

Merton's Last Epiphany?

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Introduction

Nine days before his death in Bangkok, Thomas Merton visited Polonnaruwa, which had been the medieval capital of Sri Lanka. It had long been a sacred site, with two medieval Hindu temples among many other historical structures and statues. In the 12th century Rock Temple there were four imposing statues — a seated Buddha, another Buddha in a cave, one that some scholars think to be Ananda, though others believe it is Buddha, and a reclining Buddha. Merton had already met Buddhists in Asia, including the Dalai Lama, and these meetings had exceeded anything he had expected from what he called his Asian pilgrimage.

Merton went to Polonnaruwa on Monday, 1st December, 1968 and made the entry about it in his notebook (which would become *The Asian Journal*) on Thursday, 4 December. In the rolls of film retrieved by John Howard Griffin from Bangkok after Merton's death, there were exquisite black and white images of the Buddhas, which are themselves meditations. These images, included in *The Asian Journal*, allow us to see something of what Merton saw:

Polonnaruwa was such an experience that I could not write hastily of it and cannot write now, or not at all adequately Yet when I spoke about it to Walpola Rahula at the Buddhist University I think the idea got across and he said, 'Those who carved the statues were not ordinary men.'¹

Merton went on to describe Gal Vihara, '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.² Merton was restless, constantly searching - for communion with God, and for his own way and purpose in life. Along the way he tells of several epiphanies (as we call them), the best known of which was 'at the corner of Fourth and Walnut' in downtown Louisville in 1958.³ The 'epiphany' at Polonnaruwa is no indication that Merton was moving from Christianity towards Buddhism, or that he was planning to leave his monastery and the Trappists. Comments in *The Asian Journal* show that he intended to return, that he remained deeply connected to Gethsemani. Polonnaruwa was for him a powerful testimony to an integration and completion of years of spiritual pilgrimage. He found, as he had written earlier, that 'the gate of heaven is everywhere'⁴, and in this integration, Christ was at the centre.

Earlier Epiphanies

Merton scholars point to other apparent epiphanies. Before entering Gethsemani, Merton reports in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that there were moments of vision in Rome, when he was looking at ancient mosaics of Christ. There were others, such as his being transfixed at Sunday mass in Havana's St. Francis church, when the children sang the Creed. There was also his experience of the liturgy at Corpus Christi Church, near to the Columbia University campus on the Upper West Side in New York City.⁵ Particularly striking is his account of a night vision of mercy whilst on fire watch, described at the end of *The Sign of Jonas*.⁶ Other episodes which seem epiphanic are captured in journal entries: for example, when Merton started using the small building called St. Anne's, or when he started spending time at his hermitage. One rainy night there became the extended meditation, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', telling of another kind of epiphany.⁷ Merton is restrained in his journal account of the visit to Polonnaruwa:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot 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, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or

anything—without refutation—without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening.⁸

Students of Merton have given a great deal of attention to this encounter at Polonnaruwa.⁹ Was it a moment of enlightenment, *satori*? Was it the culmination of numerous other experiences of union, communion, emptiness, compassion, mercy? Merton describes being 'knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures', and how, when looking at them, he was 'suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things' such that 'an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.'¹⁰ He writes of the 'queer evidence of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded'.¹¹ As strong as the experience was, Merton was not left drained but in great peace. In that moment he had felt that 'all problems are resolved and everything is clear' because it is clear what matters: 'Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.'¹²

Merton writes that he could not recall any time in his life that matched the sense of 'beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination'.¹³ What he jotted down in notes and in his journal would often become a more polished, more powerful piece of writing for publication. The account of the Fourth and Walnut event is a case in point. With the epiphany at Polonnaruwa, there was no opportunity for such embellishment.¹⁴

Differing Interpretations

Scholars caution against turning this last epiphany into something epic, the *point vierge* of Merton's entire life and spiritual pilgrimage.¹⁵

Context is important. Grayston reads it against the classical tradition of mystical experiences found across the world's religious traditions. Cunningham emphasizes Merton's own description of Polonnaruwa as an 'aesthetic illumination', underscoring the ways in which, like many other experiences on the Asia journey, the new and so very different cultural and religious contexts knocked Merton off his feet. Raab notes that Merton did not appear to be expecting so powerful an experience at Polonnaruwa, and was surprised at what unfolded there.¹⁶ To be able to

go to Asia, to be able to see the religious traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism in practice, to be able to speak to scholars and monastics of those traditions — all these were long-held dreams of Merton's. In this light, Merton writes that:

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 remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.¹⁷

The Polonnaruwa experience is described without explicit references to Merton's Christian tradition, yet the Christian perspective is always present.¹⁸ We hear not of Christ but of Madhyamika, sunyata and dharmakaya.

Madhyamika, according to Raab, is a synonym for Buddhism itself; literally, the 'middle way' and dharmakaya is the 'truth body' or the essential nature of Buddha and of all beings.¹⁹ However, for all his understanding and reverence for Buddhism, Merton was Christian without compromise or distortion, as a close reading of *The Asian Journal* makes clear.²⁰ Polonnaruwa was for him not only a moment of the deep truth within Buddhism, but of his own faith and life in Christ.²¹ 'Integration' is like 'communion'. Other Buddhist terms have Christian equivalents. The 'nothingness' is like a 'death to self', and 'emptiness' is like Paul's *kenosis* or self-emptying by Christ and by ourselves. Compassion is 'mercy within mercy within mercy'.²²

Towards Final Integration

In his last years, Merton was exploring the 'final integration' he had read of in Reza Arasteh's work, *Final Integration in the Adult Personality*.²³ Having relinquished responsibilities for student monks, and having been granted permission to travel, Merton visited other communities, led retreats and scouted possible hermitage locations in New Mexico, Alaska and Northern California before heading for Calcutta, New Delhi, the Himalayas (where he met with the Dalai Lama), Madras, Sri Lanka and finally Bangkok for the conference on monastic renewal for Asian monastic leaders, where he was one of the principal speakers.

Merton's conference talk, 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives', reveals something of where his pilgrimage had brought him.²⁴ He speaks of being marginal, rather than of a flight from the world, or the 'paradise of the cloister' he described at length in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Waters of Siloe*, and, to some extent, *The Sign of Jonas*. There is a spare realism about monastic identity, an honesty and clarity influenced by Buddhism and reshaped by years of writing against war and nuclear escalation, racism, rampant capitalism and consumerist greed:

The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude towards the world and its structures. ... If one is to call himself in one way or another a monk, he must have in some way or other reached some kind of critical conclusion about the validity of certain claims made by secular society and its structures with regard to the end of man's existence. In other words, the monk is somebody who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent.²⁵

Merton's presentation seems somewhat rambling, yet it bore witness to how his faith had matured. In it we hear how his 'good times and hard life', as Columbia classmate Ed Rice described it, had led to integration:²⁶

Both Christianity and Buddhism agree that the root of man's problems is that his consciousness is all fouled up and he does not apprehend reality as it fully and really is; that the moment he looks at something, he begins to interpret it in ways that are prejudiced and predetermined to fit a certain wrong picture of the world, in which he exists as an individual ego in the center of things. This is called by Buddhism *avidya*, or ignorance. ... This is the source of all our problems.²⁷

East and West—A Shared Vision

A half century later, we are accustomed to inter-religious dialogue. Popes have gathered in Assisi with imams, with Buddhist and Hindu monastics, rabbis and Christian clergy to stand together in silent prayer. Pope Francis has prayed with the Chief Rabbi and with the pastor and people of the Lutheran parish in Rome, with imams in the Blue Mosque and with

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul. In 1968, a Trappist monk, at ease with Buddhist spirituality, having just spent time with the Dalai Lama, and claiming that there are connections between the communitarian visions of Marxism and those of Christianity, such a monk could only come across as controversial and troublesome. There he was in Bangkok, speaking to Christian monastic leaders, a minority in Asia, about how much they shared and could benefit from the spiritual thought of Buddhism. Today it sounds not nearly so controversial or radical as it must have fifty years ago. Merton sought to describe not just the common vision and vocation of monks east and west, but also something of the destination at which he had arrived, after almost thirty years of monastic life:

Instead of starting with matter itself and then moving up to a new structure, in which man will automatically develop a new consciousness, the traditional religions begin with the consciousness of the individual, seek to transform and liberate the truth in each person, with the idea that it will then communicate itself to others. ... The monk 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 or other communicate this to others.²⁸

American Catholic church leaders disapproved of Merton and his views. His writings on war and peacemaking had been censored and often criticized and corrected by his order's censors. Rembert Weakland, as Benedictine abbot primate in 1968, helped shape the Bangkok conference. Years later, he told Paul Wilkes that this last talk did not go down well with his monastic audience. He also echoes this in his memoir decades later: 'The talk did not fit into the aims of the meeting and there was general disappointment in the group, a view I shared.'²⁹ Weakland made no mention of the numerous explicit Christian references in Merton's talk - to Paul, Cassian, Benedict, Bernard, and Teresa of Avila, among others. He made no mention of Merton's reference to the twelfth century writer from his own order, Adam of Perseigne and understanding

of monastic life as healing, a view prevalent in Eastern Christian monastic thought.³⁰ Merton's enduring faithfulness to the Gospel is clear to the end:

I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions, because they have gone, from the natural point of view, so much deeper into this than we have. The combination of the natural techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and independent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals—and mere this and that.³¹

This may be what becomes clearer when you have been jolted out of the deep niches of religious tradition, 'suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things', and gifted with 'an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves ... evident and obvious'.³² It is almost impossible to miss Merton's testifying to a new understanding of the Christian freedom of the Gospel, informed by what the Asian traditions had shown him, by what he saw and felt at Polonnaruwa. All that was incidental, habitual and comforting was stripped away and could be left behind. This emptying did not leave a void but rather the deep Compassion or Mercy who had always been with him, was within, closer than his own self, and in Whom there was communion with all beings. He found paradise, that is, Christ, everywhere.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 230.
2. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 230, 233.
3. Journal entry, 15th March 1958, in Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, 1952-1960, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 181-182. The journal entry, in expanded form, is included in Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), pp. 153-155.

4. *Conjectures*, p. 155.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), pp. 108-113, 284-285, 207-211.
6. Journal entry, 5th July 1952, in Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, 1941-1952, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 477-488. The passage is included in Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City New York: Image Books, 1956), pp. 339-352.
7. 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns & Oates, 1988), pp. 7-21.
8. *Asian Journal*, p. 233
9. Donald Grayston, as noted, along with William Shannon, Bonnie Thurston, Lawrence Cunningham, Robert Waldron, Patrick O'Connell and Joseph Raab are amongst those who have examined it carefully.
10. *Asian Journal*, pp. 233-34.
11. *Asian Journal*, p. 234.
12. *Asian Journal*, p. 235.
13. *Asian Journal*, p. 235.
14. That we have his photos is a small miracle, and likewise, that the notebook jottings could be put into a coherent text is due to the dedication of Merton's friends James Laughlin, Naomi Burton and Brother Patrick Hart.
15. Merton, describes *le point vierge* in *Conjectures*, p. 155. His discovery of this term in Louis Massignon's study, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, 4 vols., trans. Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), is documented in great detail by Sidney H. Griffith, 'Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon and the Challenge of Islam', in *The Merton Annual* 3, (1990), pp. 151-172. Cunningham, Shannon, and Grayston, among others, urge us not to make too much of the Polonnaruwa encounter, even if in journal accounts Merton sometimes describes the Asian journey as a whole as a crowning pilgrimage event. See Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 177-178; *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992); William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 276-278; *The Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), Donald Grayston; 'The Human Experience of Transcendence, Merton at Polonnaruwa' (ITMS Meeting, 2013), available at: <https://www.academia.edu>. See also Bonnie B. Thurston, 'Unfolding of a New World: Thomas Merton and Buddhism' in *Merton and Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness and Everyday Mind*, (ed. Bonnie B. Thurston (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007), pp. 15-27.
16. Joseph Q. Raab, 'Madhyamika and Dharmakaya: Some Notes on Thomas Merton's Epiphany at Polonnaruwa', in *The Merton Annual* 17 (2004), pp. 196-99. Also see Paul Wilkes, 'Merton's Enlightenment: What He Found in

- Asia', in *Commonweal*, May 29, 2006, and David Steindl-Rast, 'Exposure: Key to Thomas Merton's Asian Journal?' in *Monastic Studies* 10, Easter, 1974.
17. *Asian Journal*, pp. 235-236.
18. Raab, *The Merton Annual* 17, pp. 200-203.
19. Raab, pp. 196-200.
20. See the appendices in *The Asian Journal*, especially III (Informal talk delivered in Calcutta, October 1968, pp. 305-308), IV, (Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue, pp. 309-317), and V (Special closing prayer, pp. 318-319). Also VI (November Circular Letter to Friends, pp. 320-325), and IX (The Significance of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, pp. 348-353). His final talk in Bangkok, the day of his death (appendix VII, pp. 326-343), is discussed below.
21. Robert Waldron, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (New York: Paulist, 2011), p. 183. Waldron insists that the Buddhist terminology does nothing to change the essential vision that Merton had of Christ within us, closer than our own selves.
22. Grayston, pp. 5-6.
23. Reza Arasteh, *Final Integration in the Adult Personality*, (Leiden: Brill, 1965). Merton became aware of Arasteh's article with the same title, in 1965, the year they were both published. See Merton's review of this book, first published in *Monastic Studies* in 1968: 'Final Integration—Toward a "Monastic Therapy"'. The review is included in Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City NY: Image Books, 1973), pp. 218-231.
24. *Asian Journal*, pp. 326-343.
25. *Asian Journal*, p. 329.
26. Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970).
27. *Asian Journal*, p. 332.
28. *Asian Journal*, p. 333.
29. Rembert Weakland, *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 166. Paul Wilkes, *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1984).
30. *Asian Journal*, pp. 332, 333, 336, 337, 340.
31. *Asian Journal*, p. 343.
32. *Asian Journal*, pp. 233-235.

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