

# Birds of a Feather: reflections on the birds of appetite and the bird of paradise

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*If you wish to see it before your own eyes  
Have no fixed thoughts either for or against it"*

R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* was published in 1967, and became his most popular book. In it Laing writes for those 'who are still half-alive' about 'the pseudo-events to which we adjust with a false consciousness'; about the ugliness of our social realities; and about humanity's alienation from its authentic possibilities.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton's book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* was published the following year. In it Merton shows Zen as the way to cut through the false consciousness, the ugliness, and the alienation so that there is an awakening—a direct, unmediated experience of reality.

In this paper I shall reflect on aspects of the two books and show how the different emphases given by Laing and Merton largely reflect their different contexts. My suggestion is that both writers, through and in spite of their different life experiences, had arrived at a place of similar insights and awareness, and that it is only when we have recognised 'the birds of appetite' for what they are that we can see 'the bird of paradise'.

## The authors

R.D. Laing (1927-1989), psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, aimed to make madness

intelligible. He revolutionised mental health treatment through his belief that the seriously mentally ill had something important that they were trying to convey. He set up Kingsley Hall in London as an alternative to mental hospitals, allowing patients to explore their madness and so to rediscover themselves. Laing practised yoga and meditation for many years, and read widely in Eastern texts. In 1971 he spent a year in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), including months on retreat in a Buddhist monastery near Kandy, studying Sanskrit, and meeting holy men in the foothills of the Himalayas. He returned to explore and write about intra-uterine life, and about womb and birth fantasies. It appears to have been hard for Laing back in the West to hold on to the inner repose he had found in India and, during the late 70s until his death, there were problems with heavy drinking and complex personal and professional relationships.

The second part of the book *The Politics of Experience* is a sequence entitled *The Bird of Paradise*. It was assumed at the time that this was largely written under the influence of LSD (which Laing openly experimented with, both personally and with patients, before the drug

was made illegal). He denied the assumption, and said that the sequence emerged from his own dreams, and the states between sleeping and waking. *The Bird of Paradise* begins with a long quote from the Gospel according to Thomas: 'When you make the two one, and when you make the inner as the outer... then shall you enter the Kingdom'.<sup>3</sup> Throughout both parts of the book there is evidence of his spiritual searching and his under-

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standing of the connections between our psychological and spiritual needs.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was in New Delhi when *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* was published on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1968. On his journey to the East, he too was meeting holy men in the foothills of the Himalayas and staying at Kandy in Ceylon. It is from there that he visited Polonnaruwa, 'very much a Zen garden, a span of bareness and openness and evidence', and where he writes of his encounter with the huge figures of the Buddha, 'the great smiles... Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing'. It is 'the queer evidence... that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery"... everything is clear'.<sup>4</sup> Merton travelled on to a conference in Bangkok, and his accidental death occurred a week later. The

longest essay in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 'A Christian looks at Zen', introduces the Western mind to the idea of experience unmediated by rational thought or by concepts and explanations. Merton writes of Zen as the awareness of and receptivity to *what is*, and the transformed consciousness of reality that is enlightenment. This then was perhaps the awareness experienced in Polonnaruwa that left him able to write, 'I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise'.<sup>5</sup>

Merton and Laing in their writings (more broadly than these books cited) cover many of the same subjects, though from different starting points: subjects such as alienation which leads to violence; subjectivity and the person; and the idea of false consciousness hiding a true self. Both authors emphasise the centrality of unmediated experience—Merton from the context of the monastery, and Laing from the context of the psychiatric hospital.

## The primacy of experience

The central theme in both *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* is the idea of the primacy of experience — experience that is unmediated by concepts, conjectures and stylised thought. For both authors this is about subjectivity, the experience of being a person. Laing asks, 'Can human beings be persons today?'<sup>6</sup> The question resonates with Merton's plea in an earlier book: 'The person must be rescued from the individual'.<sup>7</sup>

In Merton's 'Postface' at the end of

*Zen and the Birds of Appetite* ('This book is really back to front'<sup>8</sup>), he quotes Herbert Marcuse on the alienation and absurdity that results from our rational, technologically-based society. Merton describes the effect as 'mystification', and commends Zen as a way to break through blinding conformism in order to really see. Laing writes, in his introduction, that our alienation 'goes to the roots' and that we are 'strangers to our true selves, to one another, and to the spiritual and material world'.<sup>9</sup> We are born into a world where alienation waits for us, and for Laing the alienation is arrived at by the 'outrageous violence' that human beings inflict on one another. Alienation can however be overcome when we experience one another without preconceptions and expectations, when we are really *there* for one another. Both men are writing about 'experience with complete acceptance—that is how it was meant to be'.<sup>10</sup>

Laing explores the violence and damage (both intentional and unconscious) between people in all types of relationship, within families and in our social structures and wider societies. This violence forces us to become alienated and to lose our potential to 'become who we really are'. Instead, we conform and comply in order to fit the demands and expectations of family and society. For many people, this leads to great suffering and mental breakdown. Laing observed and understood these dynamics both from his own childhood experience, and through the extraordinary capacity he had to understand the minds of others. He thought that the journey to recovering our self can often be a journey through the experience of madness, into awareness and insight.

For Merton (who also understood the

psychological violence inflicted through family, other relationships and societal institutions), our true identity is one goal of the spiritual quest. Our false self is dominated by egocentric desires and superficiality; it is illusory and outward looking, and keeps us 'on the surface' of life. This state is reinforced and fed by the type of society where all is centred on 'things,' on possessions, and ultimately on violence. Merton writes that we falsify and are not in 'right relation to the world and to things in it'.<sup>11</sup> He distinguished between community where people are respected for who they are, where the values of responsibility and freedom are held dear, and a collectivity characterised by groups of self-serving individuals who are isolated and alienated, who turn to diversions as a way of dulling the problems of life. When we are part of the collectivity we merely speak with that 'anonymous' voice, a voice which in our time and place is derived from mass media. We have lost touch with our own subjectivity.

For Laing such collectivity is exemplified by the treatment of the mentally ill. He writes that no age in the history of humanity had perhaps so lost touch with natural *healing* processes as had his own. He saw that madness can be a 'breakthrough' from the illusion of the egoic experience: 'The "ego" is the instrument for living in *this* world. If the "ego" is broken up, or destroyed (by the insurmountable contradictions of certain life situations, by toxins, chemical changes, etc.), then the person may be exposed to other worlds'.<sup>12</sup> His clinical work was about respecting the person's subjective experience of what was happening to them.

The subjectivity in Zen that Merton writes about is a subjectivity stripped of all formalism, doctrine and dogma, and beyond labels and concepts. This said, Zen cannot be conveniently classified as a religion. 'The chief characteristic of Zen is that it rejects all these systematic elaborations in order to get back, as far as possible, to the pure unarticulated and unexplained ground of direct experience'. So Merton asks, 'The direct experience of what?' The answer is *life itself*, what it means to live, and the question of who is the 'I' that exists and lives. He asks, 'What is the difference between an authentic and an illusory awareness of the self that exists and lives?'<sup>13</sup> In Zen, once the unmediated experience becomes mediated through logical thinking, form, and language, the immediate reality is lost.

In this, there are similarities to Laing's ability to accept the experience of the schizophrenic and the emotionally distressed for what it is, rather than reducing and controlling it through labels, diagnosis and associated treatments. Even in his later years, when he was discredited professionally, there are extraordinary accounts of his capacity to accept and connect with another's experience. At a conference in Arizona in 1985, Laing presented a live filmed interview with a young 'schizophrenic' street woman whom he had found the night before. The twenty minute interview looked inconsequential on the surface, but when the woman voluntarily joined Laing on the conference platform she said she felt better and then praised Laing as someone, 'who knows how to tap into where other people's minds are at, not just by asking questions and trying to figure things out'.<sup>14</sup> Laing approached others without

preconceptions—filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, accepting the evidence in front of him—surely a Zen-like frame of mind where he responded to *who* they were, and not *how* they were. Indeed, Laing refers to Zen as a growing influence in psychotherapy, 'with its emphasis on illumination achieved through the sudden and unexpected'.<sup>15</sup>

### The liminal place

These two books discussed, published within a year of each other, confirmed the position of both authors as being on the edge, on the boundary of the established church for Merton, and on the fringes of the psychiatric profession for Laing. Earlier writings by Merton had already caused concern amongst the Catholic hierarchy, and Laing's later behaviour eventually led to his agreeing to resign from the General Medical Council. Both men had discovered through their particular and personal experiences the ability to let go of preconceived thought. If dogma and doctrine is relinquished, whether theological or medical, then what you have is awareness unaffected by explanation. This insight placed both men in positions that challenged their own institutions.

Merton became immersed in Zen—not just as a subject to study, but as a way of living. He could transfer openness and awareness into a raised consciousness of 'unity with Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, he could bring Zen-like qualities into Christianity, even when this required letting go of theological formulations that restricted religious experience. He understood that the Christian religion included contradictions. The very theological for-

mulations and associated moral norms and belief systems could distort and diminish the inner meaning of Christian revelation. Merton writes of how Zen 'pushes contradictions to their ultimate limit where one has to choose between madness and innocence'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, when pressing the contradictions within human formulations, a logical understanding and rational thinking can take us beyond those mind patterns into an unexplored and innocent freedom. For Merton, the trip to the East became the liminal place where he could open himself directly to the influence of other people who understood this way.

Laing's work criticised the medical establishment. Over his career he increasingly attacked the theories and reasoning behind the system of psychiatric diagnoses, and also the treatment on offer. As his popularity grew, so did the unease and criticism about his stance and practice. In his work with people, Laing moved beyond the labelling of 'madness'. He went beyond the formal classification system, the earnest discussions about the use of ECT and physical restraint (I think he would have understood the now extensive use of drug treatments as another form of restraint) into a place of innocence and experience where he met the distressed person, where he saw and heard the abused child, or neglected baby, or over-protected infant subjected to confused parenting.

Laing was often accused of glorifying schizophrenia—a claim he rejected. However, in *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* he does explore transcendental experiences that 'sometimes break through in psychosis', and writes that the 'madman' who in his

confusion 'muddles ego and self, inner with outer, natural and supernatural... can often be to us, even through his profound wretchedness and disintegration, the hierophant of the sacred'.<sup>18</sup> He writes of the mad person as an exile from the scene of being as we know it, but who nonetheless signals to us from a void peopled with presences and spirits that we are blind to.

Laing goes on to describe the need for the dissolution of the normal ego—that part of us adapted to a false social reality

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—and the need for the breakthrough of divine power. He goes on to describe how from this 'death' there is a rebirth of a new kind of ego-functioning, where the ego becomes the servant of the divine, and no longer its betrayer. In this way, madness can sometimes be a spiritual journey into freedom.

Both Laing and Merton understood about breaking through the illusion of apparently normal reality and what is termed 'sanity.' In such a 'breaking through' there is no space for the egoic self, for desires, thoughts, beliefs, facts. There is just the *isness* of the experience: 'it is there already, if only our self-

conscious little egos, cleansed from distracting thoughts and unclouded by emotion, would allow us to look at things as they are'.<sup>19</sup> We might note the similarities between the following passages on this theme, the first from Laing and the second from Merton:

One enters the other world by breaking a shell: or through a door: through a partition: the curtains part or rise: a veil is lifted. Seven veils: seven seals, seven heavens...nowhere in the Bible is there any argument about the existence of gods, demons, angels. People did not first "believe in" God: they experienced his Presence.<sup>20</sup>

The real way to study Zen is to penetrate the outer shell and taste the inner kernel which cannot be defined. Then one realizes in oneself the reality which is being talked about. As Eckhart says:

"...the farther you get in the nearer you come to its essence. When you come to the One who gathers all things up into itself, there you must stay."<sup>21</sup>

**The birds of appetite and the bird of paradise**

The study and practice of Eastern meditation gave both Laing and Merton the potential for the direct experience of being in the here-and-now, and in a place of self-emptying and no-thought. Merton integrated Zen into his Christian spiritual tradition. He felt that Zen could help the Westerner attain a higher level of religious consciousness within a Christian context. It led Merton to discover that words are but a 'finger pointing at the

moon. To focus on the finger instead of what it points to is to miss the whole reason for seeing'.<sup>22</sup> The birds of appetite referred to in the author's note at the beginning of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* represent our desires—desires for knowledge; for information that we can take, own, and add to our life; for gain; for *something*. Instead we are introduced to an alternative:

Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the "nothing", the "nobody" that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen. It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey.<sup>23</sup>

Laing's capacity to be open to another's distress was augmented by his yoga and meditation practice. He was able to connect, to let down the barriers that most of us swiftly erect to defend ourselves from someone else—especially when they are different to us and appear to be mad. He too understood that words are what we turn to when we are beginning to lose 'that Alpha and Omega'. He writes of his awareness of saving a bird from a cat. It reads as a moment of Zen consciousness—the awareness of desire (the birds of appetite) providing an awakening (the bird of paradise):

Stop. Cat is a cat is a bird is a non-bird of ineffably frail space suddenly spreading in parabolic grace of authority. How foolish to worry, to try to save her, or grasp her. Perhaps the



cat was trying to save her. Let be. Cat and bird. Begriff. The truth I am trying to grasp is the grasp that is trying to grasp it.

I have seen the Bird of Paradise, she has spread herself before me, and I shall never be the same again.

There is nothing to be afraid of. Nothing.

Exactly.

The Life I am trying to grasp is the me that is trying to grasp it.<sup>24</sup>

So what is the bird of paradise? Merton writes of the paradise of 'the lost innocence, the emptiness and purity of heart... which had been shattered by the "knowledge of good and evil"'. Given by divine mercy the bird of paradise is then a state of mind where unity is recovered, where the two becomes one and where we experience our 'lost likeness to God in pure, undivided simplicity'.<sup>25</sup>

#### After

Years of spiritual practice and study, and the understanding expressed and explained in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* can be seen as preparation for Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa (described earlier in the paper) of a direct, unmediated awakening.

Several days later, Merton—by his untimely accidental death—indeed went "beyond the shadow and the disguise." What on December 1st was spiritual insight became on December 10th spiritual reality. Merton's transitory experience of Divinity at the feet of the great Buddhas was transformed into full communion with God. In-

sight became Sight. Prophetic hint became Eternal Vision.<sup>26</sup>

The influence of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* lives on and gives us a way into the idea of Christian Zen. It was a forerunner of the subsequent interest in Eastern meditation and spirituality, and attempts to integrate aspects into Western religious practice.

Laing's spiritual practices were not sufficiently embedded to keep him from later self-destruction, but his work too lives on. Although his lasting contribution to mental health treatment is largely unacknowledged and often discredited, I think he opened the way for the gradual appreciation of mental illness, and of the value in listening to the emotionally distressed. This led to huge numbers of counsellors and psychotherapists (there are now many more counsellors than members of the armed forces in the UK), and his insights, alongside other developments, led to the closure of large mental hospitals. Nearly forty years later, *The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* remains a relevant and inspirational book.

#### Notes & References

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4. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. VII, New York: Harper-

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6. TPE, p.20.

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10. Dom Aelred Graham, *op cit*, p.42.

11. ZBA, p.82.

12. TPE, p.115.

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15. TPE, p.40.

16. ZBA, p.39.

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19. Dom Aelred Graham, *op cit*, p.19.

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22. Belden C. Lane, quoted in Marilyn Sunderman, 'A Finger pointing at the moon: Zen and the photography of Thomas Merton', in *The Merton Seasonal* Volume 31 No. 2, Summer 2006, p.6.

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24. TPE, p.156.

25. ZBA, p.117 and p.102.

26. Monica Weis, The birds ask, "Is it time to be"? In *Beyond the Shadow and the Disguise*, Somerset: The Thomas Merton Society 2006, p.10.

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