

ZEN INFLUENCE ON THOMAS MERTON'S VIEW OF THE SELF

by **Bonnie Bowman Thurston**

"If you want the kernel you must break the shell."
Meister Eckhart¹

"Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself.
Zen shatters it."²

Thomas Merton realized that "you can hardly set Christianity and Zen side by side and compare them. That would almost be like trying to compare mathematics and tennis."³ Problems like those of emptiness vs. God, nirvana vs. salvation, and wisdom vs. faith loomed large in his mind. And yet he did, in fact, set the two side by side and, without unduly distorting either, gleaned from them a remarkable approach to human identity. He understood so well because he understood from both positions.

1. R. B. Blankney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1941), p. 148.

2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), p. 285. Hereafter appears in text as CGB.

3. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 33. Hereafter appears in text as ZBA. In so far as possible, I have kept to primary material in the text of this essay and put references to secondary material in the notes.

This question of identity, or of the self, was for Merton the key issue in a Zen-Christian dialogue.⁴ From Murti, Merton understood that the "Buddha neither said 'there is a self' or 'there is not a self' . . . among many Buddhists there appears to be a kind of dogmatism that says 'there is not a self' instead of taking the true middle . . . Buddha replied [to Vacchagotta] by silence because he considered the *condition of the questioner*. . . Buddha did not say 'there is no self' . . ."⁵ So for Merton, if not for us, the question of whether or not there was a self to ponder was not the issue. For Christians (and I believe he thought for Buddhists) human persons are "selves" involved in a crisis of identity.

In some of the last materials Merton put together before his death, he defined identity.⁶

... For practical purposes here we are talking about one's own authentic and personal beliefs and convictions, based on experience of oneself as a person, experience of one's ability to choose and reject even good things which are not relevant to one's own life.

One does not receive "identity" in this sense along with life and vegetative existence. To have identity is not merely to have a face and a name, a recognizable physical presence. Identity in this deep sense is something that one must create for himself by choices that are significant and that require a courageous commitment in the face of anguish and risk. . . . In this sense, identity is one's witness to truth in one's life. (CWA, p. 78)

Merton understood the truth in our lives to be forged by a process of consciously made decisions to act and to believe. In Christian terms, we are partners with God in creating the truth of our selves. In Zen terms, we can discipline our selves into their "native nakedness."⁷ In each case the process has an element, call it gift or grace or mystery, which is not rationally comprehensible or controlled.

It is the process of creating identity in this sense, coming to a ridding of self, that most fascinated Merton and that will be explored as a point of dialogue here.⁸

4. Indeed, Raymond Bailey (*Thomas Merton on Mysticism*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974) believed it was the key to all Merton's work. "In every period of his life and in every major title published over his name, he attacked the problem of the real and illusory selves" (p. 205).

5. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, James Laughlin (eds.), *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 104. Hereafter referred to in the text as AJ.

6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Image Books, 1973), p. 19. Hereafter referred to in the text as CWA.

7. Suzuki Teitaro Daisetz, "Self the Unattainable" in *The Buddha Eye*, Frederick Franck (ed.), (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1982), p. 15. Hereafter referred to in the text as BE.

8. Readers unfamiliar with Merton on the subject are referred to "Nirvana" (ZBA, pp. 79-88) and to "Mystics and Zen Masters" in the volume by that title (New York: Delta Books, 1969), pp. 3-44. (Hereafter referred to in the text as MZM). See also Raymond Bailey (note 4 above), "East meets West," pp. 189-210.

I. The Christian Self

... there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister.

He is supposed to be dead.

But he stands and meets me in the doorway of all my prayers, and follows me into church. He kneels with me behind the pillar, the Judas, and talks to me all the time in my ear.

And the worst of it is, he has my superiors on his side. They won't kick him out. I can't get rid of him.

Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die.⁹

This passage from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the autobiography written in Merton's early monastic life, articulates the psychology which undergirds his later writing on self. Its clearest expression is in chapters 5-9 of *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Here Merton states that we are all "shadowed by an illusory person: a false self." The false self "wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love -- outside of reality and outside of life."¹⁰ This false self harbors illusions, desires which confuse ego gratification with the inner needs of the soul, and is, therefore, the root of sin.

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self. . . and I wind experiences around myself. . . like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world. . . .

But there is no substance under the things with which I am clothed. I am hollow, and my structure of pleasures and ambitions has no foundation.

(NSC, pp. 34-35)

The false self is mirrored in its own activities rather than in an identity begun in relationship to Jesus Christ at baptism. Merton explains in *No Man is an Island*, chapter 9, that, because of Christ's sacrifice, we do not have "to do" but "to be."¹¹ When we are unable simply to be, we fill our lives with

9. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1974), pp. 496-497. Hereafter referred to in the text as SSM. Much of this discussion on the Christian self appears in an article I wrote for *Cistercian Studies*, "Self and the World: Two Directions of the Spiritual Life," Vol. XVIII, 1983:2, pp. 149-155. I thank them for permission to use it here.

10. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 34. Hereafter referred to in the text as NSC.

11. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Image Books, 1967). Hereafter referred to in the text as NMI.

doing and become, to use Merton's image, like a madman who sleeps on the street rather than in the safety and comfort of his house.

The result of "doing" to fill our false selves, of laboring for the "food which perishes" (St. John 6:27), is that we become enamoured by our labels or roles. We are not "teachers," "secretaries," "priests," "monks," "wives," or "fathers" and, if we think these labels contain our identities, we are on very thin spiritual ice. The point is exemplified in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. He writes, "Am I now seeking the favor of men or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). In Merton's terms, all activities, regardless of their "goodness," if done to curry the favor of other persons, are motivated by the false self. On the other hand, actions done in response to God's love, and for His sake alone, are from the true self.

Merton used the example of the desert monastics to show how some have realized society gives us false images of the self and have rejected those images. The desert monk chooses

. . . to lose himself in the inner, hidden reality of a self that was transcendent, mysterious, half-known, and lost in Christ. He had to die to the values of transient existence as Christ had died to them on the cross, and rise from the dead with Him in the light of an entirely new wisdom.¹²

St. Paul serves to move us to an understanding of the true self: "Put off your old nature . . . and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature created after the likeness of God. . ." (Ephesians 4:22-24). This new nature made after the likeness of God is found by looking within. St. John records, "You know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you" (St. John 14:17). After St. John, in *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton relates his belief that human personality is created by the Word (the speaking of God) exactly as everything else is created.

God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself.

But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him: that is, I shall find myself. I shall be "saved." (NSC, p. 37)

In Merton's terms, to be "born again" is to rediscover within ourselves the God Who uttered our lives. Again, as Jesus says in St. John, "You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you" (St. John 15:3).

¹² Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 7. Hereafter referred to in the text as WD.

True identity, the *insitum verbum*, is spoken in the inner silence of an individual life, and this speaking takes place within historical time and place.

His presence is present in *my own presence*. If I am, then He is. And knowing that I am, if I penetrate to the depths of my own existence and my own present reality, the indefinable "am" that is myself in its deepest roots, then through this deep center I pass into the infinite "I am" which is the very Name of the Almighty.

My knowledge of myself in silence . . . opens out into the silence and the "subjectivity" of God's own self.¹³

Merton believes that, in fact, we do not "know" ourselves so much as we "are known" by God. We are not so much speakers as we are spoken. This mystery leads us to submit to the truth of our own experience. We are (as so many of Merton's poems demonstrate) part of the world around us. As he explains:

The world as pure object is something that is not there. It is not a reality outside us for which we exist. . . . It is a living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself, my own unique door. When I find the world in my own ground, it is impossible for me to be alienated by it.¹⁴

The secret of identity, of the True Self, "is hidden in the love and mercy of God. . . in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence" (NSC, pp. 35-36). We discover the true self by discovering God Who utters Himself in us. By becoming one with the God within, we "share with God the work of creating the truth of our identity" (NSC, p. 32). Because God speaks Himself in each person, the discovery of the True Self is the discovery of all persons, the apex of community and of mystical union.¹⁵

II. The Point of Dialogue

For Merton, true identity speaks of a unity of individual, God, and other. This unity is the True Self. It shatters the falseness of what, in many places, Merton calls the Cartesian consciousness.¹⁶ In writing of Kitaro

13. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. 70. Hereafter referred to in the text as TS. See also ZBA, p. 75ff on the person as "actualized" in union with Christ.

14. Thomas Merton, "Is the World a Problem?" in *Commonweal*, 3 June 1966, p. 308.

15. See also William H. Shannon, "Thomas Merton and the Discovery of the Real Self," *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 13, 1978:4, pp. 298-308.

16. See, for example, ZBA p. 22 and p. 67 or MZM p. 26 and p. 241. Also William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 206-212.

Nishida (1870-1945), Merton begins his remarks with a discussion of "the unifying intuition of the *basic unity of subject and object in being* or a 'deep grasp of life' in its essential concreteness 'at the base of consciousness.'" This basic unity is being itself "prior to all differentiations and contradictions" (ZBA, p. 68). True Self, then, is participation in Being.¹⁷ Merton's discussion expands on this point.

Buddha taught us that all evil is rooted in the "ignorance" which makes us take our individual ego as our true self. But Nishida is not confusing the "person" with the external and individual self. Nor is the "person" for him simply the "subject" related to various objects, or even to God in an I-Thou relationship. The root of personality is to be sought in the "true Self" which is manifested in the basic unification of consciousness in which subject and object are one. Hence the highest good is "the self's fusion with the highest reality." Human personality is regarded as the force which effects this fusion. The hopes and desires of the external, individual self are all, in fact, opposed to this higher unity. They are centered on the affirmation of the individual. It is only at the point where the hopes and fears of the individual self are done away with and forgotten "that true human personality appears." (ZBA, p. 69)

There are clear parallels here between the Christian coming to True Self and the Zen Buddhist coming to *sunyata* (emptiness or "enlightenment of the nature of essencelessness").¹⁸ Merton suggests that

Buddhism and Biblical Christianity agree in their view of man's present condition. Both are aware that man is somehow not in his right relation to the world and to things in it, . . . they see that man bears in himself a mysterious tendency to falsify that relation, and to spend a great deal of energy in justifying the false view he takes of his world and of his place in it. (ZBA, p. 82)

In both traditions, the fundamental impediment to True Self is the concept of an individual ego, "a subject for whom his own self-awareness...is absolutely primary." Such an attitude creates a "solipsistic bubble of awareness -- an ego self -- imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated, and out of touch" (ZBA, p. 22). "For this very reason it is basic to Zen . . . and to Christian mysticism . . . to radically and unconditionally question the ego" (ZBA, p. 73). In both Christianity and Zen this impediment is, unfortunately, strengthened by striving for externally defined identity and by focusing on the imperfectly understood self.¹⁹

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton remarks that the

17. "Enlightenment is an experience of absolute unity; it is beyond subject and object; the empirical ego is so submerged that there is no longer "I" and "it" but pure existence or 'is-ness'." William Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), pp. 20.

18. S. B. Dasgupta quoted in AJ, p. 405.

19. For a parallel discussion see Donald K. Swearer, *Dialogue: The Key to Understanding Other Religions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, Chapt. 3, "It is No Longer I Who Live," especially pp. 78-83).

enlightened Zen man is not one who seeks Buddha, but an ordinary man with nothing left to do. "The man who is ripe discovers that there was never anything to be done" (CGB, p. 282). In the same book Merton asserts that one does not gain possession of wisdom; wisdom seizes one.

To be wise is, in a sense, to abandon every attempt at gaining wisdom, and to enter into a whole new dimension of existence, where the division of subject and object, ends and means, time and eternity, body and soul either appears in a totally new perspective or vanished altogether. (CGB, p. 291)

Similarly, D. T. Suzuki (with whom Merton corresponded) wrote that *anikalpajana* ("the sense of nondiscrimination") is not acquired by means of learning or experience. "It has nothing to do with accumulated knowledge. It comes out of one's innermost being all at once, when the zero-self becomes identified with the totality of infinity" (BE, p. 21).²⁰

Striving, externally or intellectually, tightens one in the vice grip of the false self with its round of activity and labelling and social compulsion. Nor does focusing on the "self which strives" provide an escape. Merton asserts that it worsens the situation, that a great need of modern man is precisely "liberation from his inordinate self-consciousness, his monumental self-awareness, his obsession with self-affirmation" (ZBA, p. 31). "What is important is not liberation from the body but liberation from the mind. We are not entangled in our own body but entangled in our own mind" (AJ, p. 90).

Merton understands that in both Christianity and Zen (with some qualifications), liberation from false self is a process of self-emptying which leads from isolation to unity. The Preface to the Japanese Edition of *Thoughts in Solitude* describes the process as follows: "As Christ said, the seed in the ground must die. To be as a seed in the ground of one's life is to dissolve in that ground in order to become fruitful. One disappears into Love, in order to 'be Love.'"²¹ In order for the seed to dissolve, we must doubt all we have seen in ourselves.

The "doubt" dissolves our ego-identity. Faith gives us life in Christ, according to St. Paul's word: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). To accept this is impossible unless one has profound hope in the incomprehensible fruitfulness that emerges from the dissolution of our ego in the ground of being and Love To accept our own dissolution would be inhuman if we did not at the same time accept the wholeness and completeness of everything in God's Love. We accept our emptying

20. Note that both Zen and Christian descriptions of coming to True Self stress unity and universality.

21. Robert E. Daggy (ed.), *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton* (Greensboro, North Carolina: Unicorn Press, 1981), p. 96. Hereafter referred to in the text as *IEW*.

because we realize that our very emptiness is fulfillment and plentitude. In our emptiness the One Word is clearly spoken. (*IEW*, pp. 96-97)

In a discussion of D. T. Suzuki, Merton points to Eckhart's belief that "it is precisely in this pure poverty when one is no longer a 'self' that one recovers one's true identity in God: This true identity is the 'birth of Christ in us'" (*ZBA*, p. 12). The relationship Merton points to between the Christian and the Zen True Self centers around what Christians would call *kenosis* and what Zen might call self-emptying.²²

The "mind of Christ" as described by St. Paul in Philippians 2 may be theologically worlds apart from the "mind of Buddha" -- this I am not prepared to discuss. But the utter "self-emptying" of Christ -- and the self-emptying which makes the disciple one with Christ in *His* *kenosis* -- can be understood and has been understood in a very Zen-like sense as far as psychology and experience are concerned. (*ZBA*, p. 8)

Let us address the question Merton skirts. To what extent may Christian *kenosis* and Zen self-emptying be similarly understood?

III. The "Problem" of *Kenosis*

Most who have read Merton on Zen agree that he has effected a remarkable synthesis with Christianity "as far as psychology and experience are concerned." His work on identity, however, raises a question. Are Buddhist self-emptying and Christian *kenosis* for the same end? Can we with truthfulness to both traditions equate unity with God (and thus Other) and Emptiness?

John Cobb, Jr. suggests in *Beyond Dialogue* that both being and *nirvana* are names for ultimate reality. "Emptiness," he says, "for much of Mahayana becomes the preferred way of naming ultimate reality."²³

To be empty is to lack any boundaries, any determining content of one's own, and filter through which the world is experienced. To be empty is to be perfectly open to what is there, whatever that may be. It is to be completely defenseless and with nothing to defend. (*BD*, p. 90)

22. The noun form, *kenos*, occurs in the papyri in the literal sense of "empty" (see St. Luke 1:53; 20: 20-11 or Ephesians 5:6), though it is used metaphorically in the New Testament to mean "vain" (especially in I Corinthians 15) and also "hollow" or pretentious (Acts 4:25 or James 2:20). The verb form means "to deprive of power" or "to make of no meaning." When it occurs with the reflexive pronoun (my self, my own), it is usually translated "to give up or lay aside what one possesses" or "to divest one's self of one's prerogatives." It is so used in the Philippian passage that most concerns us here, 2:5-8, especially verse 7. (It may be straining grammatical interpretation to point to the use of the aorist as past time which may either be momentary or prolonged.)

23. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982): pp. 88-90. Hereafter referred to in the text as *BD*.

Ultimate reality is empty; so the "True Self" of Zen equals emptiness. As Masao Abe suggests "what is beyond all affirmation and all negation --that is, Ultimate Reality -- should not be 'Him' or 'Thou' . . ." ²⁴ But Merton has said the Christian True Self is "Christ within" (Galatians 2:20) or God Who utters Himself in us (NSC, p. 37). ²⁵ On the surface it seems that self-emptying and *kenosis* lead to two different and incomparable ends: Emptiness and God (or Christ). But suppose God (or Jesus Christ) is understood by the Christian to be empty in terms that a Buddhist could accept?

In *Beyond Dialogue* Cobb discusses "God and Emptiness." He argues that asserting ultimate reality is Emptiness does not necessarily sever the connection the Christian makes between God and ultimate reality. In fact, it clarifies the conceptual confusion between God and being, by helping us to see the difference between ultimate reality and its divine manifestations and by helping us to recognize "that the God of the Bible . . . is a manifestation of ultimate reality, not the name of that reality" (BD, p. 111). Further, "manifest" is a misleading term for the relationship between God and ultimate reality, because "God also actualizes and embodies that reality" (BD, p. 112). "Acceptance of the view that ultimate reality is Emptiness rather than being can free us from a tendency to place it at the top of a hierarchy in which its actualizations are located in ontologically subordinate roles" (BD, p. 112). ²⁶

While Cobb concedes that "to date, no formulation of the Christian understanding of God is compatible with the Buddhist vision," he believes a key requirement in rethinking God in Buddhist terms is that "God be understood to be wholly, unqualifiedly empty" (BD, p. 113). Though perhaps not in an unqualified state, I maintain that this formulation has always existed.

In the early sagas of the Old Testament, God remains unknowable or "empty" by refusing to give a name (Genesis 32:29), and thus, in Cobb's terms, remains without boundaries or determining content. When a name is given (Exodus 3:14), it is so opaque that scholars still argue about what it means. What of Jesus of Nazareth? The substance of the synoptic gospels is

24. Quoted in Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), (J. W. Heisig, trans.), p. 141. Hereafter referred to in the text as AN.

25. Waldenfels notes that about ten years ago Nishitani placed just this point (from the perspective of Zen) before theologians in Basel and Marburg. "I find a statement in Paul which I, coming out of Zen-Buddhism, believe I understand only too well. He says he has suffered a death: 'I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me.' That makes sense to me immediately. Allow me only to ask you this: Who is speaking here?" (AN, p. 157).

26. This is an especially appropriate point for Christian theologians who have wrestled with the doctrine of the Trinity and the problem of explaining to non-Christians (especially Muslims) the separate-but-One-and-equal-God.

an attempt to determine for non-believers who He is. One of His own answers appears in St. John when Phillip asks to be shown the Father. "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? . . . The Father who dwells in me does His works" (St. John 14:10). Jesus is a manifestation of the God Who is unknowable! (I shall return to this presently.)

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) at least hints at an empty God along these lines:

What then, brethren, shall we say of God? For if you have been able to comprehend what you would say, then it is not God . . . If you have been able to comprehend Him as you think, by so thinking you have deceived yourself. This then is not God, if you have comprehended it. But if it be God, then you have not comprehended it. Therefore how would you speak of that which you cannot comprehend?²⁷

That which I cannot comprehend (or am unable to know) is certainly, at least on a conceptual level, an emptiness to me. (Of course that I do not "know" God, or that God is an emptiness to me, does not mean that God does not exist. Emptiness is pure possibility, open to all, denying nothing. See Cobb above.)

A less orthodox source of the formulation God equals emptiness, but one which is still within the Christian tradition is the mystical theologian Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500).²⁸ His writings attempt a synthesis between neo-platonism and Christianity and stress the intimate union between God and the soul which is realized by a process of "unknowing" (leaving behind the senses and the intellect). In Chapter 7 of *The Divine Names*, a section is devoted to "how we know God, which is neither intelligible, sensible, nor in general some being among beings. It is never true to say that we know God in terms of its nature . . . We know God in terms of the order of all beings which are projected out of it and which have some similarity and likeness to its divine paradigms."²⁹

We might worry about the problem of "manifestation" which Cobb speaks of were it not for the following remarkable statement:

God is
all in all,
nothing in none,
known to all in reference to all,
known to no one in reference to nothing.³⁰

27. St. Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* 52:16 (quoted in Robley E. Whitson, *Mysticism and Ecumenism* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), pp. 23-24.

28. *The Ascent to Truth* makes it clear that Merton knew this work. Elena Malits in her study of Merton (*The Solitary Explorer*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980) notes Merton's knowledge of Pseudo-Dionysius in the context of a discussion of Zen (see p. 102).

29. John D. Jones (trans.), Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 178.

30. *Op. cit.*, p. 179.

God is nothing in none, Absolute Nothingness! The editor of the work, John D. Jones, has given this expression in response to Dionysius the Areopagite.

The divinity of all that is,
 Apart from all that is: nothing.
 Divinity: nothing.³¹

We could continue to quote Christian sources which intimate an equation of God and emptiness,³² but certainly Dionysius the Areopagite has established the connection.³³ What of the equation of Jesus Christ and emptiness?

A simple (and flip!) answer can be offered by engaging in a bit of grammar school logic. If God is Empty and God is Jesus, then Jesus is Empty. Hans Waldenfels makes the connection more satisfactorily in the section of his book *Absolute Nothingness* entitled "Jesus Christ: The Figure of the 'Empty' God." He begins by warning that we are dealing here not with an "'emptiness' without content. . . but with an emptiness of comprehension" (AN, p. 155).³⁴ Jesus Christ is the "emptiness" of God taken form. As St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Philippians:

Have this in mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8).

Waldenfels quotes Rahner to describe the nature of Jesus' self-emptying; in it "the one who loves makes a total surrender of everything pertaining to the movement of his own personal history toward fulfillment." "The fundamental attribute of the figure of Jesus," Waldenfels notes, "is that . . . it continually and radically points away from itself" (AN, p. 160). Jesus Christ constantly turns us to God; He understands Himself as belonging to God in obedience (St. John 10:30). There is nothing in Him which He holds fast for Himself.³⁵ This, for Paul Tillich, is the central event of Christianity.

It is a personal life, the image of which, as it impressed itself on his

31. *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

32. For example, in the *Summa Theologica*, St Thomas Aquinas says we have no means for considering how God is. Another obvious source would be St. John of the Cross whom Merton knew thoroughly (See *The Ascent to Truth*).

33. There is a great deal to be done in comparing the work of Pseudo-Dionysius with Zen statements, perhaps after the manner of *Mysticism East and West*.

34. This bears out my point above.

35. Again, see Merton, ZBA, pp. 75ff.

followers, shows no break in his relation to God and no claim for himself in his particularity. What is particular in him is that he crucified the particular in himself for the sake of the universal.³⁶

And what is "the universal" toward which Jesus points if it is not the self-emptying God? God empties Himself to be born of a virgin, to become human. Rahner thus defines man as the "self-emptying" of God: "If God wills to become non-God, man comes to be." Waldenfels continues:

The high point of the kenosis of God, is realized in two steps, with the radical and total correspondence of the self-emptying of God and the self-emptying of man. That is precisely what Christian belief confesses in the figure of Jesus Christ and in no other. The self-surrender of God to the world in his Logos corresponds to the radical obedience of Jesus of Nazareth in his total self-surrender to his "other" which he calls "God" and whom he addresses as "Father." In Jesus of Nazareth the self-emptying of God and the self-emptying of man coincide. (AN, p. 158)

The God Who is empty (in the sense of unknowable or without content) empties Himself to become a man. Jesus Christ desires or grasps at nothing for Himself and empties Himself to become nothing in the world. Jesus Christ thus "embodies" the emptiness of God. The Christian, like Jesus, must strive to be an "embodiment" of emptiness. By "putting on" Christ, as St. Paul says, are we not "putting on" emptiness?

If there is any accuracy in this way of viewing God, Jesus Christ, and Emptiness, then we can rightly speak of a connection between Zen self-emptying and Christian *kenosis* in the process of realizing identity, True Self. The question is, "Does Thomas Merton explicitly make the connection?"

IV. The Conclusions

The answer to the question of whether or not Merton explicitly connects Emptiness with God or Christ in Christian *kenosis* must, at best, be but a qualified "yes." The imagery he uses to describe the Christian True Self hints at emptiness when, for example, he discusses "hollowness" (NSC, p. 35) and being "lost in Christ" (NSC, p. 37). In writing about Zen he joins "nothingness" and the figurative terms Christian mystics use to speak of God.³⁷ Merton goes so far as to say that "the quiet meditation of Dogen

36. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter with World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 81.

37. See MZM, p. 20 and p. 30.

could in fact turn into supernatural contemplation." Faith effects this transition

because it would provide not merely a psychological assurance that one had gained possession of his object, but, as St. John of the Cross teaches, since "faith is the proximate means of union with God" as He is in Himself, in His invisibility and seeming "emptiness" (as regards our intellect, to which He is "pure darkness" and "night"), if one's meditation is a resting in faith, then it does in fact attain to the infinite source of all supernatural light. (MZM, p. 37)

Admittedly these connections are casual. But it seems to me valid to read them in light of a statement Merton made to Brother David Steindl-Rast. Merton made the point that when one belongs to Christ, there is no self to justify. Brother David asked if "he could have come to these insights if he had never come across Zen. 'I'm not sure,' he answered pensively, 'but I don't think so. I see no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity.'"³⁸ Certainly it is true that in his later writings on human identity, Zen and Christian insights on the nature of God and of Emptiness occur side by side.

For example, writing of *kenosis* in the Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton speaks both of the Emptiness of Christ and of the emptiness required of Christians.

But if the Truth is to make me free, I must let go my hold upon myself, and not retain the semblance of a self which is an object or a "thing." I too must be no-thing. And when I am no-thing, I am in the All, and Christ lives in me. But He who lives in me is in all those around me. He who lives in the chaotic world of men is hidden in the midst of them, unknowable and unrecognizable because he is no-thing. (IEW, pp. 44-45)

Does Merton intend "no-thing" to mean "without corporeal existence" or to suggest a more Zen-like notion? I opt in favor of the latter on the basis of another statement he makes on the same subject but in another essay (in August, 1963 and March, 1965 respectively). "The Cross of Christ means more than the juridical redemption of man from the guilt of evil-doing. It means the passage from death to life and from nothingness to fullness, or to fullness in nothingness" (IEW, p. 71). And note here the similarity to Merton's description of *sunyata* "which is described as emptiness only because, being completely without any limit of particularity it is also perfect fullness . . . Buddhism prefers to speak of 'emptiness' not because it conceives the ultimate as mere nothingness and void, but because it is aware of the nonlimitation and non-definition of the infinite" (ZBA, p. 85).

38. Brother David Steindl-Rast, "Man of Prayer," in *Thomas Merton/ Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, Brother Patrick Hart (ed.), (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 88.

In the same essay, "Nirvana," Merton recognizes the need for "a serious discussion, with Buddhists, of the idea of God" (ZBA, p. 85). In a sense, he initiates it in the Preface to the Japanese Edition of *Seeds of Contemplation* (1965). Writing of the goal of the contemplative, he says:

It is the transcendent ground and source of being, the not-being and the emptiness that is so called because it is absolutely beyond all definitions and limitation. This ground and source is not simply an inert and passive emptiness, but for the Christian it is pure act, pure freedom, pure light. The emptiness which is "pure being" is the light of God which, as St. John's Gospel says, "gives light to every man who comes into the world."

(IEW, p. 69)

Here is the notion suggested earlier that God is empty by virtue of being unknowable, "beyond all definitions and limitations."

Did Zen bring Merton to the intuition that the metaphysical ground of being and knowledge is void? Note the similarity of the previous passage to one on Hui Neng.

The infinite emptiness is then infinite totality and fullness. The ground of the void is *sunyata*, but the pure void is also pure light, because it is void of all (limited) mind: and the light of the pure void manifests itself in act. But since this can be translated into positive terms, pure void is pure Being. And pure Being is by that very fact pure illumination. And the illumination springs from pure Being in perfect Actuality. (MZM, p. 39)

In spite of his attraction to apophatic theologians like St. John of the Cross (mentioned in connection with Hui Neng), when Merton speaks of ultimate reality which is the end of Christian contemplation, he reaches out, like the opening chapters of St. John's Gospel, for words which express light.³⁹

And, thanks to Hui Neng, Merton interprets *prajna* in terms of light, being, and void.

The ground of all Being is pure Void (*sunyata*-emptiness) which is *prajna*, light illuminating everything in a pure Act of being-void without any limitation. The ground-Being is not distinct from itself as Light and as Act . . . And to this basic constitution of being there corresponds . . . the act of realization, or *prajna*, in which the void and light are so to speak let loose in pure freedom and power to give and spend in action this self which is no-self, this void which is the inexhaustible source of all light and act, and which has broken through into our own life, bursting its limitations and uniting us to itself so that we are lost in the boundless freedom and energy of *prajna*-wisdom. (MZM, p. 40)

The context here is "an experience of the ground of being as pure void

39. In this context, see also the fascinating passage in the *Asian Journal* on the "three doors which are one door" (AJ), pp. 153-155). It brings together both the major themes in the issue of identity and the recurring metaphors which occur in that context.

which is light and act because it is fullness and totality" (MZM, p. 40). It is not a mystique of passivity and withdrawal "resting in one's own interiority but a complete release from bondage to the limited and subjective self" (MZM, p. 41). In the Rinzi tradition, which is broadly Merton's subject, this means fulfillment in love.⁴⁰ And in the Christian tradition, it is certainly orthodox to say "God is Love."

It would be satisfying if we could conclude here and say that Merton understands Zen self-emptying and Christian *kenosis* to converge in love. If *dharmakaya* can be equated with love ("all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya. . . [sic] everything is emptiness and everything is compassion" (AJ, p. 235), and if *nirvana* is, indeed, "the void which is Absolute Reality and Absolute Love" (ZBA, p. 86), Merton does suggest this. But it would be dishonest to omit Merton's closing remarks on Hui Neng: "We must also look to the transcendent and personal center upon which this love, liberated by illumination and freedom, can converge. That Center is the Risen and Deathless Christ in Whom all are fulfilled in One" (MZM, p. 42).

Perhaps we are left with Merton's own statement that the chief difference between the self emptying and enlightenment of the Buddhist and the self-emptying and enlightenment of the Christian is that "the former is existential and ontological, the latter is theological and personal" (ZBA, p. 76). However, as I hope these remarks and quotations indicate, Merton has raised the possibility of a more profound engagement between Zen and Christianity in precisely the place where each manifests itself --individual lives and their witness to truth.

"Myself." No-self. The self is merely a locus in which the dance of the universe is aware of itself as complete from beginning to end -- and returning to the void. Gladly. Praising, giving thanks, with all beings. Christ light -- spirit -- grace -- gift. (Bodhicitta) (AJ, p. 68).

The Christian monk raises many questions and gives few answers. In this, he is our good Zen Master.

40. "... for Daisetz Suzuki, who is certainly the most authoritative . . . interpreter of Rinzi, the 'most important thing of all is love.'" Merton, in MZM, p. 41.