

Merton Discerning His Svadharma

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Introduction

When Thomas Merton first read Vinoba Bhave's *Talks on the Gita* in 1960, he had been a monk at the Monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky for almost twenty years, and he was in the midst of a vocational crisis. At the time, he was seeking a transfer to another monastery and was feeling considerable external pressure to remain at Gethsemani.¹ As Merton struggled to discern a right course of action, he shared his angst with several close friends and confidantes, including Robert Lax. Lax knew that Merton was becoming increasingly well versed in worldviews originating in Asia. Believing that *Talks on the Gita* would be relevant and timely to Merton's situation, Lax arranged for the publisher to send a copy of the book to Merton.² Lax was right. After starting the book, Merton wrote that it was "Just what I need at the moment," later adding, "I can certainly apply this to my present case!"³

Merton would return to *Talks on the Gita* several more times until his death in 1968. Given that the influence of Vinoba on Merton remains essentially unexplored,⁴ in this article we consider the references to Vinoba and *Talks on the Gita* in Merton's writings during the period of 1960-1968 specifically regarding action and non-attachment in three particular contexts: monastic vocation, nonviolent witness, and contemporary spirituality.⁵ We contend that *Talks on the Gita* provided Merton with an inter-faith framework and language for discerning his svadharma (one's personal dharma) in these contexts.⁶

Vinoba Bhave and *Talks on the Gita*

In 1916, Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982) was a young man when he first encountered Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). After a brief

correspondence, Gandhi invited Vinoba to his Sabarmati Ashram. Upon Vinoba's arrival, Gandhi said of him, "He has come not like the others to be blessed, but to bless; not to receive but to give."⁷ Almost immediately the two men formed a very close bond. While Gandhi negotiated for peace and India's independence on the world stage, Vinoba quietly led the movement from the inside, focusing his work on social and educational reform amongst the common people. He rejected calls to take up political office, for he believed politics was about power and he was about the uplifting of all people (Sarvodaya). Though Vinoba is generally not as well known outside of Gandhian communities, his contributions to the movement, India's campaign for nonviolence, and Indian spirituality were numerous. For the purposes of this introduction to him, we highlight three elements of note from his life. First, in 1940, when Gandhi launched his first Satyagraha march (nonviolent campaign to free India from British rule), he asked Vinoba to physically lead it. Second, after witnessing an incredible act of generosity on the part of a wealthy landowner, who donated 100 acres of his land to a group of landless peasants, Vinoba was inspired to launch the Bhoodan Yagna (Land Gift Mission/Movement). This was a 13-year land redistribution campaign. While Vinoba wanted to address the issues of poverty in India with the Bhoodan Yagna, his ultimate aim was to transform the hearts and minds of India's people to apply Sarvodaya: caring for everyone, including the poorest of the poor. Finally, in the 1930s Vinoba was a political prisoner, jailed by the British because of his involvement as a Gandhian freedom fighter.

During these periods of imprisonment, Vinoba delivered a series of lectures on the *Bhagavad Gita* to his fellow inmates. These lectures were compiled into his much-loved commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*. This book, his *Gita Pravachan* (in English: *Talks on the Gita*), has been translated into over 30 languages and savored by people around the world. It is the 1960 English publication of *Talks on the Gita* that Merton received from Lax.⁸

Monastic Vocation

A close examination of several different references to Vinoba or his *Talks on the Gita* in Merton's personal journal entries and correspondence with Lax from 1960, suggests not only *that* Merton benefited from reading Vinoba's book on the *Gita*, but also *how* he put Vinoba's teachings in

conversation with his own vocational questions. As mentioned above, Merton's journal entry for 19 August 1960 reviews the denial of his request for a transfer. In the remainder of this journal entry, Merton wonders whether the "hesitation" over his resubmitted request signals the need for a "painful change."⁹ It is in this context that Merton starts reading *Talks on the Gita* and draws from Vinoba's teaching on action and nonattachment.

The next day, in his 20 August 1960 journal entry, Merton revisits his previous reflections on his passivity and then directly quotes the following from *Talks on the Gita*:

The action of the person who acts without desire should be much better than that of the person who acts with desire. This is only proper; for the latter is attracted to the fruit, and a part, much or little, of his time and attention will be spent on thoughts and dreams of the fruit. But all the time and all the strength of the man who has no desire for the fruit is devoted to the action.¹⁰

Then again, on the following day, 21 August 1960, Merton reflects on "the need to consider my *svadharma*."¹¹ He extends reflection into the entry for the following day. Here, he asks himself whether "meditation was once for me an evasion from action?"¹² In a letter Merton writes to Lax the same day, we see how he directly applies what he is gaining from Vinoba to his own context. He writes:

I am happy to tears with this sage volume and I take it under the trees constantly and sit on my can and muse: can this be my *svadharma*, namely sitting here and looking at the clouds. Echo seems to answer equivocal with the results that I am not sure, but whatever it is man I intend to do it like Vinoba said. I am faced at last with the unfortunate conviction that I am placed in the top of a tall spiky tree out on the limb's end and fruitless which is all right of course except for the immense desires of fruit...

It is further my conviction that unless we fellows get busy and start on the *vikarma* we are all going to be left up to the chin in a deluge of offal without a word of explanations.¹³

Here Merton appears to read *Talks on the Gita* reflectively and considers what his *svadharma* (his personal duty) might be, and he wants to engage his *svadharma* with an attitude of *vikarma* (an attitude where there is a

continuity between one's actions and the feelings/commitments of one's heart).

Svadharma is indeed a term that captures Merton's struggle regarding what he should do. In *Talks on the Gita*, Vinoba teaches, "In the words of the *Gita*, 'sreyaan, svadharma, vigunah'. ('One's own *dharma*, even if devoid of merit, is the best for oneself.')"¹⁴ As Merton reads, he seems to suspend judgment and to be open to the concepts of *svadharma* and *vikarma*, even when the results are uncertain, ('with the results that I am not sure'). What he is learning appeals to him such that he is determined to respond completely ('but whatever it is man I intend to do it like Vinoba said'). This commitment to act, to engage one's *svadharma*, even in the midst of uncertainty is a demonstrative form of nonattachment. Merton engages with Vinoba through his reading of *Talks on the Gita* by integrating the concepts of *karma*, *svadharma*, *vikarma*, and nonattachment into his personal struggle over his monastic vocation.

Non-violent Witness

Merton refers again to *Talks on Gita* in his journal two years later following a series of entries about nuclear testing and his commitment "to study and practice non-violence."¹⁵ In an undated journal entry, Merton reinforces his consideration about the relationship between thought and action regarding nonviolence. On 27 August 1962, Merton writes that he has resumed his reading of *Talks on the Gita*, signifying it as "A most practical and meaningful book about the conduct of life."¹⁶ In the same entry, he records that he received the anthology, *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination*, containing his position on nuclear war.¹⁷

Months later, on 2 November 1962, in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Merton included the following quotation from *Talks on the Gita* as a complete journal entry: "It is impossible to get rid of violence when one is oneself full of violence. On the contrary, one only adds to the number of the violent."¹⁸ Without narrative context or commentary, Vinoba's words appear to highlight the sole site of Merton's attention in this entry; Vinoba's teaching posits further reflection on how individual actions influence the larger community.¹⁹

Contemporary Spirituality

Writing from the hermitage in the monastery grounds where he lived

from 1965-1968, Merton continued to engage with matters related to social justice. He remained open to the application of Vinoba's teachings in *Talks on the Gita*, and to works of other Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese religious thinkers.²⁰ In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), Merton returns to the previously referenced "fine statement" (about non-attachment) from *Talks on the Gita* that he had applied to his monastic vocational crisis in 1960.²¹ This time Merton provides a commentary on the quoted passage:

This neatly disposes of the myth that 'spirituality' is not practical! But perhaps what some people really mean by spirituality is 'spiritual desire' – and that is a worse error than action driven by desire: the awful illusion of a supposed 'contemplation' that is nothing but mute desire feeding on itself!²²

Merton's commentary guides readers to consider how Vinoba's teaching can invite them to raise their own questions as he had when he first encountered the text in 1960. Like Vinoba, Merton calls his readers to action.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton again directs attention to non-attachment in relation to the persistent tension between intent and action. Echoing his previous personal application of the text, he considers the extent to which false attachment names a popular misguided belief about spirituality as a decision to avoid right action. Recalling the teaching about vikarma, he signals the need to align action with commitment. He observes that "spiritual desire", fixed on "the awful illusion of a supposed 'contemplation'" (without action) is not spirituality, it is simply "mute desire feeding on itself". Instead, he contends, when spirituality is rightly rendered, it aligns action with intent without attachment to the fruit (non-attachment). Spirituality is practical, especially when it is translated into action in the public sphere.

Conclusion

Referring to Vinoba as "one of the very very few men of our time, age or generation who has been blessed by the Good God with a few grains of sense," Merton appears to engage with Vinoba as a fellow seeker of truth.²³ Merton treats Vinoba's teachings in the "wonderful book," *Talks on the Gita*, as potentially applicable; the teachings challenge him to reflect on a course of action rooted in nonattachment.²⁴ Merton's

references to the text suggest how he applied these teachings to his own particular concerns about monastic vocation, nonviolent witness, and contemporary spirituality. Merton appears to utilize the text as a framework for envisioning the current situation, for considering the appropriate actions and attitude of nonattachment, and for adopting an alternative way of being that aligns thought and action.

Notes

We are grateful to Dr. Paul Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, for encouraging this project and for making available a scan of Merton's copy of Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita* (New York: Macmillan, 1960) in the Merton Center Digital Collections (Marginalia) at: <https://merton.bellarmino.edu/s/Merton/item/52640>

This is the version of the text we reference in this article. We are grateful, as well, for the opportunities to present parts of our project and to engage in conversations with audiences at the College English Association annual meeting (1 April 2022), the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland (7 July 2022), and the annual meeting of the Peace and Justice Studies Association (13 October 2022).

1. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4: 1960-1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1996), p. 33. Journal entry for 19 August 1960.
2. Thomas Merton letter to Robert Lax, 5 August 1960 (Letter 60.14) in Arthur W. Biddle, ed., *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax* (Louisville, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), pp. 203-204. Lax confirmed that the publisher would send the book to Merton in Letter 60.15 (undated), p. 205; Merton writes that he has received the book in his letter to Lax, 22 August 1960 (Letter 60.16), p. 206.
3. Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, pp. 33, 34. Journal entry for 20 August 1960.
4. For recent attention to Vinoba see these chapters in *Merton & Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae 2021): David M. Odorisio, 'Introduction: "Necessary for Enlightenment": Thomas Merton's Lifelong Engagement with Yoga' (xv-xlvii) in which he identifies at least five references to Vinoba and/or *Talks on the Gita* (xxxv, n.48), and Christopher Key Chapple, 'Thomas Merton and *The Bhagavad Gita*' in which he attends to Merton's inclusion of Vinoba (133-134, 139). *Merton & Hinduism* was released after we began our project and we were pleased to see that it mentions Vinoba.
5. So far we have identified eleven references to Vinoba and/or *Talks on the Gita* in Merton's writings. There are a number of issues that we will continue

to explore in subsequent works, however for the purpose of this article we focus on action and nonattachment.

6. Dharma is a complex term that is difficult to define. While dharma typically refers to duty and order on societal or even cosmic terms, svadharma is one's own personal dharma, or duty.
7. Hallam Tenyson, *India's Walking Saint: The Story of Vinoba Bhave* (Doubleday & Company, Inc.: Garden City, New York, 1955), pp. 19-20.
8. Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita* (New York: Macmillan 1960). The references to Vinoba we have located in Merton's writings include references to Vinoba himself (signifying him as a reformer and as the author of *Talks on the Gita*), and to the content of *Talks on the Gita*.
9. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 33.
10. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 34; cf. Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita*, pp. 32-33. This quotation appears in *Talks on the Gita* II.8.14. In this section of *Talks on the Gita*, Vinoba is explaining the importance of proper action and nonattachment, an overarching theme of the *Bhagavad Gita*.
11. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 35.
12. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 35.
13. Thomas Merton letter to Robert Lax, 22 August 1960 (Letter 60.16) in *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax*, p. 206.
14. Vinoba Bhave, *Talks on the Gita*, p. 21.
15. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 238. This is the journal entry titled '[No date.] Private Day of Recollection.' This entry follows the entry dated 21 August 1962 and precedes the entry for 27 August 1962.
16. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 239. Merton writes about continuing to read the book in his journal entry for 27 August 1962, thereby suggesting that he had not finished reading the book when he referenced it in 1960.
17. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 240. Merton made two contributions to the book, namely the introduction and the essay 'Peace: A Religious Responsibility'. Both are included in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace – The Social Essays*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
18. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 262. In this entry, Merton attributes the quoted passage to Vinoba but does not supply the corresponding page number from *Talks on the Gita*. The quoted passage appears in *Talks on the Gita* (p. 226) and it is situated in Vinoba's discussion about the actions of saints in the development of religion.
19. Merton refers to *Talks on the Gita* as 'too little known' in his 'Preface' to Dom Denys Rutledge, *In Search of a Yogi* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Company, 1963) which he completed the following day (Merton, *Turning Toward the*

World: The Pivotal Years, p. 263. Journal entry for 5 November 1962). See the reprint of Merton's 'Preface' in David M. Odorisio, *Merton & Hinduism*, pp. 271-276; the reference to Vinoba is on p. 273. In addition, Merton mentions Vinoba as a 'great reformer' in his preface to Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta, *The Bhagavad Gita, As It Is* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). See the reprint in David M. Odorisio, *Merton & Hinduism*, pp. 316-320; the reference to Vinoba is on p. 316.

20. See for example the following volumes in the Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series: *Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness, and Everyday Mind* (2007), *Merton & The Tao: Dialogues with John C. H. Wu and the Ancient Sages* (2013), *Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness, and Integral Humanity* (2021), and *Merton & Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart* (2021).
21. See note 10. Much had changed in Merton's life since he first read *Talks on the Gita* in 1960 including an emergent attention to inter-religious, and particularly Asian, thought.
22. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 150.
23. Thomas Merton letter to Robert Lax, 22 August 1960 (Letter 60.16), *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax*, p. 206.
24. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, p. 33. Journal entry for 20 August 1960.

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