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Thomas Merton in Asia: The Polonnaruwa Illumination

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It was on Tuesday, October 15, 1968, that Thomas Merton flew out from San Francisco on his first and only trip to Asia. What he says about this in his *Asian Journal*¹ is memorable and intense:

The moment of take-off was ecstatic. The dewy wing was suddenly covered with rivers of cold sweat running backward. The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. Joy. We left the ground—I with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around. May I not come back without having settled the great affair. And found also the great compassion, mahakaruna.²

He had been interested in Asia and Asian religion, particularly Buddhism, since the thirties, as evidenced in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. His level of interest fluctuated over the years, but by the end of the fifties, and on through the sixties, his appreciative interest in Zen and other forms of Asian spirituality was steady.³ Having been prohibited from traveling by his long-time abbot, Dom James Fox, he was now, with the blessing of his new abbot, Dom Flavian Burns, free to go to Asia.

The immediate genesis of his trip was an invitation he had received, at the suggestion of his friend Jean Leclercq,⁴ from *Aide à l'Implantation Monastique*, an international and intermonastic network, to give a major address at a conference of Asian monastic leaders at the Red Cross conference centre in Samut Prakan, about 30 kilometres from Bangkok.⁵ Once it became known that he would be coming, he received many other invitations, and the

trip presented itself to him both as an opportunity for interfaith encounters as well as visits to communities of his own Cistercian tradition, and more personally, for a pilgrimage, an opportunity "to deepen his own religious and monastic commitment."⁶

In "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue," a paper intended for delivery (but not delivered) in Calcutta, he had said this:

I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author (which I also happen to be). I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just "facts" about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and about monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.⁷

The concept of pilgrimage, then, offers us a first paradigm through which to interpret and, to the degree to which we can, to understand the culminating experience of Merton's trip, what I am calling the Polonnaruwa illumination.⁸ "Surely," he says, "with Mahabalipuram⁹ and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself."¹⁰ As a number of commentators note, his experience at Polonnaruwa, in Sri Lanka, was the moment of arrival, the sixth step in Philip Cousineau's seven-step paradigm of pilgrimage.¹¹ As Ross Labrie says, "Polonnaruwa clearly represents the point of arrival in a book whose structure is that of a pilgrimage."¹² In Cousineau's paradigm, there remains the seventh step, the bringing back of the boon; and what that is for Merton and for those of us who read and learn from him we shall consider later.

Polonnaruwa is both an ancient city in east-central Sri Lanka, and the name of the kingdom of which it was the capital from 1070 to 1284 CE. Its ruined palaces and temples testify to the glory which it must have had at the height of its power. Gal Vihara (variously translated "rock temple" or "stone monastery") is a Buddhist shrine in Polonnaruwa constructed in the 12th century

by King Parakramabahu I, and is the most celebrated and visited temple in the city, if not in the entire country. Its chief adornment is the great whale-shaped granite rock out of which have been carved four images of the Buddha—a large seated figure, a smaller seated figure inside an artificial cave, a standing figure and a reclining figure.¹³

Merton visited Gal Vihara on Monday, December 2, eight days before his death. On Thursday, December 5, he entered in his journal his description of his experience there, in the presence of the great statues, and his reflection on the experience. David Addiss and John Joseph Albert provide a useful division of Merton's journal entry into four segments: *approach*, *encounter*, *response* and *departure*.¹⁴ Excerpts from the journal entry divided into these four categories are reproduced as follows:

Approach

The path dips down to Gal Vihara: a wide, quiet, hollow, surrounded with trees. A low outcrop of rock, with a cave cut into it, and beside the cave a big seated Buddha on the left, a reclining Buddha on the right, and Ananda, I guess, standing by the head of the reclining Buddha. In the cave, another seated Buddha. ... I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot¹⁵ and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika,¹⁶ of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—*without refutation*—without establishing some other argument.

Encounter

I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the *obvious* clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies

composed into the rock shape and landscape figure, rock and tree. ... Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. The queer *evidence* of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded ...

Response

The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya¹⁷ ... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains¹⁸ but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage,¹⁹ Asian or European or American ...

Departure

The rest of the "city," the old palace complex, I had no time for. We just drove around the roads and saw the ruined shapes, and started on the long drive home to Kandy.²⁰

It is eminently clear from this rich text that Merton's experience at Gal Vihara was one of enormous impact and importance. But his poetic and allusive response to the encounter leaves us wondering what *kind* of experience it was. David Steindl-Rast pinpoints the challenge: "The *Asian Journal* is raw material. It calls for an interpretation, but, by the same token, it allows for no more than an interpretation with all the tentativeness this implies."²¹

Here is William H. Shannon's take on this challenge—the construction of a sober, balanced and contextual interpretation of Merton's experience:

Much has been made of this event. Interpretations of it have been made that pull the event out of the total context of Merton's life and give it a weight of meaning that it cannot bear—for instance, making it the climax of his life that nothing past or future could possibly match. Such an evaluation hardly seems warranted by Merton's simple but profound description of the event and his reflection upon it.²²

We can make of Merton's epiphany, Shannon says, too much or too little. He is insistent that we consider it not in isolation, but as the last in a series of important moments in Merton's life. On three previous occasions (his visiting of the great Byzantine churches in Rome in 1933, his being given in 1953 time on his own in the old monastery tool shed which he called St Anne's, and his being given in 1965 his hermitage for full-time occupation) he uses some variant of the phrase "something I have been looking for," which Shannon calls "a Merton signature for a moment of profound experience."²³ In the same series of epiphanies, we may also list his well-known experiences in the Church of St. Francis in Havana in 1940, and at Fourth and Walnut, in Louisville, in 1958.²⁴ "I know and have seen," says Merton of his Polonnaruwa experience, "what I was obscurely looking for."

Beside Shannon's cautions, we place the questions asked by Lawrence S. Cunningham:

Did Merton imply that he experienced Buddhist *satori*? Was this a mystical experience? Did it say something about his "conversion" to a kind of Buddhist/Christian form of enlightenment as has been not infrequently alleged? How seriously and strictly are we to take these words, given Merton's not rare bouts of verbal enthusiasm?²⁵

Thus cautioned and challenged, I shall offer not one meta-interpretation, not a univocal perspective, but will place side by side a

number of *framings*, or *lenses*, drawn from specific religious and cultural contexts, through which we may examine what is clearly a transcendent, aesthetically mediated²⁶ *human* experience. In saying this, I am taking a Religious Studies position, which declines to accept a radical disconnect between the two classic theories of mystical experience: the older "common core" thesis, and the postmodern contextual approach. I see no commanding reason to reject either of these approaches, believing as I do that each of them offers us part of a useful hermeneutic. The "common core" approach affirms that there are human spiritual experiences which are found in a variety of religious and non-religious traditions; the contextual approach affirms that in their particularities, such experiences cannot be understood "outside of the religious and cultural context of the mystic who is reporting the experience."²⁷ In taking this approach, I can claim Merton's support, as evidenced in a letter to Erich Fromm of February 7, 1966.

We had some discussions on the question of a non-theistic religious experience. The point I was trying to convey was that religious experience in the Jewish, Christian, Zen Buddhist, or in a *general mystical human way*, is an experience which may not be different *as a human experience* in the case of a theist or a nonbeliever. I am not denying the significance of various conceptual frames of reference, but I do believe that when it comes down to the phenomenon of the religious experience itself, the theological frame of reference is not as crucial as it may appear to be.²⁸ [Emphasis added].

Taking my cue from Merton himself, let me offer Christian, Buddhist, Sufi and Taoist framings of his experience, all of them in some form to be found in his own writings, to which I will add in conclusion Cousineau's trans-religious paradigm of pilgrimage.

In 1967, Merton wrote an article, "Transcendent Experience," which was first published in the newsletter of the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society of Montreal, and later in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Merton defines his title by saying that it is "an experience

of metaphysical or mystical self-transcending and also at the same time an experience of the 'Transcendent' or the 'Absolute' or 'God' not so much as object but Subject."²⁹ It is not "a regressive immersion in nature," nor an erotic peak experience. It may well be an aesthetic experience, but it is more than this, "though it can combine with [aesthetic transcendence] and lift it to a higher point of metaphysical insight (as in Zen painting), a matter of *superconsciousness* rather than a lapse into preconsciousness or unconsciousness."³⁰ The subject of the experience is neither the empirical ego nor the discrete individual, but, in a Christian framing, "the person as 'found' and 'actualized' in union with Christ."³¹ It is an experience of kenosis (cf. Philippians 2:5-11), "an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested."³²

Here then is our first framing: that Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa can be seen as kenotic, as a sharing in the kenosis of Christ, a perspective offered by many commentators.³³ In Patrick O'Connell's words, "it is a perfect expression of the central Christian belief that kenosis, the self-emptying [of] God in Christ, is the ultimate expression of divine compassion and the perfect model for human compassion."³⁴ We recall here Merton's words in his response to the encounter: "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion."

A notable theme in previous reflections on Polonnaruwa relates directly to the absence of Christian language in Merton's description of the event; yet the commentators who have noted this agree that it does not indicate an abandonment or repudiation of Christian identity. "Not for a moment does [Merton] give the impression of diluting or turning his back upon what is lasting and valid in the treasures of his own Christian tradition," says Julius Lipner;³⁵ or again, Addiss and Albert: "It is somewhat astonishing that Thomas Merton nowhere in his Polonnaruwa account mention [sic] God or Jesus. ... This is not to suggest that Merton had abandoned his faith,"³⁶ and as Tyson Anderson posits, "[Merton] has excellent Christian credentials, and so we may presume that he would have

been able to relate this experience to Christian symbols and language should he have cared to do so, or indeed had he had the time to do so. But he did not."³⁷ Here I return to Merton's own words in the Calcutta paper from which I have already quoted:

I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience.³⁸

This is reinforced by Merton's statement in the last entry in the *Asian Journal* that he expects to say Mass at the Church of St. Louis, whose name in monastic life he bore, something he could not in integrity have done if he had abandoned his Christian faith.³⁹ More to the point in regard to the absence of any explicitly Christian language in the Polonnaruwa account are Merton's own words in a letter of 1959 to D. T. Suzuki:

The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, *is* our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. ... Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him ... and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. *He is ourself*.⁴⁰

In other words, he didn't use any Christian language in his response to his experience at Polonnaruwa because he had no need to. As Robert Waldron comments, "In a timeless [and, we may add, wordless] moment, the Christ in Merton reaches out to the Christ in the beauty of the Polonnaruwa Buddhas."⁴¹

Returning to the text, we see that the language that Merton does use to point to the reality of his experience (I am thinking here of the Asian proverb about the finger pointing to the moon: the finger points—it is not the moon) is undeniably Buddhist. This is not at all surprising, given the physical context in which it occurred. The key phrase, it seems to me, is one that I have already quoted: "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion." If we read this as the first two terms of a syllogism, then the third term would read

that emptiness *is* compassion, which I take to mean that Merton had gone beyond any need to keep separate what in Christian terms would be called contemplation and action, or, as Shannon paraphrases, quoting Merton, surrender and love—all terms for the inward and outward movements of the spirit.⁴²

To put this in context, we need to go back to another high point in the *Asian Journal*, his conversation with Tibetan spiritual teacher and hermit, Chatral Rimpoche.⁴³ In his record of their conversation, Merton notes that all spiritual practice in Chatral's tradition leads back to "the ultimate emptiness, the unity of sunyata [emptiness] and karuna [compassion]."⁴⁴ In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism to which Chatral belonged, the person who has experienced the perfect commingling of these foundational realities has experienced *bodhicitta*, enlightenment, also called the great realization, and has become a *bodhisattva*, an enlightened being who nonetheless postpones his/her enjoyment of Nirvana until all other sentient beings may do so as well. There are ten levels or stages of the bodhisattva's journey, however, and the experience of the unity beyond any duality of emptiness and compassion simply sets the adept on the further journey through these ten stages.⁴⁵ A Mahayana Buddhist, then, reading Merton's account, might well say that at Polonnaruwa he had entered into the ground level of the bodhisattva realm.

Before exploring Tibetan Buddhism, Merton had been deeply interested in Zen, also part of the Mahayana tradition. Zen, as Merton understood it, is "a concrete and lived ontology which explains itself not in theoretical propositions but in acts emerging out of a certain quality of consciousness and of awareness."⁴⁶ The four-line poem or *gatha* attributed to Bodhidharma (in Japanese, Daruma), the first Zen patriarch in China, who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, sets out the charter, as it were, of Zen:

A special tradition outside the scriptures/sutras,
No dependence upon words and letters,
Direct pointing at the soul of man [sic],
Seeing into one's own nature and the attainment of
Buddhahood.⁴⁷

As Marguerite Davies says, "The Zen monk is in the tradition of the scriptural Bodhisattva or perfect and ideal man of Mahayana Buddhism who works out in his life the contradiction between 'emptiness' and compassion, [or who] embraces the paradox of 'emptiness' and compassion."⁴⁸

The culminating experience for the Zen practitioner is the attainment, or, alternatively, the receiving of the gift of *satori*, enlightenment. It is an attainment, in that the practitioner or adept, through his long years of spiritual discipline, disposes himself to the receipt of *satori*, which, however, when it is experienced, is experienced as a kind of gift from the universe. So Bonnie Thurston, noting that Merton was primarily interested in the Mahayana forms of Buddhism rather than its Theravada forms, asserts that "Merton's greatest illumination (dare I say his *satori*?) occurred at Polonnaruwa."⁴⁹ Similarly, Robert Waldron asks: "Had his epiphany been a momentary *satori* (enlightenment)? Merton personally felt that a Christian could, just as a Buddhist [could], experience *satori*;"⁵⁰ and I have already noted that Lawrence S. Cunningham raises the same possibility; and on this understanding, the question of a Buddhist/Christian conversion does not arise.

Waldron, as noted, raises the possibility that Merton's experience was one of *satori*. But he is more inclined to believe "that Merton experienced a great integration, a greater wholeness—holiness if you wish,"⁵¹ of the kind held up in the Sufi tradition, the journey from *fana* (the dissolution of the small-s self) to *baqa*, or final integration. Merton had written about this perspective on transcendent experience, manifestly with great feeling and appreciation, in his article "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy,'" a review of Reza Arasteh's *Final Integration in the Adult Personality* (Leiden, Brill, 1965): in my view, one of the most valuable essays Merton ever wrote. Waldron, affirming that as with all mystical experiences Merton's experience is an ineffable one, "one of the most if not *the* most profound of his life," says further that "in Jungian terms, Merton's experience points toward his own final integration."⁵² He then cites Merton's essential understanding

of the meaning of final integration:

Final integration is a state of transcultural maturity far beyond mere social adjustment, which always implies partiality and compromise. The man who is "fully born" has an entirely "inner experience of life." He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense "cosmic" and "universal man." He has attained a deeper, fuller identity than that of his limited ego-self which is only a fragment of his being. He is in a certain sense identified with everybody: or in the familiar language of the New Testament ... he is "all things to all men."⁵³ He is able to experience their joys and sufferings as his own, without however becoming dominated by them. He has attained to a deep inner freedom—the Freedom of the Spirit we read of in the New Testament.⁵⁴

Waldron then comments:

Without doubt, Merton became the person he wrote about: he is integrated, whole, cosmic and universal. When he steps barefoot upon the wet grass before the Polonnaruwa Buddhas, he steps upon holy ground. He also steps upon the ground of being. He is more himself, more grounded than he has ever been in his life.⁵⁵

Merton's last talk, at the Bangkok conference, says much the same thing. "The monk," he says (and he is referring both to Christian and to Buddhist monks),

is a man who has attained, or is about to attain, or seeks to attain, full realization. He dwells in the center of society as one who has attained realization—he knows the score. Not that he has acquired unusual or esoteric information, but he has come to experience the ground of his own being in such a way that he knows the secret of liberation and can somehow communicate this to others.⁵⁶

Written some time before the conference, this statement, I speculate,

would have been delivered by Merton with a new and very personal appreciation for the truth and pertinence of his own words.

In the Arasteh review, Merton also links the concept of final integration to the experience, among others, of the early Taoist masters.⁵⁷ The Taoist master to whom he felt most akin was Chuang Tzu (third century BCE), the proto-teacher of the later Chinese Zen tradition. Like Merton, Chuang Tzu was also a hermit whose thought was “essentially religious and mystical,” and was marked by humour, sophistication, literary genius and philosophical insight.⁵⁸ He is also one who knows that he has “folies of his own.”⁵⁹ Who is Merton describing here? Chuang Tzu, yes; but as in his description of the finally-integrated human being, he is surely describing, in our perception, himself—perhaps not as he saw himself as then being, but surely as he aspired to be. What he wanted to be, in Taoist terms, was “the man of Tao,” that is, “the man in whom ‘Tao acts without impediment.’”⁶⁰

It is with the Taoist concept of the pivot of the universe that Taoist thought most usefully casts light on Merton’s Polonnaruwa experience. Here is Chuang Tzu’s explication of the meaning of the universal pivot.

The pivot of Tao passes through the center where all affirmations and denials converge. He who grasps the pivot is at the still-point from which all movements and oppositions can be seen in their right relationship. Hence he sees the limitless possibilities of both “Yes” and “No.” Abandoning all thought of imposing a limit or taking sides, he rests in direct intuition.⁶¹

This takes us back to what Merton says in the *approach* segment of our text:

The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—*without refutation*—without establishing some

other argument.⁶²

Just as Merton’s description of Chuang Tzu suggests his own aspirations for himself, so do these lines from the text stand very close to the Taoist understanding of “the man of Tao,” the human being who has grasped the pivot of Tao, and in whom, “jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things,” the Tao can act without impediment.

Two questions remain. First, did Merton “spoil” his experience by talking about it at a dinner party?⁶³ He demonstrates ambivalence about this: he thinks that perhaps he *has* spoiled it by talking about it to casual acquaintances, but then consoles himself with the thought that what he was saying about it “got across” to Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula. Michael Mott demonstrates the same ambivalence, saying on the one hand, that in words and through “outgoing exuberance”⁶⁴ Merton had spoiled an experience that, as with Zen, had no dependence on “words and letters;” but on the other hand, that whatever might have been “spoiled in the talking [was] restored [for later viewers, not for Merton himself, who never saw them developed] by a quiet meditation on the photographs [he] took that day.”⁶⁵ Given, however, how strongly virtually every reader of the *Asian Journal* is struck by what Merton has to say about it, and certainly for myself, I do not believe that he spoiled it in any way, although Mott is without doubt correct to direct our attention to the value of the photographs.

If there is a sense in which Merton did “spoil” the experience, perhaps the spoiling can be seen as the work of the “false self,” to use a classic term of Merton’s, i.e. the self-referential ego. It is not so much the talking about the experience that “spoils” it, but rather the *asking* whether talking about it spoils it, which takes Merton another distance away from the experience itself. If it is spoiled at all, it is spoiled for the false self, since the true self couldn’t care less either way.

Second, did Merton in some way finesse or prompt or push for the experience? In a word, no. His own account testifies to this. “Suddenly, almost forcibly,” he says, he was “jerked clean out

of the habitual, half-tied vision of things ... as if exploding from the rocks themselves;" he was "knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness" at the beauty of the great figures. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he had described in words with many parallels to the Polonnaruwa text his sense of how such an experience can happen: "freedom and clarity suddenly open out within you until your whole being embraces the wonder, the depth, the obviousness and yet the emptiness and unfathomable incomprehensibility of God."⁶⁶

At the same time, however, it must be said that Merton was prepared, *primed* for the experience, as his statements in the Arasteh review and the Bangkok lecture show. What was he "obscurely looking for"? Surely it was the fullest possible experience of the depths of contemplation. He did not "attain" it in the sense of achieving it; rather, he was remotely preparing himself for such an experience in the spirit of Chuang Tzu and *wu wei*, "active non-action," which resists "conscious striving," and is "not concerned with consciously laid plans or deliberately organized endeavours."⁶⁷ When the experience came to Merton, it came as gift rather than achievement, all achievements being at some level related to the false self. The yearning he expresses in his descriptions of the man of Tao or of the finally-integrated human being testify to his life-long desire for spiritual depth. He didn't engineer the experience, but he was ready for it, ready to be surprised, to be "knocked over," and "jerked clean out of the habitual half-tied vision of things." In Jung's dictum, the future casts its shadow on the past, or indeed the present.

Merton did indeed settle "the great affair;" he "found also the great compassion." He had reached "the freedom to go beyond all divisions among human beings, all living beings, through *mahakaruna*, the great compassion."⁶⁸ Patrick O'Connell affirms that the prayer that he might find the great compassion "was answered at the culmination of his pilgrimage, before the statues at Polonnaruwa;"⁶⁹ and the great realization of which he and Chatral Rimpoche had spoken some three weeks earlier⁷⁰—this too had

come to him, inasmuch as the great realization is the experience of the unity-beyond-division of emptiness and compassion to which the text testifies. Their placement together here tells us that these are simply three ways—great affair, great compassion, great realization—of saying the same thing. Perhaps in truth the Polonnaruwa illumination marks the moment of the *finis quaerendi* (the end of the searching/seeking/looking for) to which Merton refers at the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁷¹

The culmination of his pilgrimage, yes: and so we return briefly to Cousineau's paradigm, a trans-religious one. After the earlier steps (the longing, the call, the departure, walking the path, the labyrinth or "crunch" experience) comes the sixth and penultimate step, the arrival, which we can understand in terms of the three "ways" mentioned above. There remains one more step: the bringing back of the boon, which Merton, because of his sudden and unexpected death, did not reach. The boon, it must be understood, is not in the deepest sense a material memento, such as the scallop shells that pilgrims take home from Santiago de Compostela. It is the spiritual gift which the pilgrim gives to his or her intimates at the time of return, the gift of his experience of pilgrimage. That gift, that boon, is Merton himself as the one who experienced what he did at Polonnaruwa.

If the definition of pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place, in the expectation/hope of transformation, then so it proved for Merton. Even with such a powerful spiritual awakening, the false self is still present and willing to claim ownership. Yet this in fact leaves the power of the experience untouched, and if anything allows the true self at the centre of Merton's (and our) being to become more fully aware/awake once more, and to view the false self with equanimity, humour and compassion. Capable of being "enraged and humiliated" by something as trivial as the discovery that his luggage on the flight to Bangkok was overweight,⁷² yet still the recipient of profoundly transcendent human experience, enlightened, realized and imperfect, Merton remains his own gift to those of us who are willing to learn from him.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin. Consulting Editor, Amiya Chakravarty. (New York: New Directions, 1973); It was given 44 reviews: see Marquita E. Breit, Patricia A. Burton and Paul M. Pearson, *About Merton: Secondary Sources 1945-2000. A Bibliographic Workbook*. (Louisville: The Thomas Merton Foundation, 2002) 41-42.
2. *Asian Journal*, 4.
3. As evidenced in his *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell, 1967); and his *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968). See also *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 186-88.
4. Their letters have been collected in *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, foreword Rembert G. Weakland (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002). See especially pp. 160-76 for the letters in which Merton and Leclercq discuss the possibility of Merton participating in the meeting in Thailand.
5. *Asian Journal*, xxii.
6. *Asian Journal*, xxiii.
7. *Asian Journal*, 312-13.
8. *Asian Journal*, 230-36.
9. *Asian Journal*, 197-202. Mahabalipuram, now renamed Mamallapuram, is the site of the shore temple honouring the Shiva lingam. For Merton to link it with Polonnaruwa as he does suggests that it was very important to him; but the *Asian Journal* offers no passage parallel to the Polonnaruwa text in its intensity.
10. *Asian Journal*, 235-36.
11. *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred*, foreword Huston Smith. Berkeley, CA: Conari, 1998.
12. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), 79. Paul Pearson (email, July 5, 2012) asserts that the structure of pilgrimage is provided by the editors of the *Asian Journal* rather than by Merton himself. My own view is that Merton's comments in the *Asian Journal* about pilgrimage provide strong support for Ross Labrie's statement.

13. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gal_Vihara, downloaded June 12, 2012. Merton (who was using an outdated guidebook) says that the standing figure is Ananda, the cousin and disciple of the historical Buddha, others that it is the Buddha himself; there is no general agreement on this point.
14. David G. Addiss and John Joseph Albert, *Polonnaruwa Revisited: A Speculum on Thomas Merton, the Buddha, Lymphatic Filariasis and the "Shadow Figure" at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Indwellers, 2005) 68.
15. In my 1989 presentation, I made rather too much of this, by linking Merton's "sensitivity" in going barefoot before the Buddhas to Moses being instructed to take his shoes off in front of the burning bush because he was standing on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). A man in the audience, whose name I cannot now remember, but who had been to Polonnaruwa, told me afterwards that there was a sign there: "Take off your shoes." Of course I looked for it myself on my visit there in 2001, and there it was; and yes, I took off my shoes.
16. "The middle way," i.e., Buddhism as such, systematized by Nagarjuna in the second or third century CE. See Joseph Q. Raab, "Madhyamika and Dharmakaya: Some Notes on Thomas Merton's Epiphany at Polonnaruwa," in *The Merton Annual* 17 (2004) 196-99.
17. The "truth-body of the Buddha," i.e., the true or essential nature of the Buddha himself, as of all beings. See Raab, 199-200.
18. Merton died at Samut Prakan five days after writing this, and eight days after his visit to Polonnaruwa.
19. Something which every western visitor to south Asia notices both visually and olfactorily immediately.
20. *Asian Journal*, 235-36. William Shannon also distinguishes between Merton's "description of the experience (mostly in short, pulsating phrases) and his reflection on it (more studied, less spontaneous)." *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, foreword A. M. Allchin (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 278.
21. "Exposure: Key to Thomas Merton's *Asian Journal*?" *Monastic Studies* 10 (Spring 1974) 183. The *Asian Journal*'s first interpreters, of course, were the editors who gave it its literary shape.
22. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 276-77.
23. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 278.

24. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 284-85; *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 156-58.
25. Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton," in M. Basil Pennington, ed., *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 177.
26. Often the question has been raised: was this a mystical experience or an aesthetic experience? Merton himself calls it an "aesthetic illumination" (*Asian Journal*, 235). The relation of noun and adjective is important, it seems to me. My own resolution of this is to call it a mystical experience, aesthetically mediated. See on this Merton's comment, from his conversation with Sanskritist V. Raghavan in Madras (now Chennai), that an aesthetic experience lasts only as long as the object, in this case the statues of the Buddha, is present, whereas a mystical experience has a permanent and transformative effect (*Asian Journal*, 204, and note 5, 206). See also Mott, 561; Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 278; Cunningham, *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist, 1992), 223, and *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 177; Gary Commins, "Thomas Merton's Three Epiphanies," *Theology Today* 56.1 (April 1999), 67.
27. See on this Kathleen Henderson Staudt, "Rereading Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*," *Spiritus* 12.1 (Spring 2012) 115.
28. Quoted in Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981) 212. On the "human experience," see also Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004).
29. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 71.
30. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 72, 74. Merton's emphasis.
31. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 75. See also Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1985) 103-05, 124-28.
32. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 75.
33. Shannon, *Dark Path*, 216; Bonnie B. Thurston, "Unfolding of a New World: Thomas Merton and Buddhism," *Merton and Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness, and Everyday Mind*, ed. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, illustr. Gray Henry (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007), 18, 21, quoting notes from an interview of December 7, 2000, with Harold Talbott; Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), 164.

34. Patrick O'Connell, "Merton on the Eve of the Third Millennium," *The Merton Seasonal* 22.3 (Autumn 1997), 8.
35. Julius Lipner, review of *The Asian Journal* in *New Blackfriars* 56 (October 1975), 473.
36. Addiss and Albert, 118.
37. Tyson Anderson, "What Matters is Clear," *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010), 75.
38. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 313.
39. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 254.
40. William H. Shannon, ed., *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) 564. Merton's emphasis.
41. Robert Waldron, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2011), 183.
42. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 278-79.
43. *Asian Journal*, 142-44. I record my own meeting with Chatral Rimpoche in an article I wrote for the 40th anniversary of his death: "In the Footsteps of Thomas Merton: Asia," *The Merton Seasonal* 33.4 (Winter 2008), 21-28.
44. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 143.
45. See on this the long citation, in the Complementary Reading section of the *Asian Journal*, from S. B. Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: University Press, 1958), 8-10.
46. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, ix.
47. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 15.
48. Marguerite Davies, "Thomas Merton's Rethinking of the Christian Monastic Life in the Light of the Bodhisattvacarya of Mahayana Buddhism," unpublished ThM thesis, University of St Michael's College, Toronto (1973), vii, 1. The quotation marks around the word "emptiness" are in the original.
49. Thurston, 21.

50. Robert Waldron, *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention, An Exploration of Prayer* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2007), 13.
51. Waldron, *Master of Attention*, 13.
52. Waldron, *Wounded Heart*, 181-82. Carl Jung's concept of individuation offers another possible framing of Merton's experience, one which could respond to Shannon's concern that Merton's earlier life be taken into consideration in any reference to the Polonnaruwa illumination, since individuation is a process rather than a single event. The long quotation from the Arasteh review which Waldron cites is to be found in Merton's *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 225.
53. Romans 9:22.
54. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 225.
55. Waldron, *Wounded Heart*, 182.
56. *Asian Journal*, 333; also quoted in Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction*, 165.
57. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 225.
58. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 16, 15.
59. Merton, *Way of Chuang Tzu*, 29.
60. Merton, *Way of Chuang Tzu*, 25.
61. Merton, *Way of Chuang Tzu*, 43.
62. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 233.
63. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 230.
64. Mott, 560.
65. Mott, 561.
66. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 275.
67. Merton, *Way of Chuang Tzu*, 24.
68. Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 67.
69. O'Connell, 8.
70. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 143.
71. *Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi*—"it may be the end of the book, but not of the searching/seeking/looking for." *Seven Storey Mountain*, 423.
72. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 248.