

In the Footsteps of Thomas Merton: Asia

By Donald Grayston

In the academic year 2000-2001, I had my first and only sabbatical during the time I was teaching Religious Studies at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. It was a glorious time, of a kind which I had never had before and will never have again. So how to use it, how to spend it, how to exercise stewardship of it? Part of it I spent in Europe, a time which included visits to Auschwitz and to Anne Frank House in Amsterdam in support of my teaching of a course on the Holocaust. But the single longest time away from home I spent in Asia, retracing the last journey of Thomas Merton.

Merton spent most of his time on this journey in India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, with brief stops in Hawaii, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore. He planned to meet other monastics, both Christian and Buddhist, to connect with some of the Trappist-Cistercian communities of the region, to investigate possibilities for a new location for a hermitage, to explore more fully Buddhist spiritual practice, and to continue on his own contemplative path. He left San Francisco on October 15, 1968, and, as we know, died in Thailand on December 10 – 56 days in all. [Excursus: a friend of mine here in Vancouver, Rob Pollock, is – as I write – constructing a very creative blog related to Merton’s journey (www.mertoninasia.blogspot.com). He is reading the entries in Merton’s *Asian Journal*¹ on the days on which they were written; having started on October 15, he plans to finish on December 10. He is very techno-savvy, and the blog creatively integrates Merton’s experiences, Rob’s responses, and the larger context of life in 1968. By the time you read this article, he will have finished the blog, which I have encouraged him to make a permanent installation.]

So then, a few of the merest scraps in this article from what for me was an epic journey. I left Vancouver on October 31, and arrived the next day in Mumbai/Bombay. For the next ten days or so, I traveled in Kerala, the Indian state with the highest percentage of Christians, with two friends, one Indian, one Canadian. Among other things, we visited tea plantations, rode on the back of an elephant (a cruel practice: something I will not do again), were paddled across a lake by indigenous people on bamboo rafts which rather alarmingly floated just beneath the surface of the water, visited the delightful “backwaters” of Kerala (large lagoons with houses built on miniscule strips of land), attended a performance in Kochi of “Arjuna’s Repentance” by Kathakali dancers – my most vivid memory there being Lord Shiva picking a louse out of his beard – and visited the tomb of Vasco da Gama in St Francis’ Church, a church formerly Anglican, now belonging to the Church of South India.

Returning to Mumbai, I undertook a secondary part of my trip, visiting sites connected to Mahatma Gandhi, on whom I was also teaching a course. The first of these was Mani Bhavan, his Mumbai residence and base of operations from 1917 to 1934. From there I took the train to Ahmedabad, his northern base, a journey on which my

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seatmate, an Indian engineer, asked me the impossible question: “Tell me: are people in Canada joyful?” I leave it to you what I could have answered him! In Ahmedabad I visited Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi’s longtime home. Remembering his devotion to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), I took the opportunity of a quiet time on a bench to read it out loud, just to see how long that would take: it took 15 minutes. From Ahmedabad I took the train to Porbandar, Gandhi’s birthplace – the house where he was born is now a museum; and from there to New Delhi, where again I visited several Gandhi-related sites, including the place of his assassination, Birla House, and the place of his cremation, Rajghat. Alas, in all these places, with the exception of Rajghat, the interiors of the buildings were covered in dust, and demonstrated other signs of neglect. Opinion on Gandhi in India, I discovered, is deeply divided, with half the population revering him as the father of the nation (while ignoring his values in economic and social life), the other half – unfairly, in my view – regarding him as responsible for the partition of India, with its dreadful bloodshed. I found it curious that Merton, who had some years before his Asian journey published a small book on Gandhi,² was not at all interested, to judge by *The Asian Journal*, in connecting with Gandhi’s memory or legacy while in India. But this is not uncharacteristic of Merton: to plunge deeply – for a time – into the study of a person or subject, and then to move on.

From Delhi I traveled to Dharamsala, hoping to have an audience there with the Dalai Lama, with whom Merton had had three conversations (*AJ* 100-125). Merton had traveled with Harold Talbott by train to Pathankot, and from there by jeep to Dharamsala. My trip was different: thirteen hours on a bus in a seat which had lost its spring and refused to support my back, and in which the glass in the window by my seat was lacking, a factor with serious effects as we climbed higher into the Himalayas.

I had been trying for some weeks to arrange the audience, but with no success. However, in Dharamsala, I was directed to the office of the foreign minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile, T. C. Tethong. He spoke English perfectly, and to my surprise, learning that I was from Vancouver, told me that he lived half of every year in Victoria, the capital of my province of Canada, British Columbia. From there it was a very short step to realize that he was a friend of my friends the MacRaes, also residents of Victoria – and thus was my respectability established. I gave him the Canadian flag which I had brought as a gift for the Dalai Lama, and he promised both to give it to him, and to arrange a private audience for me on the Dalai Lama’s next visit to North America. However, my subsequent emails to him on this subject went unanswered, and I later learned that he had left office as foreign minister. I spent an enjoyable few days in Dharamsala, breathing in the atmosphere of recollection which Merton describes, talking to monks (some of whom were very interested in the possibility that, being a rich westerner, I might fund their further education in North America – I don’t blame them for trying), and talking to other western visitors, the most memorable of whom was Marina Illich, niece of the great Ivan, who was in Dharamsala working on her Ph.D. dissertation from Columbia, under Robert Thurman.

On the bus back to Delhi, I found myself sitting opposite an elegant Frenchwoman, with whom I took the opportunity to practice my French. We asked each other what we were doing in India, as all westerners do, and I told her that I was on my way to Nepal, to visit the high-ranking Buddhist lama and hermit, Chadral Rinpoche (Chatral in the *Asian Journal*). “Ah,” she said, “you won’t find him there. He always spends the winter in India. Would you like his phone number?” This, I should say, was only one of the many “coincidences” (?) that I experienced in India. Since I had already

bought an airline ticket, however, I did go to Nepal, where I met one of Chadral's daughters, who gave me a magazine devoted to her father and his work. Merton, at least from the record of their conversation (*AJ* 142-44), did not realize that Chadral was a *married* hermit; according to what I later learned, he had married at a late age, after his enlightenment, and had fathered two daughters. I mention this in relation to Merton's humorous comments in *Day of a Stranger* to the effect that hermits (he himself then being a hermit) were "more unmarried" than monks, and that at a time in Catholic circles when there was "a lot of talk about a married clergy . . . there [had] not been a great deal said about married hermits."³ It is intriguing, given Merton's time two years earlier with M., to speculate what Merton might have thought, said or written had he realized that Chadral was married – married, *and* a hermit! In Kathmandu I hired a taxi to take me to Chadral's rural monastery at Pharping, which I wanted to see even if he were not going to be there; the taxi-driver, unsurprisingly to me by now, had spent a year as a social worker in Saskatchewan, but on returning to Nepal had found he could make more money driving a taxi.

Back then to Calcutta/Kolkata, and from there to New Siliguri, the major town near Salabari, where Chadral's Indian base is located, and where in the hotel in which I stayed I had a serious disagreement with the waiter from whom I had ordered a Campari and soda. When he returned with a golden liquid (for you non-aficionados, Campari is red), I demurred, while he insisted in a classic Indian way that what he had brought me was indeed Campari. I capitulated before it became an international incident.

The next day I took a taxi to Salabari, where I met Konchok Tashi, a Canadian student of Chadral's, whose name I had been given before going to India by James George, the Canadian high commissioner to India at the time of Merton's visit (*AJ* xviii, 70, 129). I had prepared a list of ten questions about Merton's visit (e.g.: "What do you remember of your conversation with Thomas Merton?"), and I asked Konchok (now back to his original name of Steve Brown, and living in the U. S.) if they were appropriate. He said that they were, but that visitors usually asked Chadral "spiritual" questions, since he was a spiritual teacher. I asked what this meant, and he said that the standard question was, "Do you have a teaching for me?" which I dutifully wrote down at the end of my ten Merton questions. I also asked Konchok what Chadral was like. His response: "To one person he will be very tender. To another, he'll say, 'You're a piece of shit; get out of my sight and never come back!' And whatever he says, that's what they need to hear." OK . . . so I've come to India to be told . . . well, I thought, tomorrow I will know.

That tomorrow – it was December 13, a day I have commemorated personally ever since – started at 7:00 a.m. I came to the compound. Chadral was seated, cross-legged on a cushion (astonishing to me for someone 90 years old), on a dais under a canopy and a big tree – grown, as I later learned, from a cutting made of the current bo tree at Bodh Gaya, itself the descendant of the tree under which the historical Buddha experienced his enlightenment. I stood in front of him, with Konchok to my left as my interpreter.

After some ritual preliminaries, including the ingesting of something that looked very much like 10/30 motor oil, a granular substance called *mendrup*, which was described to me as "the medicine of immortality," and a slap on the cheek to assist my awakening, I was ready to ask my first question: "What do you remember of your conversation with Thomas Merton?" Chadral spoke for three or four minutes, with Konchok translating. While he was speaking, I suddenly became

aware that from the moment our eyes had met, I had been silently weeping. So when he finished his response to my first question, I dumped (*le mot juste*) the remaining nine Merton questions, and asked the question which Konchok had suggested to me the day before: “Do you have a teaching for me?” “Yes,” he said. “Decide for yourself what is the most important thing that Jesus ever said, and then take it as far as you can.” At this point my weeping turned to sobbing, and after a ritual parting, Konchok and his fellow student, Heidi Nevin, led me away and gave me tea and kleenex. “Does this happen often?” I asked. “All the time,” was their reply. I decided immediately not to rush into a decision about what – for me – was the most important thing that Jesus ever said, but to make it a subject of long-term discernment. And about three months later, back in Canada, the saying rose up within me: “Let your yes be yes and your no be no” (Matthew 5:37) – and yes, I have been trying to take its truth as far as I can. As for the weeping, I realized later that the tears were related to the unrealized character of my relationship with my father. In the ten minutes I was with Chadral, whose gaze was laser-like, and whose presence was an enfolding and paternal one, I had received a kind of fathering as never before. My sense of Chadral is that he is a Buddhist equivalent of the Desert Fathers of old.⁴ It is clear to me from the *Asian Journal* that Merton’s time with Chadral was of significantly more import than his time with the Dalai Lama, who was very young at the time, while Merton and Chadral were close in age. Merton testifies to this by his comment that if he were to “settle down with a Tibetan guru, . . . Chadral would be the one [he would] choose,” and by their “parting . . . compact” to do their best to “attain to complete Buddhahood” in this life, and not some future one (*AJ* 144). Certainly my brief time with Chadral was the high point of my Indian journey, the point at which I realized that my journey, as well as being a research trip, was a pilgrimage, a holy time. He is still alive at the time of writing, but no longer sees Western visitors.

My next stop was Darjeeling (*AJ* 133-71), and the Windamere Hotel (*AJ* 133-34, 146-47, 150, 181), presided over by its owner, the redoubtable Mrs. Tenduf La – 95, 96 or 97 years old, according to various staff members. I asked her if she remembered Thomas Merton (no), or if she knew of Chadral Rinpoche. “Ah,” she said, “so many rinpoches!” The Raj, incidentally, was alive and well at the Windamere: shepherd’s pie was on the menu, and a poster advertised entertainers who were coming from London to perform over the Christmas season. I asked to stay in Merton’s room, Room 14, but this was not permitted, since the heating wasn’t working. But I was able to inspect it, and to look out the window he mentions, at the Natu-la Pass, “where the Chinese [stood] armed and ready” (*AJ* 146). A recent note from my former student David Chang tells me that Room 14 is now part of a heritage suite of rooms that since Merton’s time there have been renamed “Faith,” “Hope,” and “Charity,” with Room 14 now being named “Hope.” But more recognition this time: as Dave reports, “The manager of the hotel is a lovely Canadian woman who remarked incredulously: ‘you mean THE Thomas Merton stayed here?’”⁵



**Windamere Hotel, Darjeeling,
Room 14, in which Merton stayed**

From Darjeeling I was able to visit the Mim Tea Estate, where Merton spent a deep time of retreat (*AJ* 147-59). The ride there was memorable in that the driver took a back road instead of the highway (it took longer, and he could charge me more), which required us at one point to negotiate the road with a cow not inclined to move from the middle of the narrow track, and at another point for the driver, his brother-in-law and the passenger to alight and to push the taxi up a slippery stretch on which otherwise the wheels could find no purchase. I expressed increasing unhappiness at how long the ride was taking, to absolutely no effect; and we finally arrived at Mim when it was almost too late to take photographs. But I did meet the manager and his wife, Zeenath and Allan



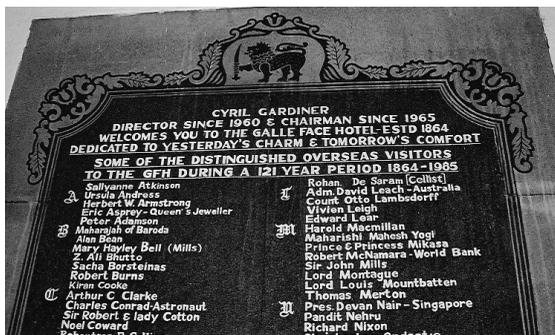
Mim Tea Estate, near Darjeeling

Palmer, and was graciously shown the guest wing of their house, where Merton had stayed, and serendipitously, that night at the hotel, drank Darjeeling tea from that very estate.

Back then via a memorable middle-of-the-night van ride along the West Bengal Highway – as I was told at church the next morning, the most bandit-infested road in India – to Kolkata, and an invitation to preach at the Church of North India cathedral, St. Paul’s, where again the Raj was alive and well – one elderly parishioner told me how pleased he had been to receive “the nicest note” from Queen Mother Elizabeth in response to his birthday card to her. In Kolkata I was able to visit Loreto House, and at least to see from the outside Birla Academy, where Merton spoke. And on a wall on the same street I found the immortal graffito, “Tracepassers will be prosecuted.” Since I was tracing someone’s steps, I did not linger!

A short flight from Kolkata took me to Chennai, formerly Madras, and to other stops on Merton’s journey: the shrine of St. Thomas the Apostle; the cave where the apostle is said to have lived from 52 to 72 CE; and St. Thomas’s Church, with its painting of the Virgin Mary by St. Luke – something of a miracle, given that it is painted in a seventeenth-century Italian style. Via the former French colony of Pondicherry, I took a bus to Mamallapuram, in Merton’s time Mahabalipuram. There I noted that the Shiva lingam to which Merton refers, “standing black and alone at the edge of the ocean” (*AJ* 197), had been moved inside the shore temple, and appeared to have had its upper part broken off: the surface was jagged, and covered with votive coins.

Then back to Chennai, and a flight to Colombo. Standing in the line, I fell into conversation with an American Catholic priest, Joe Mitchell, from Louisville, who told me that he had seen Merton, though not spoken with him, on a father-and-son retreat at Gethsemani when he was 12 or 13. We agreed to meet again in Kandy; but in the interim I stayed at the Galle Face, the hotel at which Merton had stayed – commemorated by his name being listed among those of the great and/or famous on a plaque in the lobby. Sitting on the terrace



Plaque with Merton's name:
Galle Face Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka



Colombo-Kandy Intercity Express (Merton's "Kandy Express")

of the Galle Face, looking out at an apparently endless sea, in a balmy late afternoon, and drinking a long gin and tonic, I wondered to myself how the Brits had ever brought themselves to leave! A couple of days later, I took the Intercity Express from Colombo's Fort Station to Kandy, and, as I traveled, identified the stations Merton mentions in his poem, "Kandy Express" (*AJ* 222-28) – Enderamulla, Ragama, Magelegoda. In Kandy, I met Joe Mitchell again, and for two days we shared a guesthouse room in which, on entering, we immediately noticed a standing fan, apparently of

the same ilk as the one by which Merton was electrocuted in Thailand, and placed unhelpfully between the bed and the bathroom. I was careful to give it a wide berth.

Kandy was a convenient take-off place from which to visit the great rock of Sigiriya, and from there to reach Polonnaruwa (*AJ* 230-36). There I saw the parking lot sign for Gal Vihara, and my heart began to beat a little faster. Where, I wondered, was the path of which Merton speaks, that "dips down to Gal Vihara" (*AJ* 233). Ah, there, to the right, and yes, it dips down, yes it does, to Gal Vihara! And so I walked down the very path, and soon came to the place of the great Buddhas. The monastery of which they must once have been the jewel is long gone; but the Buddhas themselves – seated, standing, reclining/dying – remain: serene, majestic, carved out of the living rock which embraces them, unworn by the centuries. For a time I had the privilege of being the only one in their presence, and was able to identify and climb "the sweep of bare rock sloping away on the other side of the hollow" (*AJ* 233) on which Merton stood to have a complete view of the statues. Much has been written about Merton's experience here, of how he "pierced through the surface and . . . got beyond the shadow and the disguise" (*AJ* 236), and doubtless much remains to be written. My



"The path dips down to Gal Vihara"



Reclining Buddha, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka

own take on it, in brief, is that Merton *realized* at Polonnaruwa what Mahayana Buddhists would describe as the inseparability of emptiness and compassion, of *sunyata* and *karuna*, and so arrived at the first level of bodhisattva-hood – there is no exact Christian equivalent (cf. *AJ* 143 and 235, and the Dasgupta readings, *AJ* 280-81). Whatever the deepest meaning of the experience, it is clear that the Polonnaruwa illumination represents the peak experience of Merton’s journey, a mere eight days before his death.

From Colombo, with a brief stop in Singapore, Merton flew to Bangkok. I flew back to Chennai, stopped briefly in Goa, and then took the train to Mumbai, my place of landing, from which, also with a brief stop in Singapore, I followed Merton to Bangkok. He had stayed in the Oriental Hotel, according to a plaque in its lobby the best hotel in the world. At \$350 US a night, I could not afford to stay there, so I stayed at the Amari Atrium at \$50 US a night, and satisfied myself with high tea at the Oriental, in the open area outside the Authors’ Lounge, in which are hung portraits of the famous writers who have stayed there – Merton not among them, an omission which needs

some day to be remedied. I connected in Bangkok with Lance Woodruff, a longtime American expatriate in Asia, who with his wife kindly drove me to Samut Prakan, 30 kilometres outside the city, to the Red Cross Center where Merton stayed and died. There we visited Star Cottage, the place of Merton’s death; but somehow – and I really must talk this over with Lance some day! – we climbed the stairs to an upstairs room, thinking that this was the room in which Merton had died. When I got home, however, I realized that my prayer for his soul had been offered in the wrong room. I had forgotten two facts that would have set me straight: first, that when Merton didn’t appear after his *meridienne* (not “meridian,” as on *AJ* 345), the person



**Star Cottage, Red Cross Center, Samut Prakan, outside Bangkok;
Merton’s Room on Left of Lower Floor**



Decal on Front Door of Star Cottage

who went in search of him looked in through the window and saw his body on the floor, which would not have been possible had his death occurred upstairs; and second, that the letter to Abbot Flavian Burns (*AJ* 344-47 [Appendix VIII]) informing him of Merton’s death refers to him as having had “bare feet on a stone floor” (*AJ* 346) – and the floor of the upstairs room was of wood. Fortunately, prayer to God is not dependent on place of utterance. We left some flowers in his honor between the doorknob and the frame of the front door, now decorated with a decal which I hunch would have delighted Merton: “Carlsberg Beer,” a decoration evocative of a line from Merton very popular with my students: “I love beer, and, by that very fact, the world.”⁶

Knowing that Merton had intended at some point on his journey to go on to Japan, I went there from Thailand, as it were on his behalf. Having asked myself the question – what would he have wanted to see in Japan? – the answer came immediately: Hiroshima and Zen temples. My brief visits to Hiroshima, with its atomic dome bearing continuing witness to a time of horror in the heart of a vibrant and restored city, and to Kyoto, with its abundance of exquisite temples, fulfilled this pledge. I then flew back to Bangkok, and returned from there to Vancouver on January 29, 2001.

Merton characterized his Asian journey as both a homecoming or homegoing (“I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body, where I have never been in this washable suit” [AJ 5]); and as a pilgrimage (“Surely, with Mahabalipuram [Mamallapuram] and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear” [AJ 235-36]). It was a pilgrimage in which his goal and boon was the settling of “the great affair,” and the finding of “the great compassion, mahakaruna” (AJ 4). My sense is that, paradoxically, dying among the monastics so many of whom were his disciples, and dying after his experience at Polonnaruwa, he did come home, did go home, did settle the great affair, did find the great compassion. For myself, my following of his route, of his footsteps, my “tracessing” in the places of his pilgrimage remains for me a mosaic, a collage of experiences of beauty, of illumination, of sadness, and of admiration. Merton himself remains vividly alive among us through his legacy, and his iconic example of contemplative insight and wise playfulness. This being so, forty years after his death the words of his friend Ed Rice continue to ring true: “Thomas Merton never left us. The journey goes on.”⁷

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973); subsequent references will be cited as “AJ” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
3. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 49.
4. Cf. Merton’s article, “The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition,” in Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 269-93; subsequent references will be cited as “CWA” parenthetically in the text.
5. Email, David Chang, August 7, 2008.
6. “Is the World a Problem?” (CWA 144).
7. From a manuscript in the archive of Rice’s son Christopher, quoted in James Harford, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax and Edward Rice* (New York: Continuum, 2006) 217.