

Silence at Amaravati

by

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People approach Thomas Merton from different angles. For some, he is the great prophet of peace and justice issues. Others value him as a poet, or a pioneer of inter-faith dialogue, or whatever. However, Merton was first of all a monk, a man of prayer, and a spiritual master. Everything else flows from that.

So the Thomas Merton Society decided it would be good to honour his memory with a day of silent prayer. The venue chosen was the retreat house at Amaravati, the Therevada Buddhist monastery at Great Gaddesden. It is near Hemel Hempstead, and so easily accessible from London but set in beautiful countryside. The man asked to lead the weekend with me was the Venerable Sobhano, a Scottish monk of the sister monastery at Chithurst, in Hampshire. Both monasteries belong to the Thai tradition of the Theravada school of Buddhist teaching. He asked me to help him. I have written on Merton and on prayer, and I have visited many Buddhist monasteries, so I had something to contribute, although when it came to practical meditation, it was Sobhano who was the master and teacher.

About fifty people came to the day, both Christian and Buddhist, and no doubt some who were neither. One of the participants was Sister Eileen MacInnes, a Roman Catholic nun who is also a qualified Zen roshi, and so spans both traditions. She is Director of the Phoenix Trust, a body which teaches prisoners to find inner freedom through meditation. Since quite a number of Christians these days use Buddhist methods of meditation, it was not possible to tell who belonged to which religion just by watching them as they sat during the talks and periods of prayer.

Sobhano led us in a number of physical exercises designed to loosen the body and relax us. We in the west have lost the art of being relaxed and yet

alert and aware, or what Eliot calls 'concentration without elimination'. We have lost that awareness which the early Church and the Middle Ages had, that body and spirit are one unity. Perhaps through the influence of Descartes, we have split mind/soul/spirit from the body, and the interest in the religions of the Far East in recent decades has enriched us with these exercises which make us more aware that we are One. Speaking as a Christian, I can say (as Merton knew) that the source of that oneness is within us, and if we make the journey inwards to the source of that Oneness, we become aware that we are ourselves the image of God, at one within ourselves, at one with God, at one with the created universe.

So the Ven. Sobhano led us in exercises, and I gave a talk on the meaning and value of silence, but of course more important than either of us were the periods of silent prayer. Of these, Sobhano has said, 'I think above all in sharing the silence, as two monastics from different faiths, and by drawing others into that circle, we gave expression to Merton's great vision of a unified belonging in spirit that he discovered in every authentic religious practice he encountered.'

It was, of course, Buddhism which Merton encountered in a special way, from the early days of his monastic life when he entered into the spirit of Zen until his last journey when he met with so many Theravada and Tibetan teachers, and especially with H.H. the Dalai Lama. There is a deep affinity between Christianity and Buddhism. There is also a great divide between them (compare a statue of the Buddha with the crucifix). But there is a far greater divide between the two of them and the materialist, hedonist and individualist spirit which characterizes modern society (which is not to say that it characterizes every member of that society or every unbeliever).

While many people came simply for the Saturday, many more arrived for an introductory session on the Friday night, and quite a number stayed on until the Sunday morning when we had the Christian Eucharist in the Buddhist shrine room, an arrangement pleasing, I am sure, both to the Lord Buddha and the Lord Jesus.