

Engaging Contacts, Enlightening Insights

Review of

Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness & Everyday Mind

Edited by Bonnie B. Thurston

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Reviewed by **William Skudlarek, OSB**

A pioneer in the field of interreligious dialogue, Thomas Merton communicated with and learned from Taoists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims. His deepest and most engaging contacts, however, were with Buddhists. This collection of essays clearly demonstrates the extent and the depth of that relationship.

Merton and Buddhism is divided into four main sections: Introductory Essays (including a valuable “Overview of Buddhism” by Roger J. Corless); Merton and Buddhist Traditions; Buddhist Traditions and Thomas Merton’s Art; and Footnotes to the Asian Journey of Thomas Merton. The contributors to these “footnotes” are some of the persons Merton referred to in the journal he kept on his trip to Asia in 1968. The editor, Bonnie B. Thurston, asked them to clarify remarks Merton made in his journal or to reflect on the time he spent with them in Asia.

Much has already been written about Merton’s interest in other religions, particularly his attraction to Buddhism. What makes this book especially interesting and valuable is the attention it gives to Merton’s appreciation of Buddhist aesthetics and the degree to which his growing familiarity with Buddhism influenced his calligraphy, photography, and poetry. Essays by Roger Lipsey, Paul M. Pearson, and Thurston clearly demonstrate the impact of Buddhism on these lesser known but highly developed areas of Merton’s creative work. The volume also includes a representative selection of his artistic output, along with numerous plates, some in color, of the art that so inspired him.

Why was Merton so drawn to Buddhism in particular? Thurston believes that he was especially intrigued by its articulation of the paths of spiritual development, its “cultural alternative,” and its contribution to monastic renewal. Buddhism for Merton was not a substitute for his Christian faith. In Thurston’s words, “Buddhism helped to awaken Merton to the Christ unfolding in the lotus of every moment” (26).

Readers who already have some knowledge of Merton’s relationship with Buddhists and Buddhism will know that he was first attracted to Zen, and then – especially during the course of his travels in Asia at the end of his life – to Tibetan Buddhism. But Merton also showed great esteem for the Theravada monks he met on that journey. James Wiseman notes that it would be wrong to place too much emphasis on the place of Theravada in Merton’s life and thought, “but that place is nevertheless not negligible” (31).

In his essay on Merton and Zen, Ruben Habito interprets Merton’s own life through a Zen lens: his experience of *dukkha*, his path of awakening, his experiences of enlightenment, his sense of unity

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and compassion. Merton's struggle to hold on to his monastic commitment as he was falling deeply and passionately in love is, in Habito's words, "a living *koan* that cut right through the core of his very being" (113).

Judith Simmer-Brown describes in great detail the encounters Merton had with Trungpa Rinpoche, Karlu Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, and other Tibetan monks during the month prior to the meeting he would be attending in Bangkok in December, 1968. The author's grasp of the incredibly rich and complex Tibetan Buddhist tradition is nothing short of dazzling. For a moment I thought I caught a tiny error when she identified Trungpa Rinpoche's tutor in Bible and western religions as a "Belgian Jesuit named Father DeGives" (56). I suspected she was referring to Bernard de Give, a Belgian Trappist and founding member of *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique*. A bit of checking, however, revealed that before becoming a Trappist in 1972, Bernard de Give had been a Jesuit, and it was indeed during his Jesuit years that he was with Trungpa Rinpoche at Oxford.

The essay I found least convincing was "The Limits of Thomas Merton's Understanding of Buddhism." In it John P. Keenan argues that the understanding of Zen Merton received from D. T. Suzuki was fundamentally flawed because Suzuki had intentionally stripped Zen of its cultural and doctrinal context in order to make it more appealing to a Western audience. But, as Roger Lipsey demonstrates in his essay, Merton had a deep appreciation for the classic texts, art, and ritual of Zen. (Lipsey acknowledges that his interpretation is different from that of Keenan [170, n. 3].) Moreover, as the other essays in this book clearly demonstrate, Merton's attraction to and interest in Buddhism went beyond Zen.

Keenan insists, and rightly so, that interreligious dialogue cannot shy away from hard philosophical and theological questions and that it must take into account the culture that shapes and is shaped by religious faith and practice. Merton would surely have agreed with him, but would also have insisted on the legitimacy of interreligious dialogue that focuses on the spiritual practices of a monastic tradition embedded in a worldview so different from his own. Merton pursued practical Buddhist wisdom not primarily as an intellectual exercise, but in order to become a better person, a better Christian, and a better monk.