

Merton, Christianity, Buddhism and Me: with Reference to Shantideva

Larry Culliford

Thomas Merton met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in November 1968. In my conceit, their conversation might have gone like this. Merton asks, "What do you think of psychiatrists?" His Holiness replies, "Better not to think about it... Better not to think."

Joking apart, the meeting between these two men has had significant and happy consequences for me. This story begins when I was studying psychiatry in Australia in 1980. At a workshop on Jung, I was introduced to an American, who was also a Tibetan Buddhist monk. I became fascinated by the psychology of Buddhism, and later went to stay for a short time at Tara House in Melbourne, learning there from a 'Geshe', a senior Tibetan lama, about Shantideva, the Bodhisattva ideal and Tibetan Thought Transformation. I also learned how to meditate.

In the eighth century, twelve centuries after the historical Buddha's lifetime, Shantideva was a monk at the great Buddhist university at Nalanda in India. His text, *Bodhisattvacharyavatara (A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life)* contains the essential points of Mahayana Buddhism, which has as its ideal the Bodhisattva who, uninterested in his liberation alone, strives for the well-being of all living creatures. In Melbourne, we used the 1979 translation by Stephen Batchelor¹.

The text comprises about one thousand stanzas in ten chapters. In the first chapter, Shantideva introduces the aspirant to the Awakening Mind and inspires him to develop it; in the second, how the mind is prepared; in the third how the Bodhisattva's vow is finally taken. The remaining chapters elucidate the means for fulfilling the commitment through the practices of moral discipline, patience, enthusiasm, meditation and wisdom.

Merton was probably using the 1907 French translation by Louis de la Vallee Poussin. According to *The Asian Journal*, the day before he met the Dalai Lama, Merton had a conversation with his chaplain about Shantideva (Santi Deva).

"He spoke of Santi Deva and I replied that I liked Santi Deva very much, had reread him this summer." (AJ p. 94)

Another text we studied in Melbourne was *Advice from a Spiritual Friend: Tibetan Teachings on Buddhist Thought Transformation* by Geshe Rabten and Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey². This is based on an 11th century text of the great Indian teacher Atisha, and says, "The awakening mind, the driving force of Mahayana Buddhism, has two aspects: ultimate and conventional.

"The ultimate awakening mind is the insight into the emptiness of inherent existence of all phenomena."

Christians often have difficulties with the *ultimate* awakening mind, and I will come back to this. *Advice from a Spiritual Friend* continues:

"The *conventional* awakening mind itself has two attributes:

1. the altruistic aspiration to attain the full awakening of Buddhahood, generated out of boundless compassion for all living beings.
2. the actual venturing into the meditative practice in order to attain this state of pure realization, so that one is in an effective position to actually help others be free from their suffering."

This conventional aspect of the Awakening Mind yields insights that are very helpful for a psychiatrist. The texts point out that all beings desire happiness and wish to avoid suffering. They also remind us that whenever any difficulty or trouble arises, we usually blame it on some other person or object, but this is not conducive to happiness.

Both the books emphasize that it is not sufficient to study these teachings carefully and understand them intellectually. It is essential to meditate on them and apply the insights gained to daily activities.

To quote from Shantideva:

"The intention to benefit all beings, Which does not arise in others, even for

their own sake,
Is an extraordinary jewel of the mind,
And its birth is an unprecedented wonder.

How can I fathom the depths
Of the goodness of this jewel of the
mind,
The panacea that relieves the world of
pain
And is the source of all its joy?"

Among these teachings, there are many echoes of the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (St Mat-

Examining the mind involves a special degree of awareness, cultivated through regular meditation. The teachings are firmly based on the idea of 'impermanence'. Conditions change. As Buddhism has it, "Everything that arises, ceases."

thew 5.39) This is tough advice when our first emotional response might be fear or anger. It would be normal psychology for us to experience aversion when assaulted, and the desire either to flee or hit back. Buddhist teaching acknowledges this, and offers a rigorous method of self-examination as a reliable remedy. Here is

a key stanza from the book on Thought Transformation:

Examining my continuum throughout
All actions, as soon as an emotional
Affliction arises that endangers myself
And others, by facing it I shall strictly
avert it.

The 'continuum' referred to is that of mental activity, which persists through waking, sleeping, dreaming and other 'altered states'. Examining the mind involves a special degree of awareness, cultivated through regular meditation. The teachings are firmly based on the idea of 'impermanence'. Conditions change. As Buddhism has it, "Everything that arises, ceases." This includes painful emotions. Here is a list of some basic 'emotional afflictions', with their pain-free counterparts:³

Painful	Pain-free
Wanting (desire/dislike)...	Contentment
Anxiety...	Calm
Bewilderment...	Clarity
Doubt...	Certainty
Anger...	Acceptance (non-anger)
Shame...	Worthiness
Guilt...	Innocence (purity)
Sadness...	Joy

Thought transformation allows the emotions on the left to dissipate, the healing process leaving those on the right in their place. Joy naturally exists in the absence of sadness, calm in the absence of anxiety and so on. There is not only healing, but also growth in terms of emotional stability and resilience; growth in the direction

of wisdom, compassion, maturity and love.

The book on Thought Transformation continues:

When seeing a being of wicked nature
Who is forced by violent wrongs and
sufferings,
I shall hold dear this one so hard to find
As though discovering a precious treasure.

Such people are not so hard to find if you are a psychiatrist. This text has been very helpful during my training and subsequently, prompting a healthy change in my attitude to 'difficult' patients. They have often become precious teachers.

Another verse goes like this:

When someone whom I have assisted
And in whom I have placed great hope
Inflicts me with extremely bad harm,
I shall view him as my supreme spiritual
friend.

The Bodhisattva and the Christian have much in common, sharing the intention to love both their neighbours *and* their enemies. What the Buddhist teachers make clear is how much we have to gain in life by doing so. It is not just about finding a place in heaven after death.

Continuing with my story, in 1992 I joined a small group travelling to Ladakh in India, a region in the Himalayas once part of greater Tibet where Buddhism remains vibrant. We visited several living monasteries. Our guide, providentially, was Stephen Batchelor, the translator. He and I kept in touch, and he later suggested that I attend the John Main Seminar of the World Community for Christian Meditation in 1994.

The *Good Heart* seminar was a landmark in inter-faith dialogue. For two and a half days in north London, the Dalai Lama gave commentaries on texts from the four Gospels, "From the perspective of a Buddhist monk". The talks were recorded and a summary published.⁴ His Holiness began with reference to Thomas Merton and to another Christian monk he had met from Spain. He spoke of looking into their eyes and seeing evidence of a profound spirituality and love. These two encounters helped him, he said, to develop, "a genuine reverence for the Christian tradition and its capacity to create people of such goodness". (*The Good Heart*, p.39)

I knew nothing about Merton when I heard him speak, but decided to find out more. Another meaningful coincidence occurred when, at about this time, I also met Juliet Hollister. Juliet was the founder in 1960 of the 'Temple of Understanding', the organization behind the First Spiritual Summit conference in Calcutta in 1968, attended by Merton. Referring to her as Judith in the *Asian Journal* (AJ p. 34), he describes her as "warm, lovely, simple, sincere". She told me she couldn't have done it without the backing of her friend, Eleanor Roosevelt. I also liked Juliet very much, and am in sympathy with the ideals of the Temple of Understanding, "To foster education, communication and understanding among the world religions".

We spoke about Merton and, my curiosity heightened, when I went to India again, I took the *Asian Journal* with me. When I got there, I knew I was in the same place. Do you remember Merton's encounter with the little beggar girl?

"The people are beautiful. But the routine of the beggars is heart-rending. The little girl who suddenly appeared at the window of my taxi, the utterly lovely smile with which she stretched out her hand, and then the extinguishing of the light when she drew it back empty. I had no Indian money yet." (AJ p.27)

I have a photo quite possibly of her grand-daughter. We also had the same experience:

"When you give money to one, a dozen half kill themselves running after your cab."

The coincidences continued. At one point I even found myself reading Merton's book in the Garden Café at the Oberoi Hotel in Calcutta, exactly where he himself had sat. He said:

"They overcharge you in the dark and give you back unrecognizable bills" (AJ p.54)

Luckily, the day I was there, the sunlight was bright; lizards were basking, and I paid with plastic.

The point is that I became hooked on Father Louis. I went to similar schools. (Not Ripley Court but Bickley Hall; not Oakham but Cranleigh.) I also went to Cambridge. (Not Clare College but St. Catharine's.) I had taken an interest in Buddhism. No doubt like everyone who follows Merton, I felt that he spoke directly to me.

My intellectual and spiritual life is based on the triangle of Christianity, Bud-

dhism and psychology ('psycho-logos'). Merton has helped me explore and relate to each other the legs of this sturdy tripod. His work, especially the material in the Asian Journal, seems to validate the spiritual connections, and I am deeply grateful for that. It is why I am making this presentation, and my journey has also culminated recently in the completion of my most recent book, *Love, Healing and Happiness. Spiritual Wisdom For Secular Times* (O Books, 2007), written this time under my own name as it is that much more personal.

Writing this book clarified my thinking in particular about the spiritual journey we all face. Let's take another look at the Awakening Mind. Why does Shantideva inspire people to develop it?

When someone has a precious treasure, a 'pearl of great price', buried on his land, he must first realize it is there before he can use it. In the same way, say the Buddhist masters, we must realize that we have the most precious treasure of a discriminating intelligence. Only when we know of its presence can we take full advantage of it. Whether we consider this psycho-biologically innate or a gift through God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, is not for the moment important.

For the Bodhisattva, the 'Awakening Warrior', aware of the treasure, there is work requiring dedication and effort to be done. There should be no delay. A conscious commitment to spiritual practice is required. This is a step, comparable for Christians to discovering an imperative and irresistible desire to take up our cross and follow Christ, come what may. I am reminded of James Fowler's six 'Stages of Faith'. The step here is that from stage

three to stage four, stages which for simplicity I have renamed 'Conformist' and 'Individual'. Here is the full list:⁵

1. Egocentric
2. Conditioning
3. Conformist
4. Individual
5. Integration
6. Teaching & Healing

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Fowler and his colleagues put together a set of ideas about how people develop towards spiritual maturity throughout life. They conducted research interviews with over three hundred and fifty people to test their theories. I have given new, less technical names to the stages, making them simpler.

The first two stages are not relevant for

this discussion. In stage three, we are conditioned by and held in attachment to the cultural and religious ways of our community of origin. We are particularly well-tuned to the expectations, values and judgements of significant others, while remaining unsure of our own capacity to think and come to decisions for ourselves. We feel safer as part of the group.

During the conformist stage, we tend to make use of dualistic, 'either/or' and 'correct/incorrect' thinking, separating 'people like us' from the rest. There is a temptation to criticize and judge others. This is a partisan, oppositional and potentially fundamentalist phase, during which we are at best indifferent to those with whom we do not identify. At worst, we consider them rivals, opponents and enemies. This, of course, results in conflict and misery on both sides.

During this stage, we are at the mercy of what psychologists call 'projection', a defence mechanism of the mind by which we project or throw into others unacceptable aspects of ourselves. Remember Christ's teaching:

"First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye"
(St Matthew 7.5)

This is about projection. It is about our blindness to our own flaws and shortcomings. In the conformist stage, to avoid the painful experiences associated with anxiety, guilt and shame, we unconsciously seek to protect the idea that we are without fault. We are incapable of taking responsibility for our emotions or the fruits of our thoughts, words and

actions (or for our silence and failure to act) until we mature. We must awaken; and we must wake up too to the fact that people who upset us may be in the grip of projection too. Like Christ, we too may pray, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do". Shantideva is telling us what a marvellous thing it is to recognize this sleep, this unconsciousness, and begin to awaken. Merton tells us very much the same thing.

This awakening heralds the beginning of Fowler's stage four. This is the stage of becoming an individual, leaving the parent group, thinking for ourselves and taking responsibility for emotions, thoughts, words and actions. It means leaving the falsehood of a selfish ego in search of our true, selfless selves. It means letting go of material attachments and rejecting the temptations of the consumer society. It can involve prolonged effort and struggle.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth", says our Lord, "But store up treasure in heaven" (St Matthew 6. 19-20). This is a poetic way of emphasizing spiritual over secular values, and recognizes that worldly desire is the inevitable precursor and cause of emotional pain.

Eventually, following spiritual guidance, doing our best to live holy lives, the struggle eases as we enter the fifth stage, that of integration. I suspect that this is when we benefit from reading or re-reading inspired and inspirational texts from Christianity (including the writings of Thomas Merton) and from other world faiths like Buddhism. They address the same human psychological problems. This is when we begin to understand them properly, no longer "Through a

glass, darkly". We are back in the fold, with a sense now of universal belonging. Our family is the entirety of humanity. God willing, we may even aspire to become natural healers and teachers, like Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama.

We are required to leave the comfort zone behind. We have to make the move from conforming, from going through the motions in terms of spiritual and religious beliefs and practices, towards revising them for our personal circumstances, in the light of our individual experiences. We have to realize the truth, which means *making it real* for ourselves. It involves finding new meaning, a revitalized sense of purpose and a universal sense of belonging in the world.

Christian and Buddhist monasticism seem harmonious. I am thinking of the Gethsemani Encounter in 1996, the Dalai Lama's visit with the monks of Drepung Loseling monastery during which performances of Tibetan and Gregorian chant were interwoven to great effect. I think too of the Rule of St. Benedict, with its emphasis on contemplative practices. Compare Shantideva who wrote:

"May monks desiring to practice
Find quiet in solitary places,
And through having abandoned all wandering thoughts
May they meditate with flexible minds."

Discipline and devotion are both required, leading to the acquisition and further refinement of wisdom, and of what we may call 'spiritual' skills.

Discipline and devotion may not be in fashion in the prevailing secular culture, but they are ideal features of any vocation. Those called to health care and

mental health care, for example, do well to consider the spiritual dimension in their work. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to remind people of this, for example in drafting a leaflet for the Royal College of Psychiatrists.⁶

The leaflet is designed for people of all faith traditions and none. Based on the idea that everyone has a spiritual dimension to life, it refers particularly to spiritual *practices*, spiritual *values* and spiritual *skills*, all beneficial for both practitioner and patient. Spiritual practices can be thought of as 'mainly religious' and 'mainly secular', as follows:

Spiritual Practices:

Mainly religious

- > Belonging to a faith tradition, participating in associated community-based activities
- > Ritual and symbolic practices, and other forms of worship
- > Pilgrimage and retreats
- > Meditation and prayer
- > Reading scripture
- > Sacred music (listening to, singing and playing) including songs, hymns, psalms and devotional chants

Mainly secular

- > Acts of compassion (including work, especially teamwork)
- > Deep reflection (contemplation)
- > Yoga, Tai Chi and similar disciplined practices
- > Contemplative reading (of literature, poetry, philosophy, etcetera)
- > Maintaining stable family relationships and friendships (especially those involving high levels of trust and intimacy)

- > Co-operative group or team activities, sporting, recreational or other, involving a special quality of fellowship
- > Engaging with and enjoying nature
- > Appreciation of drama and the arts and engaging in creative activities, including performance and other artistic pursuits, cookery, gardening, etc.

Spirituality is where the deeply personal meets the universal. Spiritual practices help to create and sustain an awareness that serves to identify and promote spiritual values such as creativity, patience, perseverance, honesty, kindness, compassion, wisdom, hope, joy and love, all of which support good health care practice.

Spiritual skills include:

- > Being able to rest, relax and create a still, peaceful state of mind.
- > Going deeper into that stillness and observing one's emerging thoughts and feelings with emotional stability, in a way that carries over into everyday life.
- > Using this capacity for deep reflection to connect with one's spiritual essence and values, enabling additional skills:

Being honestly and sincerely self-reflective, taking responsibility for every thought, word and action;

Remaining focused in the present, staying alert, unhurried and attentive;

Developing compassion and an extensive capacity for direct empathic communication with others;

Emotional resilience: having the courage to witness and endure distress while sustaining an attitude of hope;

Giving without feeling drained;

Being able to grieve and let go.

It is going deeper into the stillness and observing our minds that seems to reflect best the teachings on Buddhist thought transformation. When we find ourselves beset by desire, anxiety, anger, guilt or any 'emotional affliction', sitting with it in meditation, rather than using it to drive speech and action, allows the healing

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processes of lysis and catharsis to take effect. Lysis is the loosening of emotional energy from attachments and catharsis is its release; often as tears, sometimes as laughter.

The psychological tests we experience are of two main types: losses and threats. We suffer by holding on. Anger, for ex-

ample, is driven by attempting to hold onto something – a precious item, a person, an idea... anything – in the face of threat, even when it may already have been lost.

Research strongly suggests that belonging to a faith community, holding religious or spiritual beliefs, and engaging in spiritual practices are all helpful for health, mental health and general well-being. They help prevent illness and distress. They help the speed and degree of recovery; and they help people endure persisting distress and disability.

It is the third bullet point about connecting with our spiritual essence, I think, which helps us best with understanding the *ultimate* Awakening Mind.

“The ultimate awakening mind is the insight into the emptiness of

inherent existence of all phenomena.”

The texts tell us that although external objects appear to exist independently by themselves, there is nothing whatsoever that exists in this way. To view each phenomenon as existing by itself, completely independent of its surroundings, causes, conditions and our mental labelling of it, is the same as regarding dreams as real. However, we are advised to avoid falling into the nihilist extreme. This is not to say that things do not exist at all, or that contemplating the “emptiness of inherent existence” is like viewing the space in an empty room.

It is rather like this. Look at a snow-covered mountain wearing yellow sunglasses, for example, and it appears yellow. Remove the sunglasses and the illu-



The Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, photographed by Larry Culliford

sion disappears. We see the snow as white. The task is to penetrate the illusion, to look upon Creation with the mind of a Buddha, the mind that is awake; then we will know it as pure and complete. Then we will know its Creator and His love.

Merton points us in the right direction when he writes:

“Contemplation is the highest expression of men’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is... spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.” (New Seeds, p.1)

Merton recommends that we too awaken to this, and speaks of “Thousands of winged seeds” that “Come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men”. Sadly too, he observes that, “Most of these perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them”.

He, of course, was not only ready but eager to receive them. His path led not only towards Buddhism, to Shantideva and to the Dalai Lama, but also to his great epiphany in Sri Lanka. His description in the *Asian Journal* (AJ p235-6) seems to indicate the dawning of genuine insight and a breakthrough awakening to the Absolute. Our best word for this

would be ‘God’.

“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 have been to and, like Merton, photographed those places. Take a look again at the pictures. See if they speak to you. Viewing these sights, there can be little doubt, the Awakening Mind of Father Louis became fully awakened.

Notes

1. Now available from Wisdom Books, 1987 edition.
2. Available from Wisdom Publications, 1996 edition.
3. Adapted from *Happiness: The 30 Day Guide*, written under my pen name Patrick Whiteside (London: Rider, 2001)
4. *The Good Heart*, H.H. The Dalai Lama (London: Rider Books, 1996)
5. Adapted from *Stages of Faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* by James Fowler (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981)
6. *Spirituality and Mental Health*, Royal College of Psychiatrists’ website: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info/spirituality.asp

Larry Culliford is a psychiatrist and author based in Sussex. His website can be found at www.happinessite.com. He is also a member of the committee of the Thomas Merton Society.