

THE ZEN INSIGHT OF SHEN HUI

By **Thomas Merton**

Edited by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

EDITOR'S NOTE

When preparing the first volume of The Merton Annual, this unpublished manuscript by Thomas Merton was unearthed at the Merton Studies Center of Bellarmine College. It was suggested that a brief explanation be given to fill in the historical context of the introduction so that it could appear in the first number of the annual. The letters of Thomas Merton to Richard S. Y. Chi have been included in the first volume of Merton letters, which mentions the project of an introduction to the translations of Shen Hui which Dr. Chi was planning (see The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns, selected and edited by William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985, pp. 121-125).

In the opening letter of the correspondence, dated December 26, 1967, Merton wrote: "As you know, Lunsford Yandell has forwarded to me the excellent ms. on Shen Hui, and I am reading it with real pleasure." He continued by saying that he had some ideas about its publication in case the Indiana University Press did not bring it out. After inviting Dr. Chi to visit Gethsemani, he suggested publishing selections from Shen Hui in Monks Pond, a literary journal Merton edited in 1968. There were only four issues, and as it turned out, selections of Shen Hui in English were included in the first and fourth numbers. Incidentally, as this first volume goes to press, plans are in the offing for a facsimile reprint edition of the four numbers of Monks Pond, edited by Robert E. Daggy and published by the University Press of Kentucky.

For those unfamiliar with Shen Hui, suffice it here to say that he was the successor to the Sixth Zen Patriarch Hui Neng as the leader of the Southern (Sudden

Enlightenment) School of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, and was a figure of decisive importance in the development of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism. After several exchanges of letters between Merton and Chi, as well as a visit by Dr. Chi to Gethsemani, Merton wrote in appreciation of an article by Hu Shih, which Chi had forwarded to him: "It was just what I needed to make everything fall into place. The draft of the introduction is finished and it is now being typed. A very enjoyable and interesting task. . ." (April 3, 1968).

After receiving the introduction, Dr. Chi replied to Merton on April 23: "Your introduction is really a masterpiece. This is the first time I have seen anything written by a non-Chinese with such a deep understanding of Ch'an. It will be immortal, and the work of Shen Hui will also be immortalized by your introduction." But such was not to be the case. Now after nearly twenty years, the volume of Shen Hui in English has still not appeared.

The last letter of the exchange was written by Thomas Merton on December 21, 1968, from Darjeeling, India, less than three weeks before his death: "I have been having a very fruitful trip in Asia. I have been in India over a month, mostly in the Himalayas, and have had good conversations with the Dalai Lama and with many others high in Tibetan Buddhism -- including some extraordinary mystics. . ." He continues his letter by giving Dr. Chi his address in Indonesia, where he was going from Bangkok following the monastic conference, to direct a retreat for the Cistercian Community at Rawa Seneng. He again mentions the Shen Hui book, and wonders if it has been published, as he wanted a copy sent to the Dalai Lama and others whom he met. He concluded his letter by telling Dr. Chi that he was adding to his knowledge of Madhyamika (the School of Mahayana Buddhism developed by Nagarjuna in the second century A.D., which stressed the notion of emptiness): "I am eager to reread Shen Hui in the light of this study and look forward very much to seeing your book -- or any other studies you may be doing on Buddhist topics. In any case, I would be glad of suggestions, some people to see, especially in Taiwan. . ."

Thomas Merton ends his introduction by making it clear that when he writes about the religious genius of the Far East as having achieved a resolution of the age-old conflict between action and contemplation, he is not criticizing Christian spirituality as such, although the following lines may sound like a prophetic warning: "In the West we are still hung up in an inexorable division between activists who run around in circles claiming that their hectic and ulcer-forming busyness is 'prayer' and contemplatives (so-called) who are completely immersed in liturgical projects, or devout pieties which are justified as supremely efficacious activities." In truth, Merton saw "a fatal division in Western thinking which makes this kind of split almost inevitable. The ground of the division is the Western obsession with will, achievement, production, self-affirmation and power." He concludes by reminding us that Shen Hui is actually talking about the ground of existence and not about a religious system, which should be obvious. Let us hope that this introduction to the Zen insight of Shen Hui will help us all understand it better whether we be activists, contemplatives or a mixture of both.

With a minimum of editing, we are happy to present Merton's introduction to Shen Hui, with the hope that it will open up a new world to many Western readers who have not as yet made their acquaintance with this great spiritual master of the East. It may even act as a catalyst for some enterprising publisher to bring out a volume of Shen Hui in English. What a signal event that would be in the advancement of the East/West dialogue and in Asian studies.
