

“One Aesthetic Illumination:” Thomas Merton and Buddhism

by
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As an artist, Thomas Merton is perhaps best known as a poet. But he was also a skilled calligrapher, pen and ink painter, and photographer. Just as his studies of Buddhism and Islam affected his work as a poet, his studies, particularly of Zen Buddhism affected his photographer’s “eye.” Buddhism introduced Merton to the possibility of being “all eye.” And that profoundly affected what he framed with his lens.

Merton’s interest in Eastern religions dates to his years at Oakham School (1928-32) where he argued, and lost, a pro-Gandhi position in a debate. At Columbia University, toward the end of 1937 he read Huxley’s *Ends and Means* and notes in *The Seven Storey Mountain* “the most important effect of the book on me was to make me start ransacking the university library for books on Oriental mysticism.”¹ He found Jesuit Father Wieger’s French translations “of hundreds of strange Oriental texts.”² While the reading had little impact at the time, his contact with the Hindu monk, Bramachari in 1937 was determinative. Bramachari steered Merton toward “many beautiful mystical books written by Christians.”³ Merton reports “my reading became more and more Catholic.”⁴ In November, 1938 Merton was baptized a Roman Catholic Christian.

Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941. His earliest reference to Buddhism of which I am aware is in a journal entry on November 24, 1949.

I think I shall ask permission to write to a Hindu who wrote me a letter about Patanjali’s yoga ... I shall ask him to send us some books. A chemist who has been helping us with some paint jobs turned out to have been a postulant in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Hawaii and he spoke to the community about it in chapter.⁵

Merton’s first contact with Buddhism was with the Zen tradition; it was the most formative. Merton’s studies of Buddhism focused on the Zen traditions of Mahayana perhaps because Zen materials were most readily available in English at the time.

Brother Patrick Hart reports that it was D.T. Suzuki who stimulated Merton’s profound interest in Zen. Merton’s letters to Suzuki begin in the late 1950’s and continue until Suzuki’s death in 1966.⁶ Some Buddhist scholars suggest Suzuki’s was not the most accurate

¹ Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1970), 228.

² *Ibid.*, 229.

³ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1953), 237.

⁶ Merton’s letters to Suzuki appear in William H. Shannon’s, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) and together with Suzuki’s letters and a record of their 1964 meeting in New York in Robert E. Daggy (ed.), *Encounter: Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki* (Monterey, Ky.: Larkspur Press, 1988).

rendering of Zen, but he most influenced Merton. Additionally, Merton read prodigiously in the field and corresponded with Fr. Dumoulin, Dr. John C.H. Wu, Professor Masao Abe, Marco Pallis and others who provided a broader understanding of Buddhism. Merton's largest body of writing on Buddhism is on Zen and includes *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) and his 1961 dialogue with Suzuki, included in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968). *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) and numerous posthumous publications, notably, *The Asian Journal* (1973) contain references to Buddhism. Perhaps the best place to see the mature incorporation of Buddhist thought in Merton's work is in the not nearly well enough known collection of Merton's essays edited by Robert Daggy, *Introductions East and West*.

Merton's 1968 Asian pilgrimage immeasurably deepened his understanding of Buddhism. In my view the most important aspects of this journey were his face to face, monk to monk encounter with Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayas in November and his visit to Polonnaruwa, Ceylon/Sri Lanka in December.

Merton had first become acquainted with the Tibetan tradition through Marco Pallis. By 1963 he had read Pallis' *Peaks and Lamas* and had received from him *The Way and the Mountain* and *Born in Tibet*. Merton reported in *The Asian Journal* "I do feel very much at home with the Tibetans, even though much that appears in books about them seems bizarre if not sinister."⁷ As is often the case, what we read or hear about people, and what we find when we meet them, are very different. In his journal entries between November 1 and 8, Merton becomes more and more enthusiastic about Tibetan Buddhism. This continues in Darjeeling (November 12 - ca. November 24) when he met with Chatral Rimpoche with whom he wished to study and whom Harold Talbott thought was "the embodiment of what he wanted to learn from Buddhism in Asia."⁸ Of his meetings with the Tibetans Merton says ". . . the most significant thing of all [was] the way we were able to communicate with one another and share an essentially spiritual experience of 'Buddhism' which is also somehow in harmony with Christianity."⁹

The student and friend of Tibetan Buddhism, Harold Talbott, accompanied Merton's sojourn among the Tibetans and spoke of their travels in an interview in *Tricycle*.¹⁰ Talbott felt with regard to Vajrayana Buddhism Merton was "to the manor born." In Talbott's view, part of the reason for Merton's rapport with Tibetan Lamas was that by 1968 Merton "had passed through ... stages of *kenosis*, self-emptying, and was spurning nothing. He possessed something of the 'pure perception' that is developed by

⁷ Merton, Thomas. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin, (New York: New Directions, 1975), 82.

⁸ From an e-mail from Harold Talbott, October 13, 2003.

⁹ Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 148.

¹⁰ Talbott, Harold. "The Jesus Lama: Thomas Merton in the Himalayas," *Tricycle* 1.4 (Summer, 1992): 14-24.

practicing ... Tibetan Buddhism.”¹¹ In the context of Merton’s photography Talbott’s language is instructive. Merton had emptied himself, set the ego aside, and was able to be “pure perception,” pure seeing.

Merton’s other great Asian experience also involved perception. His visit to the great carved Buddhas at Polonnaruwa on December 2, 1968 has deservedly received much attention; his experience there was clearly very important to him. Of it Merton wrote

I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with ... Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for.

I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.¹²

Notice how much of the language of this passage is the language of seeing and of perception. Notice, as well, that the aesthetic and the spiritual “run together” as Merton has seen “beneath the surface” and “beyond the veil.” Merton’s photographs invite us into the same sort of pure perception. Unfortunately, not much more of his life “remained” after Polonnaruwa. Merton died of accidental electrocution December 10, 1968. But he died having seen what he was looking for. Certainly this is one definition of a “good death.”

Merton’s knowledge of Buddhism was rooted in the Hindu traditions that preceded it. It embraced primarily the Mahayana tradition, although perhaps his greatest illuminations occurred in the context of Vajrayana and Theravadan trajectories. Before Asia, Merton’s interest focused largely on Zen. Had he lived, I think his focus would have shifted to Tibetan Buddhism, perhaps Dzogchen. In *Mystics and Zen Masters* Merton wrote “The aim of Buddhism is then the creation of an entirely new consciousness which is free to deal with life barehanded and without pretenses. Piercing the illusions in ourselves which divide us from others, if [sic; “it”?] must enable man to attain unity and solidarity with his brother through openness and compassion, endowed with secret resources of creativity.”¹³ For Merton Buddhism was a “secret resource of creativity” precisely because it helped him “pierce illusions,” see with greater clarity. Among other things, Buddhism gave Merton a “language” for spiritual development and a cultural alternative.

Because Zen is about direct, unmediated experience (pure seeing *before* critical analysis sets in), its insights were particularly valuable, and informed Merton’s seeing. By “Zen” Merton meant “the quest for direct and pure experience on a metaphysical

¹¹ From notes of Harold Talbott, December 7, 2000.

¹² Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 235-236.

¹³ Merton, Thomas. *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1967), 286-287. I retain Merton’s exclusive language for the sake of accuracy.

level, liberated from verbal formulas and linguistic preconceptions;”¹⁴ “the ontological *awareness of pure being beyond subject and object*, an immediate grasp of being in its ‘suchness’ and ‘thusness.’”¹⁵ Merton’s photographs capture something of this pure perception. They invite us into his non-Cartesian view of the world; in the words of his poem, “Stranger,” “Look, the vast Light stands still/Our cleanest Light is One!”¹⁶

Merton’s photographs are a sort of *satori* which Suzuki calls “an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding...”¹⁷ It is an over-simplification, but *satori* is unmediated, immediate experience in the present moment. Few of us achieve it because few of us are really present. Our bodies may be here, but “we” are somewhere else. These photographs invite us to be present to what Merton calls the “*living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself my own unique door.*”¹⁸

That so many of Merton’s photographs are of “ordinary” things is evidence for the influence of Buddhism on his aesthetic. *The Book of Tea*, a popular work on Eastern culture, calls the recognition that the mundane is of equal importance with the “spiritual,” “the special contribution of Zen to Eastern thought.”¹⁹ Direct awareness of and response to the minute details of daily living are fundamental aspects of Zen discipline (as I learned to my shame when I neglected to line up my shoes properly outside a Zendo). Merton’s photographs invite us to “one aesthetic illumination” in which we see the “mundane” and the “spiritual” as one. “Our cleanest Light is One!”²⁰

Buddhism also provided Merton with a cultural alternative. One might argue convincingly that a man living as a hermit in a Trappist monastery in the mid-1960’s was in every way outside the “main stream.” Perhaps because of that perspective Merton could see so clearly the mentality and milieu of American, indeed, Western culture. Zen Buddhism represented for him the antithesis of the Western technology and materialism that Merton so distrusted. Buddhism imaged another way. Its focus on simplicity in all things and purity in the natural world was a powerful counter balance to the complexity and corruption which Merton diagnosed as increasingly at the heart of modern life.

The sorry state of Western society was, for Merton, but the outward and visible manifestation of the fact that Western religious traditions had lost their interiority. In a September,

¹⁴ Merton, Thomas. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York: New Directions, 1968), 44.

¹⁵ Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 14. Italics Merton’s.

¹⁶ Merton, Thomas. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, (New York: New Directions, 1977), 290.

¹⁷ Suzuki, D.T. *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings*, edited by William Barrett, (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1956), 84.

¹⁸ Merton, Thomas. “Is the World a Problem?” *Commonweal* 84 (3 June, 1966), 308.

¹⁹ Okakura-Kakuzo. *The Book of Tea*, (New York: Duffield and Co., 1923), 68.

²⁰ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 290.

1968 circular letter to friends he wrote, “Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action.”²¹ Buddhism provided techniques whereby Christians could reappropriate the interiority of Christ Who, throughout the gospels, withdraws to pray. This is important, for it demonstrates Merton’s understanding that Christians could adapt the practices and insights of other religions in light of their own fidelity to Jesus Christ. Sitting in Zen, what is popularly known as meditation, was an important practice for Merton, both for itself and for its potential to nurture interiority. One result of sitting is clarity of mind, clearer perception. So we return again to the matter of sight.

“Come and see” is Jesus’ paradigmatic invitation. (John 1:39) It is followed by an amazing promise “You shall see greater things than these.” (John 1:50) “Come” is an invitation to experience, to whole and synthetic rather than simply intellectual knowledge. “See” is an invitation to wake up, to pierce through illusion and experience truth. “Master, let me receive my sight,” (Mark 10:51) is a powerful, life altering prayer.

Merton accepted the invitation. His writing, calligraphy and photography all attest to his “seeing.” Not surprisingly, the language of his Polonnaruwa experience is that of sight. When on December 10, 1968 Merton came “to know the Christ of the burnt men,”²² he was fully awake. And he is fully awakening. Everything he wrote, drew, and photographed was to help us wake up, to come to what he called in *New Seeds of Contemplation* “a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real.”²³ This is precisely what attracted Merton to Zen; Zen, he writes, “seeks not to *explain* but to *pay attention*, to *become aware*, to *be mindful*, in other words to develop a certain *kind of consciousness ...*”²⁴ It is this experience to which Merton invites us as we view these photographs: “Come and see.”

²¹ Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 296.

²² Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 236.

²³ Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions, 1961), 3.

²⁴ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 38. Italics Merton’s.