

“WHO IS IT THAT HAS A TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE?”:

Main’s Meditator as Merton’s No-One

by **Gregory J. Ryan**

INTRODUCTION

I write this strictly as a non-professional, a rank amateur. I was long a Merton fanatic (though I keep my fanaticism in the closet — usually) — and this interest led me to John Main’s teaching.

Throughout my life there has been a tugging at my heart. From childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood, I have felt an attraction to quiet prayer and solitude. There was a need that I felt which was not addressed from the parish pulpit. It wasn’t until I was twenty years old and first read Thomas Merton that I found that for which I had been blindly groping. I never met Father Louis “in his body,” as he would say, but I have met his spirit in his books. That meeting has made all the difference in my life. Since then, through generous correspondence with monks across the country, I have been encouraged to find my way in the world as a husband, father, and teacher.

My contact with Dom John Main, O.S.B., goes back to 1977 when, in response to an inquiry of mine about setting up a “contemplative prayer group,” Brother Patrick Hart sent me a mimeographed copy of a series of conferences on MEDITATION that Father John had recently presented to the community at the Abbey of Gethsemani.* Brother Pat cannot imagine the debt of gratitude I owe him.

I read these conferences straight through and was dumb-struck. When I had recovered, I wrote to Father John thanking him for his message. From our correspondence I learned of the Oblate Community affiliated with the monastery. In August of 1981 and 1982 I traveled to Montreal to become an oblate. During my brief visits I was privileged to have several private conversations with Father John. He was very interested in our family and expressed his gratitude that laypeople would join the monks on their pilgrimage of prayer. He was enthusiastically supportive of our decision to get rid of our television set --- a decision we have not regretted these five

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DOM JOHN MAIN, O.S.B.

years. He blessed a St. Benedict medal that friends had given me. On the Feast of St. Lawrence, during the mass in which I made my final oblation, Father John spoke movingly of the long and loving relationship which was developing between our family and the monastic community. From his wheelchair he presented me with the oblate cross and we exchanged the greeting of peace. Words cannot express how dear these memories are to me.

There is only one teacher, the Holy Spirit, whose voice has spoken to me in the books of Thomas Merton and in the words of John Main. I offer the following thoughts in heart-felt gratitude.

There is a story from St. John Cassian that tells how he and his companion, Germanus, went out into the desert to find the "meaning of life." The Desert Fathers told them what to do, but the two pilgrims had to return a second time to find out *how* to do it.

Regarding the life of prayer, it seems that Father Louis (Thomas Merton) taught me the "what." Father John taught me the "how."

In ZEN AND THE BIRDS OF APPETITE which I first read in 1971 and which I recently re-read, I am struck by many statements that fit in very well with Father John's teaching. While there are similar passages throughout both authors' books, I will limit myself to this one book of Merton's and to Father John's recent MOMENT OF CHRIST — THE PATH OF MEDITATION. This is a collection of talks Father John gave to the weekly meditation groups at the monastery in Montreal. Since Father John's death in December 1982, the talks have been collected and published to serve as spiritual reading and encouragement to meditators around the world.

"Who is it..."

The inspiration for Father Louis' and Father John's work can be traced, I think, to St. Paul's "Christ within you." They both saw that the primary task of each of us is to live our lives as Christ?

Merton wrote so often of the importance of finding the "true self," but what is meant by this "true self?" (The following quotations are taken from ZEN AND THE BIRDS OF APPETITE.)

The true self is a self *without illusions*. When we let go of all our illusions about ourselves and the world, we are poor and "it is precisely in this pure poverty when one is no longer a 'self' that one recovers one's true identity in God" (p. 12) The true self is not "self-conscious". *What is required of us is "a totally different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking-self which is its own justification and its own center. We do not 'take account of' experiences, we simply 'experience.'"* (p. 24) *The true self is utterly free.* "The extinction of the social and cultural self is a breakthrough into a realm of mystical liberty in which the 'self' is lost and then reconstituted." (p. 5) This is the meaning of Paul's "I live now not I, but Christ lives in me." The true self is *simple*. Merton suggests that modern man needs a "liberation from his inordinate self-consciousness, his monumental self-awareness, his obsession with self-affirmation, so that he may enjoy the freedom from concern that goes with being simply what he is..." (p. 31) We come to possess the liberty of the children of God.

Merton encourages us, in these few quotations, to look beyond the false ego-self and to discover the true "no-self." To our question "Who is it...?" I am sure Merton would respond whimsically "No-one."

To put our task into proper perspective, Father John writes, "The first requirement is that we begin to understand that we must pass beyond egoism, so that 'my' prayer doesn't become even a possibility. We are summoned to see with the eyes of Christ and to love with the heart of Christ..." (p. ix) (The quotations in this section are taken from MOMENT OF CHRIST.) Later he says that the enlightenment of Jesus enlightens us and enlightens the whole of creation "only when we forget ourselves." (p. 104)

The question remains: *How do we get our false selves, our egos, out of the way? How do we forget our false selves and recover our true selves?* "No amount of self-analysis or self-examination will ever reveal to you who you are. But if you take the focus of your attention off yourself and project it forward then you will discover the other, and in discovering the other, you will discover your self." (p. 86) The Scriptures tell us that "He who will find his life must lose it and he who loses his life will find it."

The way of "forgetting" as taught by Father John is the way of "pure prayer," the way of meditation. This way of pure prayer makes use of the *mantra*, a sacred word or phrase that is recited faithfully and lovingly throughout the entire time of meditation. (The word "meditation" has for its original meaning: "to stay in the center." It is the present-day expression of an unbroken tradition that has been handed down from teacher to disciple from the times of John Cassian, St. Benedict, the author of THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING, and others. It reaches back to the time of Jesus, and beyond.) This prayer opens us to experience Reality.

The way of meditation has been for me a journey of faith. But as we meditate "it is revealed to us that we are on the journey away from fear, away from unreality, away from illusion into the only reality there is. That Reality is God. That Reality is Love." (p. 34) This Reality has been made available to each of us through the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. all that is required of us is a generous response.

My purpose, naturally has been to point out a common ground that falls in the shadow of these two giants of Western monasticism. In the darkness of that shadow is hidden a Great Light.

REFERENCES

All Merton quotes are from ZEN AND THE BIRDS OF APPETITE (New York: New Directions, 1968).

All Main quotes are from MOMENT OF CHRIST --- THE PATH OF MEDITATION (New York: Crossroads, 1984 & London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984).

* These talks were later published as THE GETHSEMANI TALKS. In 1977 Dom John Main, O.S.B., was invited by the Bishop of Montreal to leave his monastery in England, where he had been teaching meditation, to come to Montreal to found a contemplative monastery in an urban setting. The work of the monastery --- teaching meditation to anyone wanting to learn --- continues under the spiritual guidance of Father John's friend and successor as Prior, Dom Laurence Freeman. There are groups of meditators around the world who are affiliated with the monastery. Many lay people have entered into a special relationship with the monastery by becoming Oblates. Information about the monastery or about Father John's publications and tapes may be obtained from: The Benedictine Priory of Montreal, 1475 Pine Avenue West, montreal, Quebec, CANADA H3G 1B3.