

MERTON'S ASIAN TRAIL:

Some Travel Notes

by **William Buchanan**

I thought it would be interesting to look at some hotels Merton stayed at in Asia. "The Raffles" in Singapore was patronized and praised by Somerset Maugham and also has associations with Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Noel Coward. Its style is British colonial: gracious, spacious, quiet. The bar where the "Singapore Sling" was invented once looked out onto a beach with palm trees, but a landfill has put some distance, and some skyscrapers, between the bar and the ocean. "The Fort Galle" in Colombo is similar in style but retains a view of the ocean on three sides and a splendid view of gorgeous sunsets. These hotels are listed in guidebooks as "expensive," but the most luxurious of all is "The Oriental" on the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, where single rooms start at \$140. It is a palace of tasteful elegance with barefooted servants in various styles of uniforms at every turn, and the guests find orchids on their pillows when they retire. (This gave me a different idea of how monks travel: I could not possibly afford to stay in such places.)

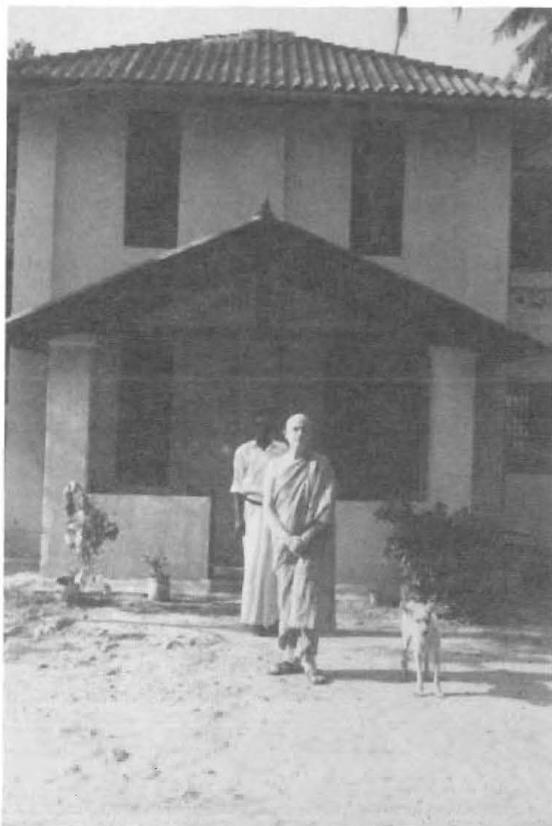
In Bangkok (October 3), I asked the host of the guest house where I stayed how to get to the Red Cross Camp. He said it was at a snake farm run by the Pasteur Institute where venomous snakes are milked daily to make snakebite antidotes. The people there were eager to be helpful but had never heard of Merton. Finally, we called a Catholic church and learned of another Red Cross camp, this one near a crocodile farm (I recalled Edward Rice's account of the crocodile eating the dog!). The priest suggested bargaining with a taxidriver for \$15 or so, but the next day I took an hour bus ride for five cents, and at the end of the line an amiable shopkeeper got her brother to give me a ride on his motorcycle to the Red Cross Camp. The land there is very flat with a straight road and some straight canals. There is still living at the Red Cross a nurse who was there in December of 1968, but she was away on the 10th on a fund-raising drive. Another nurse took me back some distance from the road to a low building where conferences are held and then to the guest houses. The guest house where Merton died is now rented out to a French family and

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hence cannot be visited. In any case the nurse said a wall had been knocked out and other changes made since 1968.

In Kandy, Sri Lanka (November 16), I was approached by a somewhat scruffy-looking twenty-year old (I found out later he was trying to grow a beard). I am wary of self-appointed guides who see foreigners as two-legged wallets, who cling and push and demand high fees for unwanted services. In this case I was wrong. The guide turned out to be honest, helpful, and humble. I was looking for the Buddhist Publication Society, and he took me there. He said: "You want to meet Nyanaponika Thera." He stated it as a fact, not a question, but he was quite right. He led me along an ascending road through a jungle reservation (where we saw many monkeys) to an isolated brick house, where the President of the Buddhist Publication Society lives and works. Well into his nineties, he is still active though he leans on a cane. He had just begun reading Basil Pennington's book on Merton.¹ He had a vivid memory of his talk with Merton on November 30, 1968.² He used the words so often used to describe Merton: "warmhearted" and "open-minded." He had looked forward to a return visit which was not to be. He doubted Merton would ever have abandoned his Roman Catholicism.

The next day my guide took me to Polonnaruwa (60¢ for a four hour bus ride plus a 50¢ bribe to sit next to the driver). We walked five kilometers to the great statues of the Buddha. A sign asked visitors to remove hats and shoes in the area. Many people have supposed, along with Merton, that the standing figure is Ananda: the sad expression suggests sorrow at the passing of the Buddha, and the hands are in an unusual position. However, later some other statues were found with hands in the same position, and now many people believe that all three statues are of the Buddha: seated, standing, and reclining. I had not known that the reclining Buddha represented his entering into *Nirvana*; this adds a dimension to Merton's experience, the climactic



NYANAPONIKA THERA

Photo by Thomas Merton

1. M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O., *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; edited by Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973). Hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*.



DEVASARANA DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Photo by William Buchanan

There I was told that Father Johan Devananda had left the community two years ago and had married. He wanted to turn leadership over to younger people. Now he has charge of Christian education of laymen at the Lanka Theological College, near Kandy, where I visited him (November 23).

Johan Devananda was forty years old when Merton visited him. He came from a family of prominent Anglicans. Seven per cent of Sri Lankans are Christian, and six per cent are Roman Catholic. However, Christians have an influence disproportionate to their numbers. He was educated in Sri Lanka and at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He spent a year in India, where, at Shantivanam Ashram, he met Swami Parama Arubi Anandam (Abbe Jules Monchanin) and Swami Abishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux) — a meeting that impressed him deeply. He corresponded with them both until their deaths.

Merton had asked the Catholic bishop of Kandy (Bishop Nanayakkara) if there were some Catholic meditation centers in the region. He said the Anglicans had one where the Anglican bishop was on retreat. The Catholic bishop drove Merton to Ibbagamuwa. There, in the Anglican ashram called Devasarana (in the middle of a coconut plantation), they sat on the porch of the guest house with Johan Devananda,

mystical experience of his life (*AJ*, p. 233f). That was Monday afternoon, December 3. The following Monday afternoon, December 10 (at the same time?), he died. In both cases, he was wet and he was “jerked.”

The next day, on the way back from Kandy, we stopped at Devasarana and found it much changed from what it was at the time of Merton’s visit (*AJ*, p. 220). Muslim and Catholic families live there, and they would like to have some Hindus. They have been involved with collective farming, land reform, organization of peasants, and political theater. They chant a “New World Liturgy” before beginning work which includes excerpts from Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Islamic scriptures as well as quotations from Marx and Mao Tse-tung.



JOHAN DEVANANDA

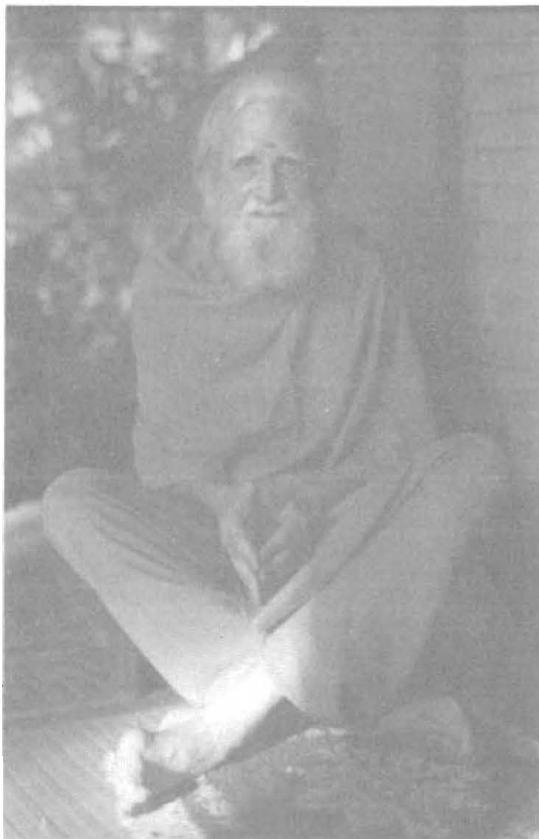
Photo by William Buchanan

sipping fresh green coconuts. Father Devananda recalled that Merton said little but asked questions and listened intently. It was his presence that impressed Devananda. Someone took a photograph of them together. Devananda said he was sure he would not have discarded it, but he could not locate it. I urged him to find it.

I asked about the American Anglican priest who was waiting to come. Father Devananda said he had come against the advice of his own bishop. Many things angered him. He had some money he wanted to give the ashram, but money was not what they needed. He felt hurt when, after a month, they asked him to leave, but they keep up a correspondence. Until his recent retirement, he was chaplain in a mental hospital.

Father Devananda does not agree with those who say one must achieve self-understanding and inner peace before trying to help others. It is *through* helping others that he feels one achieves self-understanding. All his inter-faith workshops and seminars include work on practical problems of the poor. He sees Christ as continuing the work of the prophets in being for the poor and against the rich. He spoke of the great damage the open market had done to workers and peasants; he spoke of the need to restructure society. Christians must make use of insights derived from secular humanists, including Marxists.

I am writing this at Shantivanam Ashram in South India where Father Devananda spent a month in 1960. Now the ashram is run by Bede Griffiths who attended the conference at Bangkok in 1968, but arrived a day after Merton's death. He met him once, however, at Gethsemani. He says that Merton appeared in the doorway of his guest room and announced simply: "Thomas Merton." He thought him American in his directness, but during their brief encounter he saw only the orthodox Cistercian side of him. Dom Bede recognizes Merton's great contribution to his own life work: the marriage of East and West.



DOM BEDE GRIFFITHS

Shantivanam Ashram 1983

Photo by John J. Abrahams