

# A Country Whose Center is Everywhere: Merton at the Mim Tea Estate

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By **Erlinda G. Paguio**

After Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras in 1998, journalist Ted Koppel went to visit one of the towns most hurt by the disaster. He focused his report on the destruction, the sufferings, and the amazing resiliency of the Honduran people who were left homeless. He was particularly amazed and baffled by a man whose house was buried six feet deep in mud. The man and his neighbors spent several hours arduously unearthing the door of the house by using all the manpower, picks, shovels and rope available. With an improvised pulley, they managed to unhinge the door and pull it out of the mud. The owner and his neighbors rejoiced greatly and carried the muddy door to a nearby river to wash it. Koppel followed them curiously, puzzled by what he had observed the whole day. He asked the owner of the door, "Why did you spend all that time and energy digging out your door and washing it? Of what use is that door to you when you do not have a house?" The owner of the door replied confidently, "I have a door; I can rebuild my house!" Koppel concluded his program perplexed at the Honduran's answer. Indeed, it was easier to comprehend a house without a door than a door without a house.

At a yard sale one weekend, I saw two wooden doors standing beside a tree. A big sign posted on them said: "Free doors!" I don't know if anyone stopped to take them. I thought that it was very interesting how people considered doors. In an affluent society, it is easy to discard old doors and replace them with new ones. In an impoverished town, men would spend hours digging out a door buried in mud.

A few weeks ago, while driving by a swanky subdivision in a Michigan suburb, my companion pointed at a huge wrought-iron gate in front of an imposing house. As I looked at the gate and the house, I realized that there was no fence around the estate. I wondered why the owner built that gate in front of the house, and kept all the sides of the estate open. That gate struck me as being pompous and fake, because it did not meet my idea of what a gate should be. I thought gates were used as entrances and exits to an enclosure. On the other hand,

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perhaps the owner of the house wanted a grand entrance to his grand house, and was less concerned about leaving the perimeters of the house open.

The question of doors and gates became even more complex as I watched the pictures of Albanian refugees from Kosovo fleeing their homes and trekking by foot, cars, trucks, and horse carts to the borders of Macedonia. Because of the massive number of refugees, the gates at the borders were closed because it was impossible to absorb all of them. The plight of the old and the young, men, women and children aroused not only compassion for them, but outrage at the incredible situation of systematic ethnic cleansing by Yugoslav President Milosevic, and the systematic bombing of Serbia by NATO forces to stop his policy. A television camera captured the helplessness and shock of a man who lost his home and family during the ordeal of leaving Kosovo. When a journalist asked him what he planned to do with his life, he wept uncontrollably. He then looked out to somewhere far and replied: "I guess I will build a life out of nothing."

These images of doors and gates stayed with me as I reflected on Thomas Merton's last retreat at the Mim Tea Estate in Darjeeling, India on November 19, 1968, three weeks before his accidental death in Bangkok. Merton's meditation included a reflection on three doors, which are actually one door. The first door is "the door of emptiness. Of no-where." It is "of no place for a self, which cannot be entered by a self."<sup>1</sup> Here Merton seems to be alluding to two selves: our true self which is grounded in God, and our false self that is dominated by self-centered willfulness. The true self cannot be compatible with the false self. For Merton this door of emptiness is of no use to someone who is going somewhere. "Is it a door at all?" he asked. He answered his own question by saying that this is "the door of no-door." This "door of nothingness" is a way to a life that is open to all possibilities, and that is not restricted by one's own plans for oneself, or determined by one's self-serving goals in life. This "door of nothingness" is realized when one becomes empty of one's self. The second door that Merton wrote about is the "door without sign, without indicator, without information." This is the same as "the door of nothingness" (*OSM*, 285). No one can point to it; nothing can be used as a sign for it. The third door is the "door without wish." One arrives at this door without wishing for it, without planning it or selecting it as the way. It is a "Door without aim. Door without end," a door without "a key" (*OSM*, 285). Merton was very paradoxical when he said that there is no use asking for this door, yet you must ask. This door, however, is very elusive; it fades, recedes and diminishes into nothing when you seek it. He wrote that this door has no foundation, yet it is the end of sorrow and there is nothing else to be done. There is no threshold, no step, no advance, no recession, no entry, and no non-entry to this door, which ends all doors.

Merton's meditation on the doors led him to a deep reflection on Christ, Who said, "I am the door." In St. John's Gospel (10:7 ff.), Jesus spoke about the Good Shepherd, who is the gatekeeper. The sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name. He opens the gate for them, and he leads them out and he leads them back in. The Pharisees did not understand this parable, so Jesus said again: "I am telling you the truth: I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever comes in by me will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only in order to steal, kill and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life, life in all its fullness."

Merton's meditation on Christ as the door reminds me of a journal entry he made on April 11, 1948. Merton at that time had realized how preoccupied he was with the many details in community life that upset him. He wrote: "I let my mind fill with all the little irrelevancies about Reverend Father's character, and his age, and his way of doing things. How weak and human my obedience is:

always considering the way things affect me in my own personal tastes and judgments.”<sup>12</sup> Merton’s confessor told him that he was too restless and that what he was looking for (union with God) was right in front of his nose and he could not see it. Merton realized his lack of detachment. He wrote in his journal: “What I need most of all is the grace to really accept God as He gives Himself to me in every situation. . . . Good Shepherd, You have a wild and crazy sheep in love with thorns and brambles. But please don’t get tired of looking for me! I know You won’t. For You have found me. All I have to do is stay found.” Note what Merton said twenty years before he went on his Asian trip: “What I need most of all is the grace to really accept God as He gives Himself to me in every situation” (*ES*, 199). It was one thing to know the need to be open and receptive to God’s grace in every present moment, and it was a real trial to live each present situation with grace.

Merton’s meditation on Christ as the “Nailed door” struck me so strongly because of the way he expressed his insight on the cross. Christ’s persecutors have tried to shut Christ as the door by nailing Him on the cross, yet Christ’s resurrection showed that He was not a door that could be shut with death. He rose from the dead and lives as the Risen Lord. Merton’s meditation also led to his reflection on Psalm 24:7: “Gate raise your arches, rise, you ancient doors, let the king of glory in!”

Merton added these lines: “I am the opening, the ‘shewing,’ the revelation, the door of light, the Light itself. ‘I am the Light,’ and the light is in the world from the beginning. (It seemed to be darkness.)” (*OSM*, 285). These last lines reminded me very much of Merton’s reflections on Julian of Norwich in December 1961, when he was praying to have a wise heart. He observed with much awe that Julian expressed the content of her revelations as *deeply experienced*. Julian then thought, and her thought deepened again into her life “until her whole life as a recluse at Norwich was simply a matter of getting completely saturated in the light she had received all at once, in the ‘shewings,’ when she thought she was about to die.”<sup>13</sup>

It seems to me that we can say the same thing of Merton in November 1968. He, too, had become saturated in the experiences that God had given him. While he was at Dharamsala visiting the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan monks, he began to appreciate more fully his hermitage at Gethsemani. His trip away from the monastery gave him the perspective he needed to appreciate it. He realized that even in the Dalai Lama’s mountain residence there were few places where one did not run into someone. He saw roads, paths, and trails filled with people.

The beauty and quiet of the mountains, his encounters with the lamas, and their open and full communication with him moved him very much. Merton observed the change in his perception of the mountain and the Tibetan dwellings at Dharamsala. He called this the “‘mandala awareness’ of space” (*OSM*, 254). His visit to the various rimpoches oriented him to the pattern of relationships and dwellings. He saw the spiritual order in which the amiable rimpoches and the Dalai Lama were seated. He perceived the central presence of “a fully awake, energetic, alert, nondusty, nondim, nonwhispering Buddha” (*OSM*, 254).

Merton also became much more deeply aware of his interrelatedness with the world around him. As he rode through Lower Dharamsala in the Dalai Lama’s jeep, he saw the contradiction between his wearing the white Cistercian robe and black scapular because it was expected of him to wear it, and his own policy of not appearing as a monk, a priest, and a cleric in the world.

On his drive to the Mim Tea Estate Merton wondered several times why he was going there. He had noted earlier in his journal that after hearing about this place, he thought of making a retreat there. He had plenty of time to think and to reassess in more critical terms his whole Indian experi-

ence. Although he realized later on that this was not the place he was called to settle down, he was glad to have come. The place was beautiful and quiet, but Merton thought that it had nothing that he could not have found essentially at Needle Rock or Bear Harbor in California when he visited there in May 1968. His journal entry for May 30, 1968 stated: "The country which is nowhere is the real home; only it seems that the Pacific Shore at Needle Rock is more nowhere than this, and Bear Harbor is more nowhere still" (*OSM*, 110).

At the Mim Tea Estate Merton thought that perhaps he found an illusion of Asia that needed to be dissolved there (see *OSM*, 282). He remarked that the quiet and comfortable bungalow could have been anywhere. "It could have been, just as well, my own hermitage at Gethsemani – only much quieter" (*OSM*, 283-84).

What does Merton mean when he says that this place has nothing that he could not have found in his hermitage at Gethsemani, or at Needle Rock or Bear Harbor in California? While he was in California, he wrote about the need to be more than just quiet and productive, more than just being able to pray, read, and cultivate holy leisure. "There is a need of effort, deepening, change and transformation. Not that I must undertake a special project of self-transformation or that I must 'work on myself.'" What he needed to do most was to let change come quietly and invisibly inside him because he felt "a great need of clarification of mindfulness" (*OSM*, 113). A journal entry he made on July 19, 1968 expressed his desire to find a really quiet, isolated place, where no one knew who he was, and where he could get down to the thing that he really wanted and needed to do, from which he could come out to help others. "I want to disappear," he said (*OSM*, 142). This phrase, "I want to disappear" refers to a deep longing for interior solitude.

In *Seeds of Contemplation* Merton wrote that although physical solitude, exterior silence and real recollection are all morally necessary for anyone who wants to lead a contemplative life, they are just a means to an end. If we fail to understand the end, we will make a wrong use of the means. We have to remember, he said, that we seek solitude in order to grow there in love for God and for other persons. Love of God is the one end that embraces all other ends. "The truest solitude," according to him, "is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you: it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul." This abyss of interior solitude is created by a hunger that no created thing can satisfy.<sup>4</sup> A person finds solitude by experiencing thirst, sorrow, poverty and desire, and the person who has found solitude is empty, as though he had been emptied by death. This person has advanced beyond all horizons, and there are no directions left in which he could travel. "This is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by standing still" (*SC*, 52).

In July 1960, after Merton read Chuang Tzu's writings, he wrote: "Here I am not dead, because this is my life, and I am awake, and breathing, and listening with all I have got, and sinking to the root. There is no question that I am completely committed to interior solitude. Where – makes no difference? Not a question of 'where.' Not 'tampering with my heart' or with the hearts of others. This is imperative. . . . To be one who 'though walking on dry land is as though he were at the bottom of a pool'" (*ITW*, 18).

This quotation gives a full description of Merton as he was during his retreat at Darjeeling. Merton was wide-awake, breathing and listening and sinking to the root. He was reading, reflecting, observing, hearing, seeing, absorbing the local color, at the same time he is in conversation with himself and with others, and in argument with himself. He had finished reading T.R.V. Murti's book,

*The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. Murti had written that the real heart of Buddha's teaching is the doctrine of emptiness, of enlightenment, which is *sunyata*.<sup>5</sup> Murti also discussed the silence of the Buddha, and the dialectic of criticism of what is and what is not, and the reality of the middle way.

Merton's illness at the Mim Tea Estate made me recall a period in January 1968 when he had a bad case of flu in Gethsemani. He said that it was the worst sickness he had because he could not say his office nor do anything except to get up occasionally to make tea and take a pill. He thought that an experience like his illness was purifying because it reminded him that he should not be too attached to the limited view of what he thought life was, the immediate task, the business of getting done what he thought was important, of enjoying what he wanted right then and there. He was not able to do anything or think about anything then. In the evening, however, he observed the incredible beauty of the bare trees against the metallic blue of the evening as suspended in a kind of Buddhist emptiness. He asked: "Does it occur to anyone that Sunyata [emptiness] is the very ground of life?" (*OSM*, 44).

When Merton arrived at the Mim Tea Estate on November 15, 1968, he already had a bad cold and a severe sore throat that was aggravated by the coal smoke in the air. Merton called himself the tired *penseur*, the tired thinker. He expressed his weariness by saying he was tired of and annoyed at Kanchenjunga being hidden by the clouds, so that he was unable to get a good picture of the mountain. "What do I care for a 28,000-foot postcard when I have this bloody cold?" He was tired of blue domes, and the blue clouds of smoke that aggravated his allergy. "Fog hides the mountains. Fog gets in the sore throat" (*OSM*, 281).

As he settled in the bungalow at the Mim Tea Estate, Merton was glad to have come there. He felt that there was too much movement in his life, too much "looking for" something: an answer, a vision, 'something other'. This looking for something else, a process of differentiation, was an illusion that led to mindlessness instead of mindfulness, of seeing all in emptiness (see *OSM*, 281). A Buddhist monk, Bhikkhu Khantipalo, whom Merton met in Bangkok on October 17, 1968, had spoken to him about mindfulness – "the awareness of what one is doing while one is doing it, and of nothing else."<sup>6</sup>

Merton's dream about Kanchenjunga on November 18, however, gave him a new perspective of what is seen and not seen. In the dream he saw the mountain in all its purity and beauty, and he heard a voice that said: "There is another side to the mountain." Merton realized that he was seeing the other side of the mountain, the side seen from the Tibetan direction. When he woke up the next morning, he ended his argument with Kanchenjunga. He said: "There is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain – the side that had never been photographed and turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing" (*OSM*, 284). Merton then took pictures of Kanchenjunga. That same afternoon the clouds parted and Merton had an excellent view of the mountain peaks. In the evening the clouds cleared some more. Merton exclaimed: "O Tantric Mother Mountain! Yin-yang palace of opposites in unity! Palace of *anicca*, impermanence and patience, solidity and nonbeing, existence and wisdom. A great *consent* . . . to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN. Testament of Kanchenjunga. Testament of fatherless old Melchizedek. Testament from before the time of oxen and sacrifice. Testament without Law. NEW Testament. Full circle!" (*OSM*, 286-87).

I must confess that I had some difficulty interpreting Merton's expression of his experience with Kanchenjunga, but significant moments from my own experience pointed to some understand-

ing of what Merton may have experienced at the Mim Tea Estate retreat. My mind went back to my own meditation several years ago at a hotel balcony in Cortina, Italy. I sat for several hours looking at the Dolomites, the Italian Alps. I was thoroughly awed at the grandeur and solidity of the ancient mountains, sometimes hidden by clouds, sometimes radiantly visible under the shining sun. I felt most grateful for the opportunity of being before the majestic mountains, at the same time I was observing the simplicity and ordinariness of a middle-aged man chopping wood all day below my balcony. My experience resonated with Merton's. In his November 19, 1968 journal, he wrote: "Out on the mountainside in the warm sun there is the sound of an ax where someone splits wood for fuel at the tea factory" (*OSM*, 284).

What is even more interesting in Merton's experience is his recollection of St. Elizabeth as he read the commemoration of the saint. He remembered Sister Helen Elizabeth to whom he spoke about Elizabeth of the Trinity when he was at St. Joseph's infirmary being prepared for nose surgery. Merton remembered how everything had changed since 1950. This he considered a good example of *anicca* or impermanence. Eighteen years ago, the only place he could call his city was Louisville because that was the city he goes to when he said that he was going to town.<sup>7</sup> Eighteen years later he was at the Mim Tea Estate.

Merton remarked that the Mim Tea Estate was a good example of impermanence. The landslides that had scarred the sides of the tea plantation were ironic and silent comments on the apparent permanence of the eternal snows of solid Kanchenjunga. I think this is an important observation because here we find Merton reflecting and commenting on his own experience eighteen years ago and connecting his immediate experience of his surroundings.

Two gospel stories also aided me in understanding this event in Merton's life. The first one, from Luke 9:28-36, is the story of Christ's transfiguration, when he took Peter, John and James up onto a mountain to pray. His face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzlingly white, while he was praying. Moses and Elijah appeared in glory and talked to him. A cloud came and overshadowed them, and the disciples grew fearful as the others entered it. A voice was heard saying: "This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him."

It seems to me that something similar had happened to Merton during his retreat. In his dream he saw the other side of Kanchenjunga, and heard a voice saying that there is another side to the mountain. The next day, he had an altogether different experience of the mountain. The clouds had cleared, he could take photographs, and he could see and appreciate the various peaks and the towering presence of the mountain. Then he entered into his meditation on the three doors that are one door. He concluded that meditation with "lift up your heads, O gates, for the King of glory."

The gospel story that I remembered while reading this is from John 17:1-26, when Jesus is with his disciples for the last time, and He is telling them that the Father is in Him, they must find peace in Him, and they must be brave because they will encounter trouble in the world. Jesus then raised his eyes to heaven and prayed his priestly prayer, asking the Father to glorify Him, so that His Son could glorify the Father. He prayed that all might be one in them just as He and the Father are one.

The passages that followed Merton's exclamation of "Testament of Kanchenjunga. Testament of fatherless old Melchizedek. Testament from before the time of oxen and sacrifice. Testament without Law. NEW Testament. Full circle!" evoke links with Merton's own life. His experience of interior solitude at the Mim Tea Estate suggests a deep transforming union with God. Mani-

fested in the various appearances of the mountain, hidden and unhidden by clouds, was God's deep love for him. His expression, "Testament of fatherless old Melchizedek," hinted at his religious experience in Rome after his father's death. Merton is the fatherless old Melchizedek, who had come a full circle in being found by God, and who discovered the same God in Asia (see *OSM*, 287).

His reflections on the passages he read from Conze's *Buddhist Thought in India* – modern civilizations dimming man's immediate awareness of the spiritual world; man's need for solitude to come face to face with the deepest forces of reality; one of the more elementary qualifications for those who aspire towards selfless love is to enter into solitude; and friendly love is rooted in truth rather than in passionate need – appear to be reflections on his own need and experience of solitude and love.

He wrote in his journal: "Whatever may be the answer, or nonanswer, to my question, this is a good retreat and I appreciate the quiet more than I can say. This quiet, with time to read, study, meditate, and *not talk to anyone*, is something essential in my life" (*OSM*, 287).

I would like to suggest that we include the Mim Tea Estate retreat when we look at Merton during his last days. Merton's experience of inner clearness as he approached the various figures of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon, has been quoted often by scholars, but there is hardly any reference to the deep experience at the Mim Tea Estate. There he asked himself whether he found an illusion of Asia that was dissolved there.

It seems to me that it was at this retreat that the dialectic between what is and what is not, between the world-refusal of the monk and his world-acceptance, became clearer for Merton. The world-refusal of the monk is related to his desire for change. He explained more clearly that the root of man's problems is his inability to look at reality as it is. Most of the time he interprets it in prejudicial and predetermined ways. The source of our problems, according to him, is our basic ignorance in viewing ourselves as absolutely autonomous egos (see *AJ*, 331-32). What is needed is a transformation of our consciousness.

In his Bangkok address, Merton spoke of the monk's relationship to the world. "The monk belongs to the world, but the world belongs to him in so far as he has dedicated himself totally to liberation from it in order to liberate it." Hence, there is need for a keen awareness of the interdependence of all living beings. He interpreted this view in terms of his monastic experience: "if you once penetrate by detachment and purity of heart to the inner secret of the ground of your ordinary experience, you attain to a liberty that nobody can touch, that nobody can affect, that no political change of circumstances can do anything to" (*AJ*, 342). Although Merton thought that this view was idealistic, he was convinced that it was attainable. I conclude this address with a quotation from St. John's Revelation, 3:20: "Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If any of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him."

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 285; subsequent references to "OSM" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
  2. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence*, Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 198; subsequent references to "ES" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
  3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1968) 211; see also Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963, ed. Victor Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 198; subsequent references to "TTW" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
  4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949; New York: Dell, 1957) 51-52; subsequent references to "SC" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
  5. T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London, 1960) 51.
  6. See *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 297-308; subsequent references to "AJ" will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.
  7. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953) 309-310.