

# The Zen in Thomas Merton

by  
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I must above all things avoid playing the “know myself” game, because if I do it will surely mean losing what little I can find of a path to God.

Thomas Merton,  
*Run to the Mountain*

To be a contemplative is to be an outlaw.

Thomas Merton,  
“Rain and the Rhinoceros”

The ascent is for oneself, the descent for others.

Roshi Philip Kapleau,  
*Zen: Merging of East and West*

When a finger points to the moon,  
The imbecile looks at the finger.

From a New York fortune cookie

## I

In doing my research for Southampton on Thomas Merton and Zen, after much pondering, I was struck by the fact that there is suspiciously little difference between Merton’s so-called writings on Zen and many of his other writings. The one appeared to reinforce the other. Whatever he wrote came from a deep-seated unnameable source. He was, in short, as much “Zen-drunk” as “God-drunk” and there is not, in the matter of human experience, much of a difference. He was, after all, always the same man praying, talking and writing, or, polemically firing his verbal missiles on any number of issues that concerned him and the world. Moreover, in his vast correspondence (some estimating that he wrote to no less than 1800 people in his lifetime), it did not really matter much if the person to whom he directed his attention was an irrepressible teenager in California, a peacemaker and saint near New York’s Bowery, a Sufi psychologist, a future Nobel Prize winner or the Pope himself.

This may sound heretical, but, ironically, Merton seemed to have become less Zen and more academic when he wrote seriously about the subject to Dr. Suzuki, my father and others. Even his Introduction to my father’s *The Golden Age of Zen* (later incorporated in Merton’s *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* in the essay, “A Christian Looks at Zen”) appears to come more from the hand of a schoolman than one would wish it to be. The justification for writing such a long, elaborate and, indeed, very fine essay was Merton’s attempt to explain to a Western audience what Zen was really all about. Thank God he did not end up *explaining it away* in his intoxicating prose!

In view of the above, it appeared to me that to write only of Merton’s explicit “Zen writings” would in fact put us in danger of *shrinking* his Zen. His writings are in fact full of Zen, and such elements can be found in the most unexpected places. That is because from the very beginning he was free, fearless and carefree, as Jim Forest suggested in the panel discussion on the first day of the Conference. Perhaps, it was because he was *constitutionally* unable to live in any realm other than that of freedom. Matthew Kelty, a fellow monk and student of Merton’s at Gethsemani, once said of him, Merton was as difficult to bottle as fog. And I cannot think of a better description of a Zen man than this inspired image.

Besides, I think we would have to go to great lengths to find another person as fully *integrated* as he was. And here I do not just mean the integration one finds in his writings: what I mean is that his writings and his life are a perfect mirror of one another, a wonderful coming together of knowledge and existence, which, if not the most important, is surely one of the ideals of the great Asian traditions. And I think it had everything to do with the spiritual desert which to him could never have merely meant a physical place *out there* but a self fully directed to and liberated and warmed by a compassionate Lover. This, of course, was his *unfailing* source out of which everything else gushed forth so inevitably and richly.

Once his voice is secure, a writer involves himself with themes closest to his heart, unless he is an incorrigible escapist. He doesn’t shift gears unless some huge moral or spiritual spasm disrupts that voice which necessitates a shift. Merton was to travel millenia in his thoughts, but he was fortunate to have found his voice surprisingly early on in life. Michael Mott made this quite clear during his insightful keynote presentation at the Fourth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society last summer at Olean, New York. Mott is of the opinion – and I very much agree – that Merton, at the time he entered Gethsemani in December, 1941, was already in possession of all the fundamental ideas that would make him, as many say now, if not our century’s premier spiritual writer, certainly one of its most appealing. His life was much like any great classical drama where the essential clues are dropped in the first act and the remaining acts become a matter of its unfolding.

This realization came to me while reading the wonderfully direct and fresh, yet, I might add, profound, *Run to the Mountain*, the first volume of Merton’s projected seven journals which covers the two years *before* his becoming a Trappist. It reveals the soul of a young man steadily in search of what he himself came to call

the *inmost self*, and what the Zen exponents might call self-nature, mind, even Buddhahood. This is in contrast to the more conventional and potentially obsessive Grecian command to "know thyself," which, to Merton's youthful credit, he never indulged much in. We will examine the personal disaffection he felt towards it in part II. Some might contend that Merton never appreciated the full implications of what the Greeks meant by Socratic self-knowledge, but we will not spend time looking at this important question here.

Merton was able to distinguish quite clearly the difference between human learning – to which he may have perhaps arbitrarily confined the entire Socratic dialectical process – and *wisdom*, that is, between knowledge gained through hard thinking and knowledge that *reveals* itself through hard experience and inner solitude. In short, wisdom appears only after one has abandoned a life of *hubris*, and experiences, in depth, the hollowness of intellectual knowledge, and the painful sense of moral and spiritual depravity. Moreover, unlike most other artists and writers, what distinguished the monk was that he was a great mystic and contemplative. As it has been noted by many, the psychological and spiritual makeup and the *modus operandi* of mystics and contemplatives from different traditions tend to be very similar, though the roads and goals they take and reach may be quite divergent, even contradictory.

Even as a young budding writer Merton was able to fathom the difference between the knowing of oneself in the Platonic *Dialogues* and the knowing (or, shall we say, more accurately, the "*unknowing*") of the true self one finds in all authentic traditions, mystical, Zen or otherwise. In this discrimination, you can see why he ultimately chose the monastery over the university and why he would have been constantly at sixes and sevens in an academic setting where high power intellects joust for the critical competitive edge that may end in great frustration. This choice of place itself comes, I think, from profound self-knowledge, for he most likely would have suffered badly in any other place except in a monastery. For, is it not true that part of life's wisdom is to know where we belong, where we would do the least damage to ourselves and others?

Although a very good intellectual, Merton knew that the Socratic kind of knowing could not possibly satiate his real desire for a fulfillment that would ultimately please and lead him back to his Maker. He had this enormously significant intuition that somehow wisdom and the search for the inmost self did not lie in the gaining of knowledge; it lay, rather, in the *losing* of it. Symbolically, if we recall, the young, impulsive Merton even tried to get rid of all such knowledge by throwing away all the novels and some other things he had written since his undergraduate days. Though, of course, this is not to say that he found this wisdom intact in the monastery he belonged to, either. A cursory look at his later writings on monastic reforms would quickly cure us of that illusion.

Part of the monastic problem he saw in Western societies, particularly in the more affluent ones, lay in the inordinate emphasis on the *preservation* of a collective monastic consciousness, which he found counter-productive. What Merton the

teacher later emphasized to his novices in his many recorded talks was, in so many words, a return to *true contemplation*, to him, the very crux of a monk's vocation. Being familiar with both the desert Fathers and Zen, it must have saddened him that there was so little concern in his monastery for the spiritual enlightenment and cultural enrichment of the individual monk, that the monastery was not training qualified teachers who could serve in the same capacity as *roshis* and masters traditionally did and still do in Zen monasteries.<sup>1</sup>

Merton felt the job of the monastery, and this seems to be consistent with St. Benedict's *Rule*,<sup>2</sup> was to help the individual monk unload whatever excess baggage he was carrying. This could then prepare young men (and women) for the real task at hand, which, as Leon Bloy might put it, is to become a veritable *pilgrim for the Absolute*. Which would certainly hinder such a journey if there were entire lines of countless egos tagging along, or, as one Zen Master once suggested to a Zen hopeful, "Why did you bring along such a crowd?"

It was the bringing of such "crowds" into the monastery that Merton was most fearful of, for their presence made the basic formation of the monk very difficult. Each layer of useless, cultural armor that the aspiring monk wore into the monastery literally "crowded out" the essentials that would help the novice get closer to the Absolute. Hence, an *unlearning* process becomes indispensable for, without undergoing it, possibility for enlightenment would indeed remain remote. Perhaps, this unlearning is even more important than what one could possibly learn; without it, all learning would gradually, if not contaminate, at least, water down, the essentials of being a monk.

Nothing of course was more important to Merton than giving praise to God. Essentially, that was his vocation. Yet, one may justifiably contend, Well, if one accepts that assessment, what about those countless interests that seemed to fuel Merton's own monastic life – *nonstop*? Were they merely peripheral to him and, therefore, unimportant? Were they not, too, "excess baggage"? And were they not a contradiction of what Christian and Zen and other mystics would regard as *impediments* to enlightenment? To these questions one would have to answer both yes and no. Merton was not only an intellectual and a poet – alone a rare combination – but also a great lover of culture, near and far, which, in time, he managed to appropriate to himself.

Each Merton reader has met up with that delightful problem of running into books that the monk had received from some friend or publisher and whose ideas had been digested and deftly integrated into his ever-widening universe. This great knack – to integrate intellectual knowledge, experience and even friendships – was a trick he had begun to master early in life. And one is frankly knocked out by how naturally and thoroughly he was able to bring together so easily this new integration of thought without any trace of condescension on his part. Such a feat required genius of both the head *and* heart and had to be guided not by mere curiosity alone but by an overflowing compassion that craved ever more for ideas and interaction with other people that would fuel the ever-thirsting *Light* within.

He sought actively to engage what was authentic, and was not so much interested in challenging as much as *to be* challenged. One sees this in his friendships with Suzuki, Maritain, Milosz, Pasternak, Rosemary Ruether, Abdul Aziz, my own father, and a host of others. These were encounters from which he grew immeasurably. He could only be fearless in thrusting challenges upon himself because as a young man he had already begun to have an abiding faith in the ultimate *unity of knowledge*.

To the typically spiritually-minded Easterner, Merton's approach to spirituality seemed to have run counter to common sense. While this may not be true of the Confucianists who have always had a healthy penchant for both cultural and intellectual life, it certainly has been true of the Taoists and more specifically, the exponents of Zen, even present-day aspirants, who sometimes pride themselves on abandoning nearly all intellectual and cultural pursuits and, particularly, during their period of formation, on reading almost exclusively the lives of former buddhas and bodhisattvas. This external formula of edification would be likened, for the Christian novice, to reading exclusively the lives of the saints.

Even now, there are great controversies – as I suppose there are among Christian monastics in their monasteries – over this matter of what ought to be read among Zen exponents. It is for this reason that the so-called “intellectual” Zen of Dr. Suzuki has been overshadowed in recent decades by those who regard themselves as the real practitioners, which, the latter claim, Suzuki was not. At times, there is, ironically, a sharper Occam's razor among the Zen cliques fighting for authenticity of method and experience than among the splintered Christians of the world. It would seem that one needs both breadth and depth as well as encounters with multifarious experiences; common sense tells us depth of experience cannot be confined to any one method.

My own feeling is that such controversies would fade if there was greater trust and compassion among all the practitioners, and if, once more, we can regain the humble attitude that, important as Zen and Christian monastic training and discipline are, first, life in the broadest sense remains our one *essential* teacher; secondly, our primary goal, whatever tradition we belong to, remains attainment of the true self, or self-nature. If we forget this, whatever training we master will simply disintegrate into mere fetishes, even idolatry. Merton himself made this quite clear in his own writings as regards the dangers of overemphasizing method over substance. This is not to say that he was against strict discipline and training. He was not that naive, after all, and he himself had undergone such training and was himself a very disciplined monk.

Merton, especially in his role as novice master, nearly almost always complained of and even parodied the lack of intellectual and cultural preparation so evident in the young men aspiring to become members of the religious community at his beloved Gethsemani. His now famous “Get a life!” talk, which was so finely elaborated upon by Parker Palmer at a conference at Louisville's Bellarmine College in March, 1994, gives us insight into the very intimate and, I think, exceedingly

*necessary*, role that cultural knowledge plays in the spiritual and moral development and formation of each person. Without doubt, he had felt that this lack in the young reflected the broader anti-intellectual strain pervasive in America itself, particularly in the 40's and 50's. And he could not help but feel a great disquietude in seeing it dominate the American monastic landscape. But at the same time he knew, given the superficial material culture on which most young Americans were bred, this phenomenon was rather inevitable too.

Could one say that this was a prideful attitude in Merton, an idiosyncrasy in the monk that drove him to want to make all the young monks over into his own image? Or, perhaps, being a Catholic convert, he deliberately wanted to make the entire Catholic Church over into a contemporary intellectual bastion, a newer, more robust Rome with ever more roads leading to its center? On the other hand, if we give him the benefit of the doubt, wasn't there in Merton a sincere attempt to recover those sources without which he knew his Church and her intellectual and cultural superstructure would be nothing more than, say, “excess baggage” or “crowds” shielding her very *Heart*?

One thing Merton was not: though he loved his Church, he was no apologist, at least, neither a conscious nor conventional one. As we all know now in his efforts to bring the Church into the 20th century (how quaint that sounds as we dodderingly muddle through *fin de siècle*, truly a *fin de millenium*!), he probably alienated more of its members than he won over. Of course he would have: wasn't he, after all, a prophet crying in the desert, and, fittingly, someone who knew that he and others like him were in some senses already operating in *diaspora*? The Jewish experience in the first half of the twentieth century and the later forced exodus of the Tibetans from their homeland had been warnings enough.

In one recorded tape<sup>3</sup>, Merton cautions the novices of a future time when they would have to “stand on their own two feet,” a prophetic theme that highlights the paper he delivered in Bangkok hours before his untimely death. He seemed to be preparing his fellow monks for that fateful day when they would have to walk on their own *without* baggage or crowds or intellectual and cultural crutches. I have no doubt at all that Zen helped him along this path to spiritual freedom.

Merton's own monastic life was a precarious passage to such a liberation, a letting go of all extraneous threads and anchors that unnaturally held him back. He wanted nothing better than to get rid of whatever artificial crutches and supports that would prevent him, as he said in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz, from “falling through the floor of time...,” and that one ought “to start with a good acceptance of the dark...”<sup>4</sup> In an earlier letter to Milosz, when he had said, “I had (falsely) given the impression that I had answers...,”<sup>5</sup> he was hinting ever so subtly at the absolute necessity of living Meister Eckhart's idea of *perfect poverty*,<sup>6</sup> that particular dimension of emptiness in Zen where *prajna* (wisdom) and *karuna* (compassion) operate in perfect union in human action.

I now think Merton was able to be fearless with regard to intellectual and cultural accoutrements because, first, he saw how he himself and a long line of

monkish kinsmen and kinswomen over nearly two millenia had been able to make creative use of them; secondly, working from his unique perspective as a contemplative monk, he considered all human knowledge as a profitable *means* and never as an end-in-itself; and, thirdly, from a specific Christian theological dimension, he saw them as ciphers and signs, symbolic ladders and *natural* epiphanies of the Word Itself.

In short, rather than impediments standing in direct contrast to the Absolute, as that which taints the self and throws an irreconcilable wedge between ourselves and the truth and, therefore, standing in mutual exclusivity, he saw in human knowledge, instead, helpful, even essential windows or pictures that would aid in bringing us closer to where we should be heading, or, to *where we have always been*.

From the perspective of enlightenment, human knowledge, when assisted by grace, becomes an indispensable tool in the gradual journey that takes us to the core of the inmost self where we come face to face with the source of existence and literally become lost in God. Or, as we allow ourselves to be immersed in God – to be *God-drunk*, as it were – , self-nature emerges. Human knowledge, then, once it has faithfully executed its work, must finally teach us to help it to *get out of the way of the Light* so that divine love and compassion may begin freely to operate in us along paths which, given the profound level at which it usually works, is often far more *dark* than light.<sup>7</sup>

I think Zen also taught Merton the fiction of both collective and individual experience, both of which he ultimately found impersonal, isolating and without connection to any past or future. They have a parasitic, ghoulish existence, in which we act as if we have been taken over by some body-snatchers. Even a monastery could represent “a womb of collective illusion” in which nothing is deeply felt because it is not *personally* experienced.

The point he was trying to make on the tape I have cited above and elsewhere was that no matter how sophisticated the theologies, how richly elaborate the rituals, or how air-tight the hierarchies and superstructures of our respective traditions, all the external trappings may sometimes serve as terrible traps if the individual monk is not able to *directly experience* and come to terms with what is plainly there all along, i.e., Ground of Being. And as long as it is experienced on the surface and does not touch the core of our being, it is neither Christian nor Buddhist but some caricature or fiction of what truly *is*. In his autobiography, *Beyond East and West*, my father, who was as committed to Roman Catholicism as anyone could be, wrote:

(Buddhism) has taught me the importance of direct personal experience in the matter of spiritual life. As Frank Sheed puts it, ‘If you want to know how wet the rain is, do not judge by someone who went out into it with an umbrella.’ He advises us to go stripped into the shower of truth and life. The spirit of Zen is nothing else but this.<sup>8</sup>

“Going stripped into the shower of truth and life” is very much like Dr. Suzuki’s idea of experiencing life “without gloves,” in which gloves are representative of anything that prevent us from encountering life *as it is*, from savoring the very nectar and joys, sorrows and even tragedies of life, to wit, life as given to us without any holds barred, that has not yet been filtered through or softened by some concept or reasonings that somehow take the bite or sting out of what actually is. (As a whimsical aside, I would like to say that, obviously, Frank Sheed never went out into the Southampton rain without an umbrella. Therefore, I somewhat take umbrage in what he advises!)

What happens when we do not use concepts and our reason properly is that, besides imposing our own whims and silly caricature on what we see before us, we in effect also *shrink* that which we are pointing to. We then find ourselves convincing ourselves that we have savored the rain in its refreshing rawness, when in fact we have done nothing more than *discredit* the rain itself. It may be likened to looking at the mountain without actually seeing it; we are like the imbecile obsessed with the wildly wiggling finger, trying to convince ourselves and whoever else might listen that we are in possession of the real thing when, in fact, we are simply holding on to an illusion or, at best, a distorted view of things.

Frank Sheed’s simple words remind me of Merton’s marvelously illuminating prose-poem, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” in which the monk suggests that rain is a festive hymn with a sacred rhythm of its own. It is such magnificent writing that we could quote it at random. For me, the great downpour serves as a final baptism that finally spiritualizes the hermit’s simple hermitage once and for all and reconfirms the poet’s recognition that the real hermitage is indeed his own heart. One wonders if anything could be more Zen than this piece of writing in which is anticipated Merton’s later experience at Polunnaruwa on his Asian journey.

Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water... What a thing to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech,...the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows!

Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.<sup>9</sup>

The above reminds me of this lovely couplet found in Zen literature:

The Ground of the Mind contains many seeds  
Which will sprout when heavenly showers come.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Merton’s life as a monk, then as a hermit, was certainly an endless sprouting of seeds tumbling forth from some Unnameable Source!

Then, in the following, although Merton ostensibly speaks of the alienating effect of urban life, in fact, on a deeper metaphysical and spiritual level, he is talking of “gloves,” of “umbrellas,” of “excessive baggages,” of the nearly obsessive *shrinking of life* that goes on mostly involuntarily and tragically undetected everywhere and to which all of us are always in danger of succumbing.

They have constructed a world outside the world, against the world, a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man. (Raids, p. 11)

## II

There is a popular Zen parable about the processive way we look at a mountain. It gives us a great clue into the way of gradual enlightenment. It goes something like this: when we first enter the Way, we look at the mountain and see the mountain; as we enter more deeply into the Way, the mountain suddenly disappears; finally, as we arrive at the Way itself, the mountain is fully before our eyes again. At that instant, we are struck by this tremendous realization that the mountain had been there all along, but that lest we become distracted along the Way, the mountain had disappeared for a while. It reappears at the end of our journey, in a way we had never seen it before. This joy of discovery or re-discovery is totally incommunicable. For the mountain appears to have become fully transformed; yet, in fact, it really is the same old mountain, and it is we who have been transformed!

Like all parables, it cannot be gotten at through some clever thinking. If one “arrives” through that alone, you can be sure that you are still standing outside its gates, either wallowing in what you have “accomplished” and foolishly thinking that you have “arrived,” or, if you have attained some wisdom along the way, sadly and forlornly waiting for the gates to open. The former, the one who thinks he has arrived and is pleased with his/her accomplishments, probably has not even reached the foot of the mountain, while the latter at least understands he is somewhere along the Path and his own efforts will become increasingly less significant the further he goes along. And that is really the important part, that you understand you are no longer in the driver’s seat but *gladly* – perhaps, with a great sigh – allowing the Transformer of Life to be increasingly in charge of your life.

Thomas Merton may have been too cerebral to some of us but one of his virtues was that he rarely used intellectualism as an end-in-itself. Even as a budding young writer in his mid-twenties, he seemed to have been able to avoid the odious fetish of giving the self an undeserved god-like status. Something told him that when one pays inordinate attention to the self, by “puffing up” the self, or by giving knowledge a higher status than it deserves (reminiscent of the *scientia inflat*, or “inflated knowledge” – St. Augustine’s personal comment on St. Paul), you actually make it *less-than-itself*. Obviously, too, experience had told Merton there was great wisdom and strength in *meekness*.

This insight may or may not have come from readings he had done on the East, but a reading of Saint Theresa’s *The Interior Castle* which he mentions in that same entry of December 8 in *Run to the Mountain*, surely must have fortified this valuable intuition (whose original source lay of course in the *Beatitudes*). This would have widespread ramifications in nearly all his future writings. I suppose there really is no greater temptation than the intellectual who thinks himself meek, especially one who is also basically a man of the spirit. The person either sours in midstream or his/her life becomes a veritable *piece of art*, a paradigm of earthly paradise, perhaps, even a saint or *true man* or *true woman*.

Living in an age of individualism when most others seemed obsessed with their individual selves, the young Merton was desperately fighting against this tide which he recognized ultimately as fraudulent. The December 8, 1939 journal entry – when Merton was not yet 25, and fully two years before his entering Gethsemani – puts us in direct contact with the psychology and the comet-like evolution that his spirituality was even then undergoing. It also reveals the whimsical attitude he had begun to entertain towards himself, a Zen-like phenomenon in that the laughing at oneself – a “letting go” – was helping to strip layers and years of accumulated and essentially useless encrustation from the self. Somehow, he sensed that, up to then, the self that had sustained him had only been a parody of his true self.

The entire entry, so self-liberating in its writing, sets forth concretely a new direction for the young Merton. Humourously anecdotic, he speaks disparagingly of his own silliness in trying to figure out the “psychological type” he belonged to following a reading of C. G. Jung. He had concluded that he was an “extraverted sensation type” and writes of his unfounded fear of being an “introvert.” He also makes allusion to his having absurdly identified with a character (George Gissing) in one of Virginia Woolf’s novels: “What a ridiculous thing to take oneself so seriously!” Then, he adds, as if with a huge sigh of relief,

It is completely embarrassing to come upon such examples of vanity and pride. It is more pitiful to think how miserable and ignorant I continued to be while I was so unhappily engaged in the futile business of trying in a reasonable and humanistic manner, *to know myself*. What floundering around! It was a wonder I remembered my own name! It was a greater wonder I remembered the names and faces of people around me. (Run, p. 96. Emphasis added.)

It was also a wonder that Merton was able to make such a wonderfully subtle connection between this potentially self-indulgent, psychological need of self-identity, on the one hand, and the underlying religious desire for the true self and the primitive thirst for the presence and love of God, on the other hand. Into the following, one could very easily read a pietistic strain, and why not, for the young Merton was, after all, a new and enthusiastic member of the Catholic Church. He is manifestly “God-drunk” and understands that the full weight of the Creator’s love can work in us only if our other desires are somehow brought to their knees:

Knowing myself--it was really a sort of a desperate substitute for confession and penance. That was why it was so silly and so lamentably useless. For the only valid kind of self-knowledge is the amount needed for a good examination of conscience to make a good confession...and the important thing is God's love, not ourselves and what is in us. *We don't want to know what is in ourselves in order to dwell upon it, treasure it, meditate upon it unless it is not of ourselves but of God.* So everything that is of our own worldly desire and fear must be cast out so that we can see God within us and everywhere outside of us too. What we want to know is not ourselves but God. (Run, p. 96. Emphasis added.)

Here in these very suggestive words one can see surfacing a future contemplative. It begins with the recognition of the spiritual blindness that results in encountering life by way of the ego; secondly, the basic insubstantiality and emptiness of worldly pleasures; thirdly, the vapidness of intellectualism devoid of a *source*, so that verbalization and culture become ends in themselves; fourthly, the irreconcilable gap between knowledge and wisdom; fifthly, the healing nature of a personal, loving God; and, finally, the certain faith that once we have gotten over the obsession with the self and experienced the freedom resulting from God's love, we will then be able to witness *directly* the workings of the divine hand in the world as well. Here, too, we can see in bold relief the first signs of the anti-Cartesian strain that was to run ever more deeply in Merton, particularly in the epistemology surrounding both his philosophy of contemplation and his approach towards Zen.

In fact, one could make a case that in these words there contained all the seeds that would gradually reach fruition in the later, mature Merton. At the same time, it would hardly be too audacious to say that the young man's basic insights and his eventual excursions into other mystical traditions would not have been possible if he had not been able to see through the empirical ego into the ontological mystery of the *inmost self*; furthermore, that everything Merton did thereafter centered on the unfolding of that mystery that brought him ever closer to the cosmic heart of Christ. He knew, writing twenty years later in much of his inspired "The Inner Experience," for instance, that the key to contemplation and even Zen enlightenment, lay in being dismissive of that ego which he identified as the deadly source of all human troubles.

Again, in that same marvelous and inspired journal entry, Merton hits upon another important insight, when he says: "We must know this much: that we are not God. We already know we are unhappy: *the amount of self-knowledge we need is simply what will help us find out the reasons for our unhappiness*: that is in what ways we have loved silly and inferior and imperfect things and preferred them before God." (Run, p. 97)

How fortunate Merton was that long before he took up Zen as a serious study he was very much aware of the seductive, built-in traps that accompany a too anxious obsession with the self; furthermore, he understood that no accumulated knowledge of the self would bring us happiness, that in fact the greater we come in possession of such knowledge, the less likely we shall be able to penetrate that shell and attain personal liberation.

Philosophical Taoism, principally the works of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, which together with classical Confucianism played a historical role in sinologizing Buddhism and helped bring Zen into a golden age during the T'ang dynasty (618-906 A.D.) in China, appears to have a strong anti-intellectual bias, which was perhaps assumed – I think, erroneously – by the Zen aspirants. This bias, however, is true only on the surface. Several passages in the *Tao Teh Ching* specify that the Way of Tao, in contrast to human knowledge, is the "way of unlearning," in fact, to *unlearn what we have learned*. This is scandalous to our twentieth century minds conditioned to indulging in positivistic myths about progress and speed and the indispensability of the most recent addition of hi-tech to our lives.

Yet, if we are able to get closer to the way of the Christian monk, the true man of Tao or the Zen aspirant, we can see them in a common link beginning with the implicit faith that much of our troubles stem from the kind of learning that inevitably disturbs the natural ecology of the mind. At times, in attempting to compensate for our loss in spiritual equilibrium, we may take upon ourselves indiscriminate modes of learning which, rather than liberating us from our estranged self, ever more entangle us in the web of illusory concepts and self-imposed mental prisons. To those on the outside, the Christian monk, the Taoist and the Zennist may indeed appear to have "abandoned" the world; when, in fact, all that he or she has done has been to strip away the deadening encrustations of the soul that leave it earthbound.

But from their respective perspective, each in his or her own way has seen the horrible consequences of making an idol either of the self or the collectivity. Merton, writing in the 60's of the rising Western interest in Zen which he saw to be "a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism," blamed the vacuity of Western intellectualism on "the reification of concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness, flight from being into verbalism, mathematics and rationalization." He adds that "Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it."<sup>11</sup>

William Shannon, commenting on those words, gives his own insight: "For this Cartesian, thinking self, even God becomes an object that can be reached only by concepts. This perhaps is why an age that glorifies the ego-self is the age of 'the death of God.'" (*Dark Path*, Ibid.) The great temptation of Cartesianism for the West – of the dualistic split of the subject from the object – is that it has encouraged us to be conscious of a million things and, in the meantime, made us lose contact with Pure Consciousness itself. It is much like mistaking the nameable Tao for the Eternal Tao, or, from the standpoint of the Christian, of confusing its complex doctrines, and elaborate rituals and culture for the simple Pauline image of "putting on Christ."

In 1959, writing on contemplation, Merton pointed out the political consequences of a people or society existing without a genuine sense of self and healthy personalism. He speaks of our tragically facile contemporary tendency to willingly "fall back into *collective barbarism* in which the individual and his freedom once again lose their meaning and each man (and woman) is an expendable unit

ready to be immolated to the political idols on which the prosperity and power of the collectivity seem to depend.”<sup>12</sup> (Emphasis added.) How much concerned he always was in the preservation of the real self! The failed utopian enterprises in our century are a harrowing documentation and reminder of the sort of barbarism that results from an unwittingly naive idolization of both an impersonal collectivism and ego that live parasitically among enchanted mirrors capable only of reflecting back our illnesses and diseased souls. The extraordinary personal conviviality is that it dies upon being touched by *Mystery*. While Zen itself may not be equated with that Mystery, it is, nonetheless, an indispensable *pointer* to it.

### Notes and References

1. For a good picture of the relationship between the Zen master and the aspiring student, see Roshi Philip Kapleau's "The Private Encounter with the Master." pp.44-69, in *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, edited by Kenneth Kraft (New York, Grove Press, 1988)
2. See Aelred Graham's essay, "On Monasticism", pp 171-82, in *Zen Catholicism* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963) in which he makes some interesting and suggestive comparisons between Zen discipline and the *Rule of St Benedict*.
3. See "The Straight Way", Credence Cassette: Merton AA2801 (Kansas City, Missouri: The National Catholic Reporter Publishing Co., 1995)
4. Th. Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine Bochen (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993) letter dd. Jan 18 1962, p.78. Referred to in the text as *Courage*.
5. *Courage*, letter dated June 5, 1961, p.75
6. Th. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York, New Directions, 1968) p.12.
7. Th. Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. One 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (Harper/San Francisco, 1995), p. 418. Referred to in the text as *Run*.
8. John C.H. Wu, *Beyond East and West* (New York, Sheed and Ward, 1951) p.185
9. Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros", in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York, New Directions, 1966) p.10. Referred to in the text as *Raids*.
10. John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (N.Y. Doubleday Image Books, 1996) p.71.
11. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, quoted in W.H. Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987) p.206. referred to in the text as *Dark Path*.
12. see Th.Merton "The Inner Experience:Notes on Contemplation II", (*Cistercian Studies*, 1983), p.129.

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