

Madhyamika and Dharmakaya: Some Notes on Thomas Merton's Epiphany at Polonnaruwa*

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Introduction

The narrative of Thomas Merton's *The Asian Journal*, if one can seize upon its golden thread, begins with excited anticipation of a great discovery and culminates with the Polonnaruwa experience that confirms and consoles the pilgrim and the reader with the fulfillment of Merton's intense longing just days before his death in Bangkok on December 10, 1968. For many of his Christian readers the Buddhist language Merton employs in his December 4th entry, recounting his experience of December 1st, is both intriguing and challenging for the same reason. It is the writing of a Catholic monk whose account of his intense spiritual vision is shot through with Sanskrit terms and without one explicit comparison or even allusion to a Christian frame of reference. In order to appreciate the extent of his "passing over"¹ into Buddhism I want to consider the Sanskrit terms Merton employed in his journal entry. In accord with Merton's own affinity for integrating seemingly disparate traditions, I would like to consider how this very significant experience can be understood within the context of the larger narrative of his Catholic life.

From the very outset of the *Asian Journal*, Merton prepares himself and his reader for the experience that surprises him in front of the stone Buddhas in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka just days before his death. The experience surprised him because he was not especially expecting a great realization on that particular day in that particular place, but still he was anticipating such a breakthrough in an indeterminate way when he left on his Asian pilgrimage months earlier hoping to "settle the great affair" and to discover "the great compassion, the *mahakaruna*."² Indeed, a couple of weeks before he approached those Buddhas in Gal Vihara

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with his shoes off, Merton was discussing *dzogchen* and *dharmakaya* with Chatral Rimpoche and confessing that he had not yet attained to perfect emptiness, but that he was hoping to go out and get lost in a great realization.³

On December 1st, as he toured among the artifacts in the park in Polonnaruwa, Merton had a great and powerful realization. A few days later he recreated the scene and the experience in a detailed journal entry. In his account he characterized the monumental bodies of the Buddha figures as “questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing” and being filled with “the peace . . . of Madhyamika . . . that has seen through every question.” Yet he warned us that, “[f]or the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening.” Then he recalled the inner event of being “jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things”⁴ when everything became clear and evident and obvious. In an instant he had moved to a total affirmation. And his affirmation was this: “all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya, . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.”⁵

It is possible when reading Merton’s journal to appreciate the impact and the importance he assigned to this experience without having any clue what he meant by the Buddhist terms he employed. But, since the language Merton used was thoroughly Buddhist, it is the language I want to consider, especially the terms *Madhyamika* and *Dharmakaya*.

Madhyamika

At one level, *Madhyamika* or “the middle way” is simply another name for Buddhism. It suggests the Buddha’s realization of *moksha*, or liberation, by navigating through the dialectical extremes of a self-indulgent adolescence and a self-destructive asceticism that characterized his early adulthood. It also names the method for advancing one’s liberation as spelled out in the eight-fold path. But the term is richly over-determined; it also refers to a level of systematic reflection developed within the *Mahayana*⁶ traditions.

Merton’s understanding of *Madhyamika* is largely informed by his reading of T.R.V. Murti’s *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of Madhyamika System*.⁷ This is one of the many texts Merton carted around with him on his journeys from Calcutta, to Darjeeling, to Sri Lanka, and then further east to Bangkok; his journal is generously peppered with quotations from Murti.⁸ In this

immensely rich work, Murti presents *Madhyamika*, the doctrine of the middle path systematized by Nagarjuna in the 2nd or 3rd century C.E., as a denial of both a monistic reading of the Vedanta and a nihilistic reading of Buddhism. For the Mahayana, Nagarjuna's clarification of *Madhyamika* is a recovery of Buddha's original teaching that had been misunderstood by the Theravadins. For Murti, and consequently for Merton, *Madhyamika* offers a critique of any and all philosophical positions and aims at a spiritual purification of the mind "freeing it from the cobwebs and clogs of dogmatism."⁹ No doubt Merton's own approach to Zen resonated with Murti's practical and functional appraisal of *Madhyamika*. In a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether dated February 14, 1967 Merton commented, "About Zen: not abstract at all the way I see it. I use it for idol cracking . . . get the dust out quicker than anything I know . . . not piling up the mental junk."¹⁰

According to a story from the Mahayana tradition, just before the Buddha passed away he said to his *bhikkhus*, "anyone who says I have passed into nirvana cannot be my disciple; anyone who says I have not passed into nirvana cannot be my disciple." This little dictum serves as a nice illustration of *Madhyamika*. *Madhyamika* means "the middle way"; here it is the path between these two statements. What position lies between? Silence or laughter is a better response than offering an explanatory exposition, since humor is a proper fruit of humility; still, Murti's entire book attempts to elucidate just what this middle path is all about, and what is meant by the Buddha's silence.

Methodologically, *Madhyamika* is an approach to any philosophical or ideological position that would disclose the emptiness, impermanence or contingency of the particular view through the dialectical process. The process undermines and exposes the hidden, tacit, or overlooked limitations of any philosophical position. It is avowedly deconstructionist since it offers a negation of any formula; but it is not nihilistic nor agnostic because a commitment to truth still obtains and an ultimate affirmation of life establishes the context within which the deconstruction is carried out. *Madhyamika* espouses the "both/and" and "neither/nor" view always between contraries purporting absolutist positions. *Madhyamika*, then, transcends the "dualistic grasping" inherent in *avidya* (ignorance).¹¹ Some of Merton's own notations on Murti's

text help us to consider what he was gleaning from it, or at least what he found complementary to his own way of thinking. Merton commented:

Madhyamika does not oppose one thesis with another. It seeks the flaw both in thesis and in antithesis. It investigates the beginningless illusion that holds "views" to be true in so far as they appeal to us and when they appeal to us we argue that they are not "views" but absolute truth. All views are rejected for this reason. ". . . Criticism is Sunyata—the utter negation of thought as revelatory of the real." . . . The empirical, liberated from conventional thought forms is identical with the absolute.¹²

And a couple of pages later Merton wrote, "The purpose of *Madhyamika* is not to convince, but to explode the argument itself. Is this sadism? No, it is compassion! It exorcises the devil of dogmatism."¹³

The insight that engenders *Madhyamika* grasps that our ordinary language (or unenlightened mind) is falsely dichotomous because it implicitly accepts the subject/object division as foundational, primary and basic. When one grasps the unity that precedes, transcends, and conditions the subject-object division that emerges in consciousness, one discovers a new freedom. When the opposition comes together (or dissolves) in a penetrating insight, it often finds expression in the mystical paradox, the *coincidentia oppositorum*; the *todo y nada* of St. John of the Cross; Suzuki's "zero equals infinity, infinity equals zero" or even Eckhart's prayer to God to be free from God. *Madhyamika* denies the final validity of all other positions in order to affirm the illimitability of *rigpa*,¹⁴ the emptiness of mind that gives rise to each limited view. There is an affirmation of transcendence that is essentially performed by *Madhyamika* but not explicitly declared and, thus, translated into a philosophical position. The denying of any particular claim to fully determine the nature of reality amounts to an implicit affirmation of reality as transcendent of any one view. And the affirming of transcendence is simultaneously an affirmation of nature and immanence, because *Madhyamika* refuses to set one up against another. It is both a refusal to reduce reality to monism (a single view) and a refusal to fracture reality into a pluralism of many unrelated, mutually exclusive, or irreconcilable views. In his recollection, Merton sees the peace of *Madhyamika*

exploding from the rocks. Merton expresses the realization with the final affirmation, "all life is charged with *dharmakaya*, . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion."

Dharmakaya

Dharmakaya translates as "the body of truth" or more directly, "truth body" and it can be used in numerous ways. Again, we can cull through the many books Merton was toting around with him to find out whence his conception of *dharmakaya* was forming. An important influence seems to have been Evans-Wentz's translations entitled *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*,¹⁵ there the term is used in its traditional relation to the two other bodies of the Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha is said to be realized in three distinct ways, or "bodies." This doctrine is called *trikaya*, and the three bodies are (1) *nirmanakaya*, or a living Bodhisattva, or earthly incarnation of the Buddha, (2) *sambhogakaya*, a bodhisattva inhabiting a celestial sphere, in splendid paradise, who imparts wisdom to pilgrims seeking liberation, and finally (3) *dharmakaya*, or "truth body" which means that the essential nature of Buddha is identical with the non-dual, absolute or ultimate emptiness (*sunyata*). This is the Buddha's first body or, for lack of a better term, his true or essential nature, as well as the essential nature of all beings.¹⁶

Given this meaning of the term *dharmakaya* it is odd for Merton to say, "everything is charged with" it, since this syntax can reify the *dharmakaya* as a "something" that imbues "something else." It is tempting to attribute this odd phraseology to the fact that Merton relied on Evans-Wentz, whose own translations of Tibetan texts were heavily influenced, and in some cases seriously flawed, by his theosophical world-view.¹⁷ In addition, many of the texts Evans-Wentz undertook in translation were texts explicitly reserved for initiated practitioners, and presumably those initiations and practices established contextual parameters for a kind of orthodoxy. However, I would suggest that the odd construction is due in part to the fact that Merton was not writing this with a scholar's concern for technical accuracy, but he was interested in evoking and recalling a response, and his prose is still successful in this regard. Additionally, Merton himself did not go back and edit this (at which point he may well have assumed a more critical posture and noticed the awkwardness of the rendering). At any

rate, *dharmakaya*, for *Madhyamika*, is not a spiritual substance permeating a non-spiritual nature, but is identical with both emptiness and form.

The book that Evans-Wentz calls "Book II," Donald S. Lopez, Jr. informs us, is a translation of a text originally written by Padma dkar po (1527-1592) entitled *Notes on Mahamudra* (Phyag chen gyi zin bris). Here the original author explicates four ways of realizing *Mahamudra*, or the Great Seal, or enlightenment. Padma dkar po speaks of two ordinary ways and two extraordinary ways. The latter of the extraordinary ways is called the "uncultivated yoga" whereby without meditation and prior dispositional practices the one to be enlightened suddenly "identifies the natural spontaneity of all phenomena as the truth body (*dharmakaya*) . . ."18 This provides a fairly sound avenue for understanding Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa from within the Buddhist frame of reference he employed. Merton's own description that "everything is charged with *dharmakaya*" resembles this identification.

Dzogchen and Sacramental Vision

At Polonnaruwa, Merton had a flash of insight into the essential emptiness of nature, and found the insight led to the *mahakaruna*, the great compassion that arises beyond and within the emptiness, and in fact is not separate from the emptiness. Merton's final affirmation that "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion" is clearly consonant with the language of *dzogchen*.19 Donald S. Lopez, Jr. describes the *Mahamudra* realization of the Great Seal, analogously akin to the Great Perfection of *Nyingma*, or *dzogchen* as "a state of enlightened awareness in which phenomenal appearance and noumenal emptiness are unified" in a single vision.20 Again, it is quite easy to see this as correlative with Merton's language concerning his experience at Polonnaruwa. Given the linguistic parameters set by the Sanskrit terms, we still wonder about how Merton, who was always concerned to "unite divided worlds" in himself and "transcend them in Christ," might have understood and integrated his Buddhist experience of the "Great Seal" within his own Catholic faith life.

I propose that the language of *dzogchen* as the "unity of emptiness and compassion" and the unity of "noumenal emptiness and phenomenal appearance" would also remind the Catholic monk of St. Augustine's definition of a sacrament as "the visible form of

invisible grace."²¹ This correlation would have been natural for Merton to make since he had already, in his dialogue with Suzuki, identified the Buddhist experience of "emptiness" with his Christian experience of "grace," however tentative that identification may have been.²² In this sense we can understand Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa as a sacramental experience as well as an experience of *dzogchen*.

When we acquire the clear vision of faith, we can see the whole world as a sacrament. St. Ignatius Loyola prayed to "see God in all things." Through the eyes of faith the present moment becomes "the great sacrament."²³ Merton enjoyed this sacramental vision of nature more regularly than most. Indeed, if we were to read Merton's nature poems, which are often also his "Zen-mystical" poems, we find that this vision is expressed in poetry long before he was suddenly overwhelmed with the experience at Polonnaruwa. As an example of this, in Merton's 1957 collection of poetry called *The Strange Islands*, he has a poem titled "In Silence" where he expresses a vision of nature as secretly and silently on fire with the presence of God. This poem can be read not only as a sacramental view of creation but even as a foreshadowing of his experience of the burning stones of Polonnaruwa. Merton wrote:

Be still
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your

Name.
Listen
To the living walls.
Who are you?
Who
Are you? Whose
Silence are you? . . .

. . . The whole
World is secretly on fire. The stones
Burn, even the stones
They burn me. How can a man be still or
Listen to all things burning? How can he dare

To sit with them when
 All their silence
 Is on fire?²⁴

For Merton, we are, and everything is, the silence on fire with God. Merton taught that “there is ‘no such thing’ as God because God is neither a ‘what’ nor a ‘thing’ but a pure ‘Who’.”²⁵ For Merton, the emptiness and compassion of Polonnaruwa are also in a real sense the emptiness of creation and the compassion of Christ, the emptiness and compassion of the Triune God. Thomas Merton’s experience at Polonnaruwa was certainly contextualized in the culture of Buddhism, but it is not discontinuous with his Catholic life story. Indeed, Merton thought that Catholicism and Buddhism were mutually complementary since these traditions were dialogically engaged within him in a kind of mystical dance.

Christianity carries forward and makes present the divine Word of the Transcendent Source, who speaks in and through the apostolic *kerygma* and the *koinonia*. Buddhism fiercely debunks the false conceptions we tend to erect about ourselves, and the world, and even the ultimate source, and reveals the essential emptiness or radical contingency of all individual existents. For Merton, the apophatic or iconoclastic function of Buddhism helped till the soil to receive more deeply the good news of Christ, the Word, who becomes incarnate in time in history and community through a process of self-emptying (*kenosis*), and whose acceptance in the world of “rapacious men” demands the utter humility of self-forgetting. Christ is both the *kenosis* and the Word of God, and through our own self-emptying we are transformed by the Spirit; Christ the Word becomes incarnate in us.

The *karuna* (compassion) that Merton declares in union with *sunyata* (emptiness), was for him not something other than the compassion of the Christ, the one who reveals to him exactly what “compassion” can mean. Apart from the life of Christ, the one who willingly suffers with us and for us, and whose suffering heals us, “compassion” can end up being, as Flannery O’Connor once lamented, “a vague and popular word that sounds good in anyone’s mouth . . . which no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense, so it is always safe for anybody to use.”²⁶ This may be the case for all words. The point is, divorced from its context, the word becomes meaningless. The kenotic hymn of Philippians and the passion of the Christ would, for Thomas

Merton, reveal a profound and personal meaning for the *sunyata* and *karuna* of *dzogchen*. Within Merton there is a complementary interpenetration of contexts, Buddhist and Christian, and his interest in the former always included the faith commitments he had made within the latter. Merton's contemplative Catholicism provided him with a place from which to move into the Buddhist world, a first language with which to correlate meanings within a new linguistic frame of reference. But it was always to Christ that Merton would turn to help him define the essential terms and conditions of his own life. The "both/and" and "neither/nor" positions of *Madhyamika* would only support his faith in the paradoxical Christ who is both truly human and truly divine, neither imprisoned by suffering and death nor exempt from it; who is the begotten, incarnate Word of the Absolute, Eternal and Unbegotten.

Notes

1. John S. Dunne uses this term to speak about a form of the spiritual journey that involves temporarily immersing oneself in, or passing over to, a tradition other than one's own in order to deepen one's understanding and appreciation both of the other tradition and of one's own. See *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. ix-xii.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton, et al. (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 4.

3. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 143.

4. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 233.

5. Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 235.

6. According to Roger Corless, Mahayana emerges as a distinct tradition on the Indian subcontinent in the first century C.E. at least in part as a reform movement liberating the Dharma from dogmatic rigidity. Mahayana contains two theoretical traditions: *Madhyamika* and *Yogachara*. I will attempt to elucidate only the former. See Corless's *The Vision of Buddhism* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1989), p. 290.

7. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of Madhyamika System* (London: Allen and Unwin, 2nd edition, 1960).

8. *The Asian Journal* also includes a section for complementary reading (pp. 263-292) that incorporates many helpful and poignant snippets from Murti's text.

9. T.R.V. Murti, p. 146.

10. See *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, edited by Mary Tardiff, OP (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), p. 24.

11. See *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*, Teachings Given in the West by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Translated by Geshe Thupten Jinpa and Richard Barron, edited by Patrick Gaffney (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 2000), pp. 185-187.

12. Here Merton was reflecting on the material found in pages 140-143 in Murti's text. See *The Asian Journal*, p. 115.

13. This is Merton's synthesis of the material from 145-146 in Murti's text. See *The Asian Journal*, p. 118.

14. *Rigpa* is the dynamic, creative, emptiness of mind that gives rise to both self and world of objects. It is an instance of *sunyata* (emptiness) and not separate from it. See His Holiness the Dalai Lama's *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*, pp. 47-61.

15. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines: Seven Books of Wisdom of the Great Path* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), first edition 1935.

16. In the Glossary of *The Asian Journal*, the definition of *dharmakaya* is taken from Murti's text and reads, "the cosmical body of the Buddha, the essence of all beings", (p. 372).

17. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., in his New Foreword to the most recent edition of W. Y. Evans-Wentz's translations of these seven Tibetan books makes the flaws and limitations of Evans-Wentz's work very clear to newer readers while still lauding Evans-Wentz for a work remarkable for its time.

18. See Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, pp. 148-149.

19. It is important here to recall Merton's conversations with Chatral Rimpoche with whom he spoke for a couple of hours about *dharmakaya*, *dzogchen*, and relations among Buddhist and Christian doctrines (*The Asian Journal*, pp. 142-144). Indeed, it was this conversation that led Merton to describe *dzogchen* as the "unity of sunyata and karuna" which means the "unity of emptiness and compassion" the precise terms Merton uses later to recall his experience of December 1st 1968.

20. See Donald Lopez's Foreword to Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, p. I.

21. This broad but classic definition of sacrament commonly attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo was also taught by St. Thomas Aquinas and affirmed by the Council of Trent (Session XIII, Decree on the Holy Eucharist, Chapter 3). It also reminds the Merton reader of the opening line of his poetic essay *Hagia Sophia*, "There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness." See *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 363.

22. In his Final Remarks on the dialogue with Suzuki published in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* Merton says that the "divine mercy" is grace, not "as a reified substance given to us by God from without, but grace precisely as emptiness, as freedom, as liberality, as gift" (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*), pp. 136-137.

23. Jean Pierre De Caussade S.J. (d. 1751) wrote *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* wherein he celebrated this Ignatian ideal of seeing God in all things.

24. For the entire poem see *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 280-81.

25. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 13.

26. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Noonday Press, 1969), p. 43.