁶⁵ Arbman, *Ecstasy*, Vol. 2, 78.

kāyasaṃkhāra, or the vital current of the body”²⁶⁶ Teresa describes quite similar symptoms. She explains that prayer of union is “a kind of swoon in which breathing, and all the bodily energies gradually fail” (V 18,10). In this mystical state “all the external energy is lost, and that of the soul is increased so that it might better enjoy its glory” (V 18,10).²⁶⁷

4.4.12 Duration, frequency, and intensity

We focus now on the duration, frequency and intensity of the *jhānas* and the mystical union. At the beginning of the practice of any *jhāna* the duration is most likely short (a few minutes) until sounds, smell, thoughts or some other disturbance intrude upon mind. As the *jhāyin* develops “power” (*vasi*)—in the sense of skill— he gradually suffers fewer impediments and can remain in the state of *jhāna* for longer periods of time, even days. However, there is more. The meditator must master each *jhāna* before beginning the next. This proficiency consists of the “five masteries in the practice of *jhāna*.”²⁶⁸ With it, the *jhāyin* acquires the ability to enter into, maintain and exit any *jhāna* more nimbly every time. With the mastery in maintaining *jhāna*, called “mastery of resolving” (*adhithāna-vasi*), the meditator should decide on how long he will stay in *jhāna* before starting the session (PP 4.131). During practice, there may be fluctuations between *jhānas*, they may occur at intervals, or one may sink back into the ordinary state and return to *jhāna* afterwards.

Regarding the duration, frequency and intensity of the states of mystical prayer, Teresa explains that, in her case, they did not last long and, in general, she had no control over them.²⁶⁹ The duration varies from the prayer of passive recollection and the prayer of quiet, which only lasts for a moment, to union whose duration can range from a few minutes to a half hour.²⁷⁰ Teresa affirms that, in general, ecstatic union does not last more than two hours,²⁷¹ although to the person it may seem a much shorter time. Teresa describes ecstasies with fluctuations and intervals that last for many hours.²⁷²

These unitive experiences can fluctuate between the prayer of quiet, complete union, ecstasy and the reverse. In full union and ecstasy, the experiences may have different degrees of intensity and duration (C 31,4). As Teresa enters deeper into the mystical mansions, we see find an increase in the frequency and intensity of these experiences.

4.4.13 The effects of the *jhānas* and mystical unions

Neither the *jhānas* nor the states of mystical union are an end in themselves. Both are described as serving the purpose of interior transformation. In the words of Nanayakkara: “the *jhānas* are only a means to an end, and are not an end in themselves.”²⁷³ The *jhānas* transform

²⁶⁶ Upali Karunaratne, “Jhāna,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Colombo: 1996), 52.

²⁶⁷ Teresa adds that, externally, union is like a person who is so faint that we think she is dead” (5M 1,4). See also V 18,6.

²⁶⁸ These five skills are: 1) skill in adverting the mind to *jhāna* (*āvajjanavasi*); 2) skill in entering *jhāna* (*samāpajjana-vasi*); 3) skill in “resolving”, that is in maintaining *jhāna* (*adhithāna-vasi*) or be established in *jhāna* as long as the person wishes; 4) skill in emerging from *jhāna* (*vuthāna-vasi*) and; 5) skill in reviewing *jhāna* (*paccavekkhana-vasi*) (PP 4.131).

²⁶⁹ One can exercise some control over the prayer of quiet, but no control is possible over prayer of union or ecstasy.

²⁷⁰ Teresa writes: Suffice it half an hour to last (R 5,13). As W. R. Inge states, a full suspension of “half an hour is frequently mentioned by the Roman Catholic Mystics” cited by Arbman, *Ecstasy*, Vol. 2, 90.

²⁷¹ See V 10.10 and V 39,15. It is necessary here to distinguish between the suspension of the senses and faculties itself (union) and the effects of the experience, which can last days.

²⁷² Teresa writes: “Your Reverence will ask how it is that the rapture sometimes lasts so many hours and occurs so often. What happens in my case, as I said in speaking of the previous prayer, is that the rapture is experienced at intervals. The soul is often absorbed or, to put it better, the Lord absorbs it in Himself suspending all the faculties for a while and then, afterward, holding only the will suspended. It seems to me that the activity of these other two faculties is like that of the little pointer on the sundial that never stops. But when the Sun of Justice wants to, He makes the faculties stop. This suspension of the two faculties, I say, is brief.” (The “other two faculties”, of course, are intellect and memory. These are not continuously absorbed, whereas the will may be absorbed for a considerable length of time” (V 20,19). Cf. 5M 18,12.

²⁷³ “Ecstasy,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Colombo), 12.

the mind, but this should not be confused with awakening.²⁷⁴ In similar terms Howells says: “For Teresa ecstatic states serve mystical transformation, but they are not its essence.”²⁷⁵ What are the lasting effects of the *jhānas* and the states of mystical union?

The *jhānas* and the mystical unions are not temporary states irrelevant to daily life. On the contrary, both have lasting beneficial effects on those who experience them. Certainly, the *jhānas* are transient meditational states but, as Harrison points out, “their effects are expected to trickle back into ordinary life.”²⁷⁶ With an assiduous and diligent practice, the *jhāyin*’s mind becomes focused, tranquil and equanimous in all situations. As regards Teresa, in the second section of the Fifth Mansions²⁷⁷ she declares the effects that the union with God leaves in the soul in a description of its metamorphosis from an ugly silkworm into a beautiful butterfly, after which the soul cannot recognize itself (5M 2,7). When comparing the enduring effects of the *jhānas* with those of mystical unions some of them have correspondences, while others are specific to each tradition.

Throughout *jhānic* training as well as throughout the mystical dwellings, an exhaustive purification occurs. Both result in states quite free of moral stains. The practice of the *jhānas* takes place throughout an arduous process of purification of mind (*citta visuddhi* or *samādhi*), the second of the seven stages of the path of purification (*visuddhi-magga*). If *jhāna* temporarily suppresses the impurities, *jhānic* training gradually purifies the mind. According to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* the *jhānas* yield a mind that is purified (*parisuddhe*), unblemished (*anaṅgaṇe*), free of impurities (*vigatūpakkilese*) (DN 2.97).²⁷⁸ However, we must point out that *jhānic* training overcomes iniquitous tendencies but does not root them out. Total eradication only occurs through the “path and its fruits.”²⁷⁹ Returning to Teresa, an effect of the experiences and “works” of the mystical mansions is moral cleansing (5M 2,5). The unitive states are passive purifications by God, whose aim “is to purify this soul so that it might enter the seventh dwelling place, just as those who will enter heaven must be cleansed in purgatory” (6M 11,6).²⁸⁰ Throughout the experiences of the mystical abodes, the soul grows in virtue (V 14,6),²⁸¹ and obtains a renewed willingness to submit lovingly and completely to the will of God.²⁸²

After passing through the *jhānas* or the mystical abodes, one becomes more unified and focused.²⁸³ Having attained the fourth *jhāna*, a meditator’s mind is described as “concentrated” (*samāhite*). The attainment of the four *jhānas* is typically understood as synonymous with the realization of *samādhi* (concentration) and *sammā-samādhi* (right concentration).²⁸⁴ Directing our attention again to Teresa, if in mystical union the faculties of the soul are gathered and absorbed in God, this too is not merely a transitory phenomenon. If, as O’Donoghue writes: “by recollection St. Teresa means a certain concentration or unified attention of the mind—an

²⁷⁴ Rupert Gettin, “On the Practice of Buddhist Meditation According to the Pāli Nikāyas and its Exegetical Sources,” in *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 10 (2004): 17–37.

²⁷⁵ Edward Howells, “Teresa of Avila: Negative theologian?,” in *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition*, ed. Edward Howells and Peter Tyler (New York: Routledge, 2017), 60.

²⁷⁶ Eric Harrison, *The Foundations of Mindfulness, How to Cultivate Attention, Good Judgment, and Tranquility* (The Experiment, 2017), 207.

²⁷⁷ Teresa also deals with the effects of ecstasy in the sixth section of the Sixth Mansions.

²⁷⁸ The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, reads: “And he with mind concentrated, purified and cleansed, unblemished, free from impurities, malleable, workable, established and having gained imperturbability, applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of the destruction of the corruptions” (DN 2,97).

²⁷⁹ See Cousins, “Buddhist Jhāna,” 117.

²⁸⁰ Supernatural prayer illuminates the stains and bad habits a soul might still have so they appear may clearly visible to it (V 40,7 and C 35,4) and cleanse them preparing the soul for the transforming union of 7M.

²⁸¹ Chiefly, humility and detachment (V 14,3).

²⁸² Teresa states that after experiencing the prayer of quiet, “there is [in the soul] an improvement in all the virtues. It will continue to grow if it doesn’t turn back now to offending God” (4M 3,9).

²⁸³ The attainment of a concentrated mind is a common denominator of all contemplative systems. Rose, *Yoga, Meditation, and Mysticism*, 74.

²⁸⁴ Karen Arbel, *Early Buddhist Meditation: The Four Jhānas as the Actualization of Insight* (London and New York: Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism, 2017), 116.

attention, that is, to God and divine things.”²⁸⁵ The path of prayer and recurrent mystical unions leaves the soul unified, entirely focused on God.²⁸⁶

With the fourth *jhāna*, the mind becomes flexible, sensitive or pliant (*mudubhūte*), malleable or workable (*kammanīye*). Such adaptability is predicated of the soul after the mystical mansions. For Teresa, the soul after mystic union “neither knows nor wants anything more than what He wants with her [...] He desires that, without understanding how, it may go forth from this union impressed with His seal. For indeed the soul does no more in this union than does the wax when another impresses a seal on it” (5 M 2,12).

The four *jhānas* produce a mind that is steady (*thite*) and unshakeable (*ānejjappatte*) (DN 2.97).²⁸⁷ On the chapter devoted to 7M, Teresa explains how, in spiritual matrimony, the soul remains always inalterable at its center (7M 2,6). After *jhānic* training the mind is also described as peaceful, serene and tranquil. Harrison puts it this way: “over time, a good practitioner [of the *jhānas*] will be peaceful under all circumstances, not just when she has withdrawn from the world to meditate.”²⁸⁸ Teresa describes the peace of those who reach the Fifth Mansions thus: “I don’t mean to say that those who arrive here do not have peace; they do have it, and it is very deep” (5M 2,10).

The fourth *jhāna* transcends *pīti* and *sukha*. These qualities, however, are replaced by a timeless equanimity and serenity that, paradoxically, is also a form of spiritual joy. Teresa says that after the experiences of the mystical mansions the soul attains great peace and joy: “For the trials [of the mystic mansions] are so valuable and have such good roots that although very severe they give rise to peace and happiness” (5M 5,10).

Of the path of *samatha* meditation (we understand here also referring to the *jhānas*) AN 1.61 says that it allows one to give up passion (*rāga*, in the sense of *taṇhā* “thirst” or “craving”), whereas *vipassanā* meditation allows one to give up ignorance (*avijjā*). Teresa describes how though the mystical mansions the soul discovers the nothingness of the things of the earth compared with God and puts all its passion into the search for God.

Both the *jhānas* and mystical unions produce a spiritual happiness and enjoyment so intense that they eclipse the pleasures of the world and make it easy for one to detach from them. After experiencing the *jhānas*, in Shankman’s words, “the allure of worldly pleasure fades.”²⁸⁹ Teresa insists that after union, the world loses its attraction.²⁹⁰ Khantipalo says that those who have experienced the *jhānas* have few attachments.²⁹¹ Teresa says: “Since it [the soul] has experienced such wonderful rest, all that it sees on earth displeases it, especially if God gives it this wine often [...] Everything wearies it, for it has learned through experience that creatures cannot give it true rest” (5M 2,8). The *jhānas* are delightful, but one should not cling to them as they do end ignorance or suffering. Teresa warns her sisters not to cling to the desire to receive favors from God.

According to the *Samaññaphala Sutta*, the mind after in the fourth *jhāna* is luminous, bright

²⁸⁵ Noel O’Donoghue, *Adventures in Prayer: Reflection on St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross* (London: Burns & Oates, 2006), 79.

²⁸⁶ On the unification and concentration of the mind in relation to Teresa, Ribot says: “In order to trace this ascending progression toward absolute unity of consciousness... I find in the Castillo Interior of St. Theresa a description, step by step, of this progressive concentration of consciousness” Théodule Ribot, *The Psychology of Attention* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1890), 96.

²⁸⁷ Polak, *Reexamining Jhāna*, 51.

²⁸⁸ Harrison, *The Foundations of Mindfulness*, 207-8.

²⁸⁹ Shankman, *The Art and Skill of Buddhist Meditation*, 121-22.

²⁹⁰ “Since it has experienced such wonderful rest, all that it sees on earth displeases it, especially if God gives it this wine often [...] Everything wearies it, for it has learned through experience that creatures cannot give it true rest” (5M 5,8).

²⁹¹ Khantipālo, *Calm and Insight*, 57.

(*pariyodāte*). Of the Seventh Mansions, where the King resides, a divine light comes out that reaches the other dwellings (1M 2,14). In the purified soul, in the center of the castle, Teresa describes a new world, in which everything has a clear and luminous aspect.

Paired with both mastery over the *jhānas* and the Sixth Mansions, a series of supernormal phenomena such as visions, locutions, levitation, premonition or ubiquity appear in both traditions. Several of these phenomena are specific to each tradition. These phenomena are described in Chapter 12 of the *Visuddhimagga* and throughout the chapter dedicated to the Sixth Mansions (Spiritual Betrothal) in *Castillo interior*.

There are effects or benefits that are specific to each tradition. As regards the *jhānas*, among other benefits, their attainment provides blessed permanence here and now for *arahants* (Buddhist saint) and those noble persons who have destroyed the corruptions. *Jhānic* training produces dominion of the mind, which is not explicit of mystical union. More significantly, the *jhānic* training prepares for the practice of *vipassanā* meditation.

Teresa says that after having had many mystical unions, the soul becomes more courageous in the service of God and grows in faith, inner strength and love (V 10,6). The main effect of the mystical mansions, which finds its zenith in the Seventh Mansions, is a call to the active exercise of charity. Teresa speak of “works, works” (*obras, obras*) which is the final end of prayer for Teresa; good works of love for the neighbor (7M 4,6). All these effects of the Teresian mystical path of prayer are temporary since the final goal of the mystical mansions is to favor a permanent state of union with God which occurs when consciousness reaches the Seventh Mansions, when all life is already prayer.

Summarizing, with regard to the effects of the *jhānas* and the states of mystical union, both have a great impact on who experiences them and, in the case of mystical union, changes his life radically. Several of the lasting effects of both experiences are similar, not identical, and some are typical of each tradition without apparent correspondence. Both the *jhānas* and mystical unions also have some of the features of the respective final states (*nibbāna* and Seventh Mansions), but they are not equal to these states.²⁹²

5. Conclusion

Having juxtaposed Buddhaghosa’s definition of *jhāna* and Teresa's explanations of mystical prayer, the comparison now put us in a better position to respond both to those who consider them “identical,” and those who see no relationship between them. Judging purely from the descriptions given by our two authors, the comparative analysis reveals that, although there are certainly points of congruence—as observed by Cousins, Heiler and others—the points of divergence, at the same time evident, are more fundamental.

The ultimate purpose of the *jhānas* is the *telos* of Buddhism: liberation from suffering and ignorance. Christianity aims to recover the lost unity of the soul with God and achieve salvation from sin and its effects and the mystical sates of prayer are tributary to this aim. Although there have been attempts to reconcile both *teloi*, the differences in self-understanding (from basic

²⁹² Gethin states: “while the state of mind cultivated in *jhāna* may fall short of awakening because it involves only the temporary suspension defilements and not their final eradication, it nonetheless shares many features that characterize awakening and as such is the gateway to various knowledges that are directly conducive to awakening.” Rupert Gethin, “The *jhānas* in the Buddhist path to liberation, the Theravāda perspective presentation given the 30th July 2017 in “1st. World Encounter Teresian Mysticism and Interreligious Dialogue Theravāda Buddhism and Teresian Mysticism,” held from 27–30 July at the International Centre of Teresian and Sanjuanist Studies (CITeS) of the University of Mysticism in Avila, Spain.

conception to symbolic language) clearly show that we are faced with two different soteriological systems, with dissimilar principles and purposes. Speaking specifically about the two experiences under comparative scrutiny, the most important difference is that Teresa describes her experiences as encounters with God, while the *jhānas* are described as states of absorption, unification of the mind, and calm. As Meissner says about mystical experiences “within the Judeo-Christian tradition they share a note of passivity, ineffability, the sense of submissive immersion in the experience of divine love, and the sense of formless fusion with the object of that love.”²⁹³ This “immersion in the experience of divine love” is a description fully alien to Buddhism.

As regards the points of resemblance, and summarizing our comparative exploration, the phenomenological affinities between the *jhānas* and the degrees of mystical prayer are already conspicuous in how revealing the borrowed terminology is that is used in translations. The two experiences, at their peak, are described as “ecstatic trances”²⁹⁴ or “raptures.” In them, the person’s attention remains absolutely absorbed in the object of meditation or in God, respectively, and there is a sensory abstraction of all external phenomena. In both states of there is inhibition or complete suppression of all mental activity of the person (articulated thought, will, understanding and memory), and, in deep states, a total immobility of the body, inability to speak, and a slowing down of circulation, metabolism and breathing. Both are described as states of a great peace, satisfaction, serenity, and spiritual enjoyment. And both have profound purifying and transformative effects on the person who experience them and are accompanied by similar paranormal phenomena.

One more point of contact is the structural position that the *jhānas* and the states of union occupy in their linear, step-by-step descriptions, of the respective spiritual paths. Both the *jhānas* and the states of mystical union have as their comparable consecutive antecedents the cultivation of virtue, asceticism and the practice of discursive mediation. Both states are also usually preceded by a unification and deepening of attention: mindfulness leads to *jhāna*, recollection leads to the door of mystical prayer. Besides, as Teresa also declares about mystical prayer, Buddhaghosa affirms that the *jhānas* are neither the goal of spiritual path, nor the only way to it and nor are they indispensable.

In light of this comparison, we conclude that, although the *jhānas* and the states of mystical prayer belong to different soteriological realms and differ in their essential nature, from the psycho-spiritual viewpoint they share enough phenomenological characteristics and structural and functional parallels so that it does not seem inappropriate to apply Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance” to categorize their relationship.²⁹⁵

Considering that the two religious systems were developed in a relatively isolated manner from each other, in different continents, cultures, languages and eras, and that they are fundamentally independent, the consensus between them deserves an adequate explanation. The unresolved task then is to provide a satisfactory justification for the aforementioned “family resemblances,” especially considering that the path of the *jhānas* and that of mystical prayer produce remarkably similar interior transformations.

Our working hypothesis, which we elaborate in Part Four of our doctoral dissertation, points

²⁹³ W. W. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and religious experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 151.

²⁹⁴ Cousins, “The Stages of Christian Mysticism and Buddhist Purification,” 111.

²⁹⁵ Cousins states: “One might perhaps sum up by saying that *jhāna* is certainly what St Teresa would call union, but whether she would call it union with God is perhaps another matter. For Buddhaghosa the Prayer of Union would perhaps be acceptable as a form of *jhāna*, but probably not as *lokunara* or transcendent *jhāna*” (Cousins 1995, 110).

out that in both cases we are facing something essential in the human condition: the transcendence of the person's erroneous identification with the experiential self. Both the *jhānas* and the states of mystical union purify the person who experiences them, giving rise to a gradual deconditioning, transformation, and disidentification with the contents of the mind and are experiences where the person transcends his identification with and attachment to the phenomenological self, as in both *jhāna* and union there is dissociation or temporary loss of the sense of self. We believe that this progressive transformation, deidentification and loss of I-consciousness is the explanatory key for the similarities between both experiences. What progressively fades away in the *jhānas* is identification with those contents of the mind that sustain the empirical self. What dies through mystical mansions is pride, the ugly worm of self-love and self-will and the identification of the person with an "I" self-sustained, separated and independent of God (5M 6,2).

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