

# Emptiness as Fulfillment

Review of

*Journeys into Emptiness:*

*Dogen, Merton, Jung and the Quest for Transformation*

By Robert Jingen Gunn

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Reviewed by **James Finley**

Robert Jingen Gunn's *Journeys into Emptiness* examines Dogen's, Thomas Merton's and Carl Jung's search for transcendence from the vantage point of how each experienced and was transformed in his response to emptiness. Gunn's reflections on each of these three men follow a basic pattern that begins with autobiographical and biographical accounts of the emptiness each encountered in his childhood experiences of loss and emotional deprivation. Gunn then demonstrates how these early childhood experiences were ongoing contributing factors affecting how each of these men was transformed in their life-long journey into the emptiness embodied in the uncertain and precarious aspects of human existence. And, finally, Gunn demonstrates how, as their journeys into emptiness continued to deepen and expand, they came to realize that the emptiness that was initially so painful became for them the means and the end of a self-transforming journey into the ineffable fullness of reality itself.

There is a stroke of intuitive brilliance to the very idea bringing Dogen, Merton and Jung together under the unifying theme of emptiness. The evocative nature of the book lies, to a great extent, in the manner in which Gunn allows the inter-related themes inherent in his subject matter to come together into a unified picture: emptiness shedding light on Dogen's, Merton's and Jung's lives, as their lives shed light on the nature of emptiness; Zen Buddhism, contemplative Christianity and depth psychology each standing forth in its unique perspective, as their underlying unity as paths of self-transformation come to the fore; Dogen, Merton and Jung appearing as three heroes in the self-transforming journey each of us is challenged and privileged to face in our own lives. All these themes come into play as Gunn gravitates toward his central task of attempting to shed light on Dogen's, Merton's and Jung's subjective experience of their self-transforming journey into emptiness.

Gunn's book impressed me as being consistently clear in the detailed psychological observation of Dogen's, Merton's and Jung's courageous struggle with the arduous aspects of emptiness. He is clear too, in his more objective summaries of their insights into the transpersonal dimensions of emptiness. The clarity dims a bit, however, in several instances in which Gunn makes statements that seem to me to be inappropriate and perhaps untrue. It would be picky to criticize these particular comments that pop up here and there throughout Gunn's book, were it not for the fact that they are, in

many instances, Gunn's stated conclusions pertaining to key principles and aspects of religious faith and transpersonal psychology. Nowhere are these questionable statements in Gunn's book more apparent than in some of his interpretations and conclusions about Thomas Merton.

Gunn expresses much admiration for the courageous and insightful manner in which Merton faced and entered into the emptiness of his own failings and uncertainties. He states, too, that Merton certainly had a deep appreciation and wealth of insight into the spiritual fulfillment to which his own journey into emptiness was leading him. Gunn, concludes, however, that "Thomas Merton did not reach his stated goal of becoming a saint. Instead, by pursuing his own experiences of emptiness into his own tasks and destiny, he bequeathed to subsequent generations a rich record of what it is like from the inside to wrestle with the experience of emptiness in all its rough edges."

It is difficult to know what to make of Gunn's assertion of Merton's failure to become a saint, in that he does not address the range of meanings given to the attribution of sainthood and then go on to state, in more precise terms, the basis for his assertion. In pausing to consider this range of meanings here, we must take into the account the perspective that sainthood is ultimately a divine mystery beyond the pale of what we on this earthly plane are qualified to know with any certainty. With respect to this meaning of sainthood, Gunn's assertion lacks a sense of humble recognition that it is preferable to refrain from being so bold as to proclaim that anyone, including Merton, failed to attain sainthood.

The term sainthood is also a social phenomenon, indicating that the faith community recognizes a person as exemplifying an inspiring, extraordinary degree of holiness. From this point of view it is also difficult to see on just what basis Gunn makes his blanket, terse assertion that Merton failed to become a saint. In my travels about the country I have talked to a number of people since some of the intimate aspects of Merton's personal life have been made public. In many instances, the disclosures seem to heighten rather than lessen the degree to which Merton is a saint in the eyes of many people who identify with his uncanonized and perhaps uncanonizable holiness. The formal designation of saint relative to the likelihood of Merton's canonization, is overshadowed by the church's own teachings, grounded in the Gospel, that the currency of God's hidden economy is revealed in Christ to be that of a childlike acceptance of ourselves as invincibly precious and one with God in the midst of our poverty. From this vantage point it is not that Merton pursued his own emptiness *instead* of a state of sainthood he failed to attain. Rather, his life and writings give witness to the sanctity of a perpetual surrender to a divine benevolence that freely flowed through him in his powerlessness to be anything other than the weak, flawed person that he so openly realized himself to be.

A second example of Gunn's occasional comments that warrants some constructive criticism is found in his willingness to grant to Merton no more than a conceptual understanding of the Buddhist notion of the emptiness of emptiness. This Buddhist teaching refers to a personal realization that emptiness is absolutely empty of being in any way whatsoever other than the contingency of the phenomenal world. To realize this directly is to simultaneously realize that the contingency of the phenomenal world is absolutely empty of being in any way whatsoever other than emptiness. To realize the emptiness of emptiness is then to realize that each faltering step one takes in the journey into emptiness is nothing but the totality of emptiness. Thus, the Heart Sutra's proclamation that "Form is emptiness precisely. Emptiness is form precisely." Thus Dogen's proclamation that one does not sit in meditation seeking enlightenment; rather, sitting in meditation *is* enlightenment. Thus, Nagarjuna (in whose writings the specific phrase "emptiness of emptiness" occurs) states (using

Stephen Batchelor's translation), "emptiness is contingency configured." Gunn correctly stresses that an intellectual grasp of the notion of the emptiness of emptiness is not to be confused with the living realization of the emptiness of emptiness that is occasioned only in a transformative event in which "all concepts, including 'I' or 'experiencing' or 'emptiness' are left behind and one experiences '*tathata*,' 'suchness,' reality itself without thought or concept."

Regarding the question of whether or not Merton had attained to the living realization of the emptiness of emptiness, Gunn states, "while Merton understood this concept intellectually it is the judgment of this author that he was never able to relinquish the inner witness of his own experience." Gunn assumes that Merton's unresolved ego-development issues, expressed in his narcissistic trait of self-monitoring, eclipses the possibility of his having attained the nondual state of the emptiness of emptiness beyond ego.

It seems to me that Gunn's purposes would have been better served had he made at least a passing reference to the more carefully nuanced perspective expressed in Ken Wilber's notion of blends. The term "blend" is used by Wilber in referring to situations in which a person attains to an authentic state of habituated transpersonal realization, even as he or she may still be subject to the effects of unresolved ego-development issues. The phenomenon of blends is seen, for example, in the Zen master whose depth of enlightenment is well established but who is addicted to alcohol or who sexually exploits the trust placed in him by sangha members. Similar examples are readily found in Christian settings in which someone who, in attaining to a high state of habituated contemplative union with God, may be openly punitive and judgmental of others or, in the opposite direction, may remain heavily dominated by avoidant, dependent attitudes and patterns of behavior.

The moral aspects inherent in the path of transpersonal transformation require a whole-hearted commitment to recognize, accept and do one's best to resolve patterns of thoughts, attitudes and behavior that cause suffering to self and others. These moral aspects extend to taking responsibility for working through hurtful thoughts, attitudes and behaviors that flow directly from unresolved ego-development issues, such as the ones Merton struggled with in his own life. The crucial point to be kept in mind, however, is that the graced event of awakening to nondual states of spiritual fulfillment is not contingent upon the degree to which one has first succeeded in overcoming one's personal failures, shortcomings and unresolved ego-development issues. To the contrary, one can, in the very midst an ongoing struggle with unresolved issues, break through into a state of nondual awareness. What is more, as was indicated above, the unresolved ego states can continue to be present even after the breakthrough into a transpersonal state has occurred. It is just that unresolved ego-development issues, failings and shortcomings, as well as one's ongoing whole-hearted efforts in working through these difficulties, are intimately realized to be the manifestations of pure, undifferentiated emptiness.

The extent to which Merton attained to a habituated state of nondual awareness is, of course, open for speculation. But there are two reasons why an assessment of the matter more generous than the one offered by Gunn seems to be in order. First, there are a number of passages found throughout Merton's writings that can be interpreted as flowing directly from Merton's experience of nondual states of transpersonal realization. Secondly, both the Buddhist and Christian traditions teach that unresolved ego-development issues must be honestly acknowledged and dealt with, not as obstacles to transpersonal realization but as the intimate domain in which the graced event of transpersonal realization occurs. In theistic terms this is to realize God is All in all that the thorn in the flesh

discloses. In Buddhist terms this is to realize that “compassion is the body of emptiness.” Or, to borrow a phrase of the contemporary Vajrayana master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, this is to realize the “sour spot” of one’s failings and shortcomings is itself the manifestation of the great way of endless liberation.

Gunn’s book is ironically like Merton’s own life in being a paradoxical blend of authentic wisdom and insight interlaced with shortcomings. The shortcomings do not cancel out but rather embody a particularly poignant and precious aspect of the nature of emptiness Gunn’s book explores. This poignant and precious aspect is expressed in two brief self-disclosures with which Gunn begins and ends his book. In the opening pages he shares that his copies of the writings of Dogen, Merton and Jung are worn and tattered from years of use – a telling comment disclosing the extent to which Gunn’s book is continuous with his personal commitment to the wisdom his tattered books contain. In the final pages he shares a story about climbing a mountain with his daughter. He writes, “We reach the peak. We sit and survey the land and lakes and forests for miles in all directions. We taste the water. We take pictures and head home.” The “we” clearly denotes a sense of contemplatively realized oneness that includes not just to the author and his daughter, but Dogen, Merton, Jung as well as each one of us, as we all head home together in the midst of the most fragmented and disjointed aspects of our own self-transforming journey into emptiness.