

PRAYER AND
THE CULTIVATION OF MIND:
An Examination of
Thomas Merton and Chinul

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A noticeable current trend in religion has been a spirit of understanding between Buddhism and Christianity. Because of the needs of the time, the task of comparative study is not to be taken lightly. Within this framework the purpose of this essay is to examine Thomas Merton's understanding of prayer in comparison with Chinul's doctrine of the Cultivation of Mind to find what similarities, as well as differences, exist between them.¹ Thomas Merton, Trappist monk who is regarded as a bridge-builder between East and West, lived in twentieth century America while Chinul, Buddhist master who is considered the founder of the Zen tradition in Korea, lived there in the twelfth century. Differences between them are apparent in time and space as well as in faith.

1. This essay is based on Chapters V and VI of my doctoral dissertation. See Kun Ki Kang, *Thomas Merton and Buddhism: A Comparative Study of the Spiritual Thought of Thomas Merton and That of National Teacher Bojo* (New York: New York University, 1979).

Yet, a common ground which makes this comparison possible can be found between the two masters. As persons of prayer and the cultivation of mind, they devoted their lives to finding their true selves and to sharing the fruits of their findings with others. Reaching where words play little role, they expounded what they learned in their solitude for the sake of others, using words as the finger pointing to the spiritual path. They were also both persons who possessed that rare combination of mystical insight and intense intellectual power. What they expounded in words and letters is, therefore, not merely theology or metaphysical speculation, but the doctrine of salvation which urges us to go from words to reality itself. The essential message of Merton and Chinul is fundamentally simple: "To find one's true self." For them prayer and the cultivation of mind are the most effective way to do this. Accordingly, Merton's prayer is not incompatible with Chinul's cultivation of mind.

In examining this subject we will focus our attention on the following topics: 1) their understanding of the human being; 2) the meaning of prayer and the cultivation of mind; 3) two levels of prayer and two kinds of cultivation. For each topic, Merton and Chinul will be allowed to speak for themselves. For this reason, the views of Merton and Chinul will be presented separately; and the comparison of the two views will follow to determine what parallels, as well as differences, exist between them.

THOMAS MERTON: PRAYER

Merton's attitude towards the human person is affirmative and optimistic, emphasizing its possibilities rather than disabilities. In his writing there is a singular absence of the profound preoccupation with sin found in so many Christian writers. For Merton, we are essentially created in the image of God rather than merely sinners. The God who dwells at the heart of our own being is the basis for his view of humanity. The same divine image has been referred to by various names, such as inmost self, inmost sanctuary, inner self, and true "I." Moreover, the image of God in us constitutes the basis for what Merton calls our "natural union with God." According to him, whether we recognize it or not, by nature we are united with God; we are already one with God. Merton says: "Our natural union with God is an immediate existential union with Him residing in our soul as

the source of our physical life.”² Merton’s spirituality rests upon the fact that we are the image of God and that we naturally are united with God.

Sin, according to Merton, is “our refusal to be what we were created to be — sons of God, [the] image of God.”³ The distortion of our real nature takes place when we forget our God-like nature, become self-centered. For Merton, selfishness is original sin.⁴ However, importantly enough, sin or evil is not a positive reality, and therefore the image of God in us, the true self, remains indestructible in spite of sin. Merton writes:

For after all, human nature in its essence was not ruined, only weakened, by original sin. St. Bernard sees the fall not as a descent from the supernatural to the natural, but as a collapse into ambivalence in which the historical “nature” in which man was actually created for supernatural union with God is turned upside down and inside out, and yet still retains its innate capacity and “need” for divine union.

The human soul is still the image of God, and no matter how far it travels away from Him into the regions of unreality, it never becomes so completely unreal that its original destiny can cease to torment it with a need to return to itself in God, and become, once again, real. (NM, p. 112)

Even though the image of God, the true inner self, can be buried and imprisoned under selfishness, it cannot be destroyed by it.

Therefore, for Merton, the whole meaning of spirituality or religion is to comprehend one’s true self. “Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation,” he says, “is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self” (NSC, p. 31). The highest spirituality, which for Merton is union with God, is possible only when one understands himself or herself. He writes: “In order to find God whom we can only find in and through the depths of our own soul, we must first find ourselves. To use common figures of speech, we must ‘return to ourselves.’ We must ‘come to ourselves’ ” (NM, pp. 63-64). Merton does not believe that there is any other way for man to reach God except by first finding one’s own true self; for it is in this inner self that man becomes one with God in Christ.

As has been examined, each individual, according to Merton, possesses a God-like potential within himself or herself, for we were created in the image of God. Indeed, for Merton, humans have naturally been united with God from the beginning. However, this potential alone does not make

2. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), pp. 140-141. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NM*.

3. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1964), p. 12.

4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 43. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NSC*.

them holy. Nor does the state of natural union constitute sanctity. The potential must be actualized; the state of natural union must be realized. The most effective way to do this, according to Merton, is prayer. For him, prayer means the whole process of actualizing one's innermost potential; and this is none other than the realization of one's union with God.

Merton views the traditional meaning of prayer as the spiritual activity which brings persons into communion with God.⁵ But the common implication of the word with its suggestions of formal devotion and detailed petitions by means of traditional supplication do not really convey Merton's use of the term. It is some kind of "inner awareness of God's direct presence" within one's own self.⁶ Prayer, as far as Merton is concerned, is "something much more than uttering petitions for good things external to our deepest concern."⁷ Accordingly, the proper mode or orientation of prayer is self-emptying rather than getting something from without.

Although prayer is the process of a continuing growth it can be divided into two distinctive stages or levels as he writes:

Infused contemplation begins when the direct intervention of God raises this whole process of development above the level of our nature . . . But before this begins, we ordinarily have to labor to prepare ourselves in our own way and with the help of His grace by deepening our knowledge and love of God in meditation and active forms of prayer as well as by setting our wills from attachments to created things. (NSC, p. 214)

In light of this description, the whole process of prayer in Merton's thought can be divided into two levels: active and passive (or infused). Moreover, the dividing line between the two is marked by the experience of God's direct intervention. The first active level of prayer, which is prior to the experience of God's direct intervention, is called meditative prayer, while the second passive level, which begins with the experience of infusion and ends in mystical union, the summit of one's spirituality, is called contemplative prayer. A proper understanding of the nature of prayer in Merton's thought will be possible by examining the two levels of prayer, namely meditative prayer and contemplative prayer in relation to the first experience of God's direct intervention. If one desires to return to God where shall he/she look?

5. "Prayer," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*; edited by James Hastings with the assistance of John A. Selbie and other scholars (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1925-1935), X, p. 171.

6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1973), p. 176.

7. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1971), p. 67. Hereafter referred to in the text as CP.

Again and again, for Merton, the answer is: "The kingdom of Heaven is *within* you." The path lies through the center of one's own being. "Turning inward," away from the flux of exterior things, towards the center of one's real self constitutes the first level of prayer, namely meditative prayer, which he defines as "The active effort we make to keep our hearts open so that we may be enlightened by Him" (CP, pp. 83). The important word in this context is "active," which characterizes the nature of one's effort in meditative prayer. What does this active effort consist of? It consists of one's voluntary and conscious effort which relies largely on one's reason and will within the limits of one's faculties. In active effort, the source of power is one's natural faculties. Because of this "active effort" meditative prayer is called active prayer and is considered different from the other phase of prayer. Meditative prayer, then, is one's active effort by which one prepares the self for the crucial event of divine communion.

In helping one to recollect himself and withdraw from things of a temporal nature, a certain discipline is necessary. Even though Merton does not overly emphasize methods and systems of meditation, he recommends that one begin with the help of the Bible — with meditation on the Psalms and on the mysteries of the Christian faith.⁸ In this meditative discipline one uses understanding, imagination, and affections in order to shift attention and interests from external to spiritual concerns. One thinks, studies, and meditates in this first phase of prayer. What one is most dealing with is a clear knowledge and understanding of truths about God. All these spiritual activities constitute one's "active effort," which is the distinctive nature of meditative prayer.

How is self-purification accomplished on this level of prayer? As the whole process of prayer goes hand-in-hand with self-purification, so does meditative prayer. It goes together with active purification. Merton says:

First of all, what do I mean by asceticism? I mean the active self-purification by which the soul, inspired and fortified by grace, takes itself in hand and makes itself undergo a vigorous spiritual training in self-denial and in the practice of virtue. My stress is on the word active. The initiative is left to us.⁹

In view of this, it is evident that the characteristic of ascetic purification, in which one disciplines oneself in self-denial and practicing virtue, is one's active or deliberate effort as in the case of meditation. Because of the active

8. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1960), pp. 53+.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951), p. 158. Hereafter referred to in the text as ATT.

effort involved in self-purification, Merton uses the term "ascetic purification" in contradistinction to mystical or passive purification which is essentially independent of one's active effort, and, therefore, takes place only on a higher level of prayer, namely contemplation.

According to Merton, when one advances in meditative prayer there comes a stage in which words and thoughts play a less important role and one's imagination and ideas tend to be deserted. The clear knowledge of divine things hides in a "cloud of unknowing."¹⁰ It is in this cloud and desert that the first experience of God takes place. What is the nature of this experience? First of all, it is an awakening to a new life. Merton says: "The dark water of the soul has suddenly been touched with sunlight from heaven. Suffused with the clarity of God, it awakens to a new life, discovers itself to be a different being, rests in an unknown joy" (*ATT*, p. 218). Merton compares this awakening to "waking" from a dream, the dream of external self. This waking means for him that "This 'I' is really 'not I' and the awakening of the unknown 'I' that is beyond observation and reflection" (*NSC*, p. 7). Moreover, this new experience is a pure gift of God, that is, there is nothing one can do to deserve or obtain it.

However, this is only a beginning, not an ending; only a gift, not perfection. "However, in all these things," Merton says, "you remain very far from God, much farther than you realize. And there are always two of you. There is yourself and there is God making Himself known to you by these effects" (*NSC*, pp. 278-279). As long as this separation exists one has not yet entered into the fullness of contemplation which means unity between oneself and God. This initial experience of God, which constitutes a momentary taste of the reality, is, then, a gift of God to one at least partly purified by active effort.

One important thing we should notice here is that Merton regards this infused light as the beginning of real faith. Faith in this sense does not mean one's belief in concepts about God or in articles of religion as in the ordinary sense of the word; it means a direct experiential knowledge of God beyond concepts and images.¹¹ "Too often our notion of faith,"

10. In *The Ascent to Truth*, pp. 82-84, Merton says that the first contact with God takes place at the Night of the Senses and Prayer of Quiet. They are believed to be the borderline stages between meditation and contemplation.

11. In order to differentiate the two kinds of faith, namely faith in concepts and articles, and faith illuminated by the gift of God Merton uses "pure faith," "supernatural faith," "higher faith," in contradistinction to "bare faith," "natural faith," and "lower faith." See *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 19 and *ATT*, p. 210.

Merton goes on, "is falsified by our emphasis on the statements about God which faith believes, and by our forgetfulness of the fact that faith is a communion with God's own light and truth" (NSC, p. 128). Faith is, then, not just one's determination to cling to a certain form of words but his assent to the reality itself in infused light (NSC, p. 132). But for Thomas Merton there is no contradiction between faith in dogmas and mysticism, and this needs to be said so as to avoid the impression that dogma is unimportant to him. It is basic. Faith and understanding, in the sense of direct knowledge rather than conceptual understanding, are closely related in Merton's thought. Accordingly, faith and infused contemplation begin at the same point, and one travels in faith to the final perfection, mystical union with God. This is what Merton means when he says, "The beginning of contemplation is faith" (NSC, p. 126). Thus elevated by the gift of God one becomes firm in one's faith and enters into contemplative prayer. As we have said, however, this is only the beginning: a gift — not union with God. As long as there is giver and receiver separation still exists. The gap between oneself and God must be filled. The separation between the two must be abolished in order to achieve perfection. This must be done in passive prayer.

What is the nature of contemplative prayer? First of all, instead of being active as in meditative prayer one remains passive in contemplative prayer. God "has the initiative." This "being passive" constitutes the most distinctive characteristic of contemplative prayer. What does "being passive" mean exactly? It means being empty — empty of all plans, methods, images, ideas, and thoughts including those about God and spirituality. In the active level of prayer these are useful means by which one detaches himself or herself from things of a worldly nature. However, on this higher level of prayer they too have to be discarded in order to see God as He is. Merton writes:

Since God cannot be imagined anything our imagination tells us about Him is ultimately misleading and therefore we cannot know Him as He exactly is unless we pass beyond everything that can be imagined and enter into an obscurity without images and without likeness of any created things.

(NSC, p. 131)

For this reason, Merton believes that the best mode of contemplative prayer is being empty or passive. This is what he means when he says, "Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence" (CP, p. 90). This kind of listening, however, is not to hear something with one's ears but being empty of all ideas, even that of listening. "Yet in a certain sense," he

continues, "we must truly begin to hear God when we have ceased to listen" (CP, p. 90). The desire to listen has to be emptied in order to hear genuinely. In the ordinary sense, this is not listening at all. Yet this is the best way to hear God. What is the explanation for this paradox? This leads us into the second point, namely, "interior activity."

The nature of the activity by which one responds to God in contemplation is not exterior, but interior. It is the activity which takes place not in one's faculties but "in the very roots of our being," where no distinction between the subject and the object is made. If seeing, hearing, and thinking, as activities of the senses, constitute exterior activities, then interior activities do not consist of them at all. One sees without seeing, hears without hearing, and knows without knowing in the core of one's being. This is the nature of interior activity. In other words, even one's faculties should be empty of all desires and ideas including their effort to see, to hear, and to know. Hence, "we must truly begin to hear when we have ceased to listen." This interior activity is, therefore, no activity at all according to our ordinary standards, that is, in reference to our faculties. Yet, this is the best possible response to God in contemplative prayer because it is not mere absence of activity but full of action and nothing is undone in it. This paradoxical, modeless mode of contemplation can be summed up in Merton's own words:

All the paradoxes about the contemplative way are reduced to this: being without desire means being led by a desire so great that it is incomprehensible. It is too huge to be completely felt. It is a blind desire, which seems like a desire for "nothing" only because nothing can content it. And because it is able to rest in nothing, then it rests, relatively speaking, in emptiness. But not emptiness as such, emptiness for its own sake. (CP, p. 94)

Only in this emptiness or "inner activity" can one become free from all plans, methods and attachments to spiritual things. And it is only then that prayer is not separated from life and *vice versa*. This is exactly what Merton means when he says:

In actual fact, true contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life . . . Contemplation is not to be thought of as a separate department of life, cut off from all of man's other interests and superceding them. It is the very fullness of a fully integrated life. It is the crown of life and of all life's activities.¹²

This unity of contemplation and life is the highest and therefore the most

12. *A Thomas Merton Reader*; edited by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974), p. 43.

desirable of contemplative prayer as far as Merton is concerned. And this is possible when one empties oneself without any reservation.

What is self-purification on this passive level of prayer? Again, we should remember that prayer and purification are two sides of one and the same practice for Merton though we are examining them separately. He describes self-purification on this level as follows:

“Mystical” or passive purification takes place without our initiative . . .
 “Mystical” or passive purification is a work done on the soul by God, from within the soul itself, just as the graces of passive prayer are infused into the soul from its own depths. (*ATT*, p. 158)

Initiative is left in God’s hands. Therefore, one is effortless. Moreover, this work, namely “inner work” takes place in the innermost depths of one’s own being which is being emptied of all desires including those for spiritual attainment. Indeed, mystical purification means detachment not only from material things but also from spiritual things. “Only when we are able to ‘let go’ of everything within us, all desires to see, to know, to taste and to experience the presence of God, do we really truly become able to experience that presence” (*CP*, p. 89). If one is concerned with detachment from exterior and sensual things in active purification, one is now more concerned with detachment from spiritual things on this passive level.

In light of this, we may conclude that contemplative prayer for Merton, into which one enters only after the initial experience of God, is essentially being empty of all desires, plans, ideas and thoughts, even those for and about God. When one gives up active effort and becomes effortless, a different kind of work begins in the core of one’s being. The “inner activity” works in a paradoxical way: it works without working, knows without knowing, prays without praying and purifies without purifying. This is the kind of work needed on this passive level of prayer. When one is able to work in this way, one’s entire life itself becomes prayer and prayer becomes one’s entire life.

CHINUL: THE CULTIVATION OF MIND

According to Chinul, sentient beings are originally Buddha since Buddha-nature or True Mind is inherent in them from the beginning. But they do not know this and this makes them different from Buddha. Then,

why are they unable to know it? It is, he argues, because of false mind or delusion which makes all kinds of hair-splitting distinctions, separating subject from object.¹³ Chinul says:

Someone asked: "If everyone has the essence and function of True Mind, what makes the difference between the holy man and the ordinary man?" My answer is: "True Mind is originally the same in both holy man and ordinary man. But as ordinary men see things with false mind, they lose their own pure nature by themselves, thus creating difference from holy men. Therefore, True Mind is unable to manifest itself."¹⁴

However, True Mind is never contaminated by false mind and defilements, though it is covered by them. A jade does not lose its original color even though it is thrown into mud. The fact that True Mind does not lose its nature and is always present in us makes one's hope for spirituality alive. According to Chinul, therefore, spiritual life means to be perfectly oneself. In order to be fully what we are supposed to be the inborn-nature has to be realized personally. This process of the realization constitutes "cultivation" in Chinul's thought. In *Susim Gyo*, Chinul expresses what may be understood as the most distinctive characteristic of his view of the subject as follows:

Though there are many gates to enter the Tao, in essence there are only two, namely sudden-enlightenment and gradual-cultivation . . . These two gates of sudden-enlightenment and gradual-cultivation are the right path of all saints. From the ancient time to the present, there has not been a single saint who attained the realization of Tao without the cultivation which follows after sudden enlightenment. (SG, p. 41)

In this context, Chinul emphasizes two things. First, sudden enlightenment and gradual-cultivation are the key to the realization of Tao. Second, the right order in the process of realization is enlightenment first and then gradual-cultivation following after it. In other words, as far as Chinul is concerned, one should attain sudden-enlightenment first and then pass through gradual-cultivation to realize the final perfection. Thus, in his thought, cultivation cannot be separated from sudden-enlightenment and vice-versa. In view of this what we will do in the following pages is to examine the nature of sudden-enlightenment and that of cultivation. First, let us hear from Chinul:

13. To examine Chinul's cultivation of mind, we will focus mainly on his doctrine of Sudden-Enlightenment and Gradual-Cultivation. The entire work of Chinul has been translated into English. See Robert Buswell, *The Korean Approach to Zen* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983).

14. Chinul, *Susim Gyo*, in *Bojo Bobo* (Seoul: Hwaeum Hakhoe, 1973), pp. 46-47. Hereafter referred to in the text as SG.

Sudden-enlightenment is: when an ordinary person who, due to delusion, takes the four elements for body and false thoughts for mind without knowing that self-nature is the true body of dharma, that the mysterious inner knowing of his mind is true Buddha, looks for Buddha from outside his own mind here and there in vain, suddenly, due to the guidance of a good and learned friend, enters into the right path, turns the light inward and sees into the original nature; and understands that in the ground of Nature there are originally no defilements whatever and that the nature of the absolute wisdom is complete in itself from the beginning without having the slightest difference from Buddha. Therefore it is called sudden-enlightenment.

(SG, p. 43)

As is evident in this description, sudden-enlightenment is the sudden insight into one's original nature, that is, True Mind which has been with us all the time and yet, due to our delusion, has been unrecognized like "The spring flowing under the ground." This sudden discovery of True Mind consists of two things, though they are one and inseparable: one is the understanding that all defilements are empty. The other is the awakening to the fact that a person is none other than Buddha from the beginning. Chinul often compares this awakening to the birth of a baby and/or to waking from a dream. As the waking from a dream is sudden so is the sudden-enlightenment for Chinul. It is spontaneous and, therefore, has no relationship of cause and effect with the practice prior to the event.

Interestingly enough, this sudden-enlightenment is identified with faith in Chinul's thought. Of course faith, which is referred to as "the origin of Tao and the mother of merits," in this sense, is very different from the kind of faith required in traditional Buddhism in which "the law of cause and effect" is to be believed.¹⁵ For Chinul, faith is not belief in external things, however valuable they may be, but belief in one's innermost being. In order to be the person of faith then one has to know clearly that one is none other than Buddha. For this reason, Chinul identifies faith with sudden-enlightenment and thus, for him, the real faith begins only when one sees one's own nature.

We have said earlier that sudden enlightenment should be followed by gradual-cultivation in order to reach the final perfection. Thus, Chinul believes that cultivation after the initial enlightenment is genuine enough to lead one to realization enlightenment. But what about the cultivation prior to it? According to Chinul, there is a great difference in quality between the cultivation prior to and after sudden-enlightenment in such a

15. Chinul, *Jinsim Jiksol*, in *Bojo Bobo*, p. 61.

degree that the former is called "Polluted Cultivation," while the latter is referred to as "True Cultivation." Because of the difference he emphasizes the true cultivation which follows sudden-enlightenment rather than the polluted cultivation which precedes enlightenment. Let us consider both theories individually: first the cultivation prior to sudden-enlightenment.

As far as the subject matter of one's practice is concerned there is no difference at all. One relies on the three learnings in both cases. But the difference lies in one's attitude in practicing them. For this reason, Chinul distinguishes two of the three learnings: characteristic-oriented and nature-oriented learnings, each characterizing the cultivation prior to and after sudden-enlightenment respectively. Chinul explains the characteristic-oriented learning, which represents the cultivation prior to the enlightenment as follows:

Sila [moral discipline] means to guard against the wrong and to cease the evil; and it prevents us from falling into the three conditions of sentient existence. *Samadhi* [meditation] means to regulate disturbance in accordance with principle; and it enables us to transcend the six desires. And *Prajna* [wisdom] means to understand *dharma* and to see their empty nature; and it enables us to transcend life and death.¹⁶

Thus, the three learnings, in this case, mean to prevent evil, to regulate disturbance, and to understand the nature of things one by one according to circumstance. And this is the way by which one counteracts the three poisons, namely evil desire, anger, and stupidity. This is not different from the program of purification practiced in the Northern School of Shen-hsiu. One has to wipe the dust from the mirror so it may stay uncontaminated. Therefore, what is essential in this practice is one's conscious effort.

However, for Chinul, this is not genuine enough. The problem with this kind of cultivation lies precisely in one's deliberate effort to cut and to subdue something when, in fact, there is nothing to be cut, for defilements are fundamentally empty. Without clear understanding of their nature, mere striving to control them is not only insufficient but dangerous as well. He states:

Some people, without understanding the empty nature of good and evil, believe that the true cultivation of mind is to sit up firmly without motion and to suppress body and mind just like pressing down grass with stones. This is a great delusion. Therefore, it is said that "Sravakas cut defilements mind after mind, but the mind of cutting itself is the enemy." (CSG, p. 49)

16. Chinul, *Kwonsu Chunghye Gyolsa Mun*, in *Bojo Bobo*, p. 11. Hereafter referred to in the text as KCGM.

Thus, what is wrong in this concept of cultivation is believing that one can find something by getting rid of all defilements. Enlightenment becomes an object to be attained by paying the price of subduing the evil. This happens because of one's ignorance about the real nature of evil. For Chinul, "the mind of cutting itself is the enemy." What is one's cultivation with the idea likely to be? Instead of being spontaneous, one cultivates with cultivating, and cuts with cutting. In short, this is none other than "polluted cultivation." Polluted by what? Is it not by one's desire or idea itself? Furthermore, it is none other than this idea that makes one attached to systems and methods of cultivation such as sitting in meditation, believing that one can achieve something by that. The result of this brings the most serious danger to one's spiritual life, namely the dichotomy between the act of Zen and life itself. Whenever this happens one's cultivation is inevitably limited to certain formal acts. Sitting in meditation is one thing, and other activities are another, some of which are preferred over the other. Hence, cultivating mind is viewed as to "sit up firmly without motion." Chinul calls this type of cultivation "the act of quietism," and it is obviously a danger (CSG, p. 54). Finally, one of the most serious weaknesses of cultivation prior to sudden-enlightenment is "seeking inner truth outside," of which Chinul is most critical. This also happens when enlightenment becomes an object and one is attached to it.

After all, one's cultivation prior to sudden-enlightenment is not based on True Mind but is bound by external conditions. Consequently, one merely exerts his striving as "pressing down grass with stones." As long as the roots remain uncut, the "act of pressing down," no matter how hard it may be, will be insufficient to prevent the regrowth of offshoots. In the same way, one's striving alone will be equally insufficient in dealing with defilements. To cultivate with the mind of cultivating, to cut with the idea of cutting, are not enough as far as Chinul is concerned. The "mind" — the "idea" — has to be emptied. This cannot be done unless one has an insight into the nature of True Mind. For this reason, cultivation has to be followed after the initial insight in order to be true and real.

What is cultivation after initial enlightenment? As we have said, Chinul calls this gradual-cultivation, and it is divided into two kinds in accordance with the different capacities of people. For those with high capacity gradual cultivation consists of three nature-oriented learnings, while for people of low capacity the characteristic-oriented three learnings are provisionally recommended. Let us begin with the nature-oriented

three learnings, the path for people of high capacity. According to Chinul:

To understand the Principle that there is originally no "I" is *Sila* [moral discipline]; to understand that originally there is no disturbance is *Samadhi* [meditation]; and to understand that originally there is no delusion is *Prajna* [wisdom]. To understand this principle is the true three learnings.

(KCGM, p. 11)

This is a paradoxical form of cultivation. Instead of depending on external conditions as in cultivation before initial enlightenment, cultivation in this case simply refers to the Principle which is none other than True Mind. This is not cutting or subduing defilements but being free from them by understanding their nature. This is, according to Chinul, "the cultivation of no-thought," which he describes as follows:

Though one cultivates afterward he has already realized in sudden enlightenment that defilements are originally empty and the Mind-Nature is originally pure, he cuts the evil without cutting and cultivates the good without cultivating: this is true cultivation and true cutting. Therefore, it is said: "Though one cultivates the numberless good acts he takes no-thought as the basis." (CSG, p. 48)

Thus, in this cultivation of no-thought, one cuts without cutting and cultivates without cultivating. What is required is not deliberate effort but effortless effort. A person's desire and idea which make his act of cultivation polluted are gone now. This is not a cultivation at all in the ordinary sense; yet this is true cultivation. This is being free from everything including methods and systems of cultivation. Furthermore, since one is free from them one's cultivation is not limited to a certain form of action but one's life itself is cultivation and *vice versa*.

This is what Chinul calls "*Samadhi* of oneness," which is none other than keeping True Mind in all circumstances all the time without hindrance. Therefore in this cultivation of no-thought or *Samadhi* of oneness every moment and every action — walking, staying, sitting, and lying down — becomes cultivation itself and there is no separation whatsoever between cultivation and life itself. This means that there is no discrepancy between one's cultivation and one's Self-Nature. Hence, this true cultivation is referred to as the nature-oriented three learnings.

Sila, *Samadhi*, and *Prajna* are fused into one and the entity in True Mind. Therefore, there is no need of setting them up separately in this cultivation. This is precisely what Hui-neng meant when he rejected all methods of practice by saying: "Self-awakening to self-nature, and sudden practice with sudden awakening — there is nothing gradual in them, so that

nothing at all is set up."¹⁷ Indeed, Chinul's cultivation of no-thought is none other than the "sudden practice" of Hui-neng in this context. There is no difference between them as far as this radical form of cultivation is concerned. Hui-neng's school believed that such sudden cultivation was for those whose capacity was superior as *The Platform Sutra* records: "Master Hui-neng said: 'Your [Shen-hsiu's school] precepts, meditation, and wisdom are to encourage people of shallow capacities, mine are for men of superior attainment . . . I don't even set up precepts, meditation and wisdom'" (Yampolski, p. 164). Since this sudden cultivation is for people of superior capacities, Chinul questioned how many persons of this capacity there were in the world. Unlike Hui-neng, who seemed to insist on no "setting-up," Chinul could never neglect people of "shallow capacities." For him, they were no less important than people of superior capacity. Accordingly, he set up another path for them utilizing the characteristic-oriented three learnings, which is the characteristic of cultivation prior to sudden-enlightenment. Herein lies Chinul's uniqueness.

Those who do not qualify for the effortless cultivation of no-thought are strongly recommended to borrow the gradual cultivation of characteristic-oriented three learnings. Even though one may provisionally take the characteristic-oriented cultivation, it is very different qualitatively from the active cultivation prior to sudden-enlightenment. "Though one may borrow," he says, "the method of subduing defilements and regulate accustomed habits, due to his sudden enlightenment in advance . . . he does not fall into the polluted cultivation of the gradual path for people of inferior capacity" (CSG, p. 54). Since he has understood clearly the nature of True Mind as well as that of defilements he does not mistake the means for the end. He now knows how to use the means properly without being hurt by them. "Sitting in meditation," reading scriptures, reciting the name of the Buddha and the act of Zen as well are in good order to serve him. He exerts his effort in doing all those, yet not without wisdom. Hence, he does not slide back to the active cultivation prior to sudden-enlightenment, namely "polluted cultivation." Therefore, though one temporarily relies on the characteristic-oriented three learnings, he will eventually reach the cultivation of no-thought.

So far we have examined Chinul's view of cultivation mainly on the basis of his doctrine of "sudden-enlightenment and gradual cultivation."

17. Philip B. Yampolski, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 164. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Yampolski*.

Taking the position of the Southern School of Hui-Neng, Chinul advocates sudden-enlightenment and is critical about the gradual path of the Northern School of Shin-hsiu. One's striving alone without understanding the nature of True Mind is not true cultivation but polluted cultivation. Yet, he does not go all the way with the extreme line of the Southern School to say that no cultivation at all is necessary. Instead, Chinul affirms the necessity of gradual cultivation after the first initial enlightenment. Indeed, on this level, even the gradual path of the Northern School is upgraded and reaffirmed. Thus, for him, as far as the nature of enlightenment is concerned, it is sudden or spontaneous and there is nothing to be gradual. On the other hand, however, as far as cultivation is concerned it is gradual: "a new-born baby needs time to grow into an adult."

PRAYER AND THE CULTIVATION OF MIND

We have so far examined the view of prayer and the cultivation of mind as found in the writings of Thomas Merton and in that of Chinul. What we have done is by no means a complete and thorough examination of the subject but is limited to some aspects of spiritual cultivation. Now, let us evaluate similarities, as well as differences, which exist between Merton's understanding of prayer and Chinul's cultivation of mind.

The primary difference between Merton and Chinul, and to a certain extent between Christianity and Buddhism, is found in their understanding of humanity. For Merton humans are identical in substance with God, though humans are in the image of God and are naturally united with God from the beginning. For Chinul, however, humans are none other than Buddha. True Mind is Buddha-nature and humans are originally Buddha. Thus, likeness, *versus* oneness, or a dualistic view *versus* a non-dualistic view characterizes the difference. Another main doctrinal difference between the two masters is found in the process of actualizing one's true self. For Merton, one is supposed to progress from meditative prayer to contemplative prayer successively, whereas Chinul is negative towards cultivation prior to the initial insight of sudden-enlightenment.

However, interesting parallels are also apparent. In the first place, in spite of the differences we have indicated, Merton and Chinul are equally affirmative regarding human nature. For them humans in their essence are not miserable sinners but potential beings. For Merton, the image of God is

in everyone regardless of one's current status; for Chinul, everyone is a natural Buddha since everyone possesses True Mind or Buddha-nature. Moreover, for both of them, sin or false mind does not have the power to destroy one's original nature because that nature is empty in its essence.

In the second place, for Merton and Chinul, the way of prayer and the cultivation of mind is none other than the process of actualizing one's true self, namely the image of God and True Mind. Accordingly, their spiritual path is basically an inner search. God or Buddha can only be found at the center of one's own being. For them, therefore, seeking inner truth outside is not only wrong but as impossible as "cooking rice with sand."

In the third place, they both agree that the higher one progresses in a spiritual journey the less conscious effort is required. Paradoxically enough, the most desirable way to contemplation is not trying to contemplate. The best way to cultivate True Mind is not to cultivate. Merton explains this paradox with the "inner work" and Chinul with "the cultivation of no-thought." Both are no work and no cultivation at all in terms of our external standard. Yet in them the best possible work and the best cultivation are not left undone. If active effort is to cut offshoots, the roots are cut in this effortless work. Above all, the desire to reach contemplation and enlightenment as the object to be obtained must disappear so that God and True Mind can work by themselves. Instead of "I" let God and True Mind work!

In the fourth place, both of them acknowledge that there occurs a transition which marks a sharp distinction in the spiritual life. In Merton, the first intervention of God, the gift of understanding, divides natural from super-natural or the active from the passive life of prayer. Similarly, in Chinul, sudden-enlightenment lifts one's spiritual cultivation to a far different level. Though we are not sure of the similarity between the two initial experiences of the gift of understanding and sudden-enlightenment, two things are sure at least. First, these are the first transcendental experiences in which one directly tastes the reality personally. Second, there is no doubt about the effect of the experience in one's spiritual life: the quality of one's cultivation of True Mind by sudden-enlightenment is as sharply shifted as that of one's prayer after the first initial intervention of God. In both of them, the initial experience means not the end but only the beginning. With it, one finally begins the real life of faith. Although their concepts of faith may not be the same, faith, which begins at the same point with initial experience, is not merely a conventional belief in articles and

concepts but a definite personal taste of the reality beyond concepts and ideas.

Finally, the highest form of practice they both envisioned is the unity between prayer or the cultivation of True Mind and life itself so that one can pray or cultivate the Mind regardless of time and place.