

THE ASIAN JOURNAL OF THOMAS MERTON, edited from his original notebooks by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James McLaughlin (1973): A New Directions Book, New York, 1973

Thomas Merton's "Asian Journal" carries his final reflections written before his unexpected death in Bangkok on December 10th 1968. This record transmits the sensitivity, depth and vision of a man hovering on the threshold of immense change.

Merton's final journey represents an epiphany of sorts during which he came into direct contact with carriers of deep spiritual wisdom won through discipline, perseverance and commitment to contemplative asceticism. Merton himself was no stranger to these ways and recalls in these pages the great delight and deep illumination he experienced through contact with his Asian brethren. Of particular significance on this final journey were the three meetings he had with the Dalai Lama and the many discussions he had with the retreat master, Chatral Rimpoche.

In these journal entries, Merton reveals his own reflective depths, his penetrating scholarship and his relentless pursuit of those universal qualities embodied in all authentic spiritual traditions.

Merton remained an outlaw to the end, pushing well beyond the cautiously drawn boundaries of the Catholicism to which he gave his undivided allegiance. The clarity that he projected in regard to the repressive elements within Christian monasticism in such earlier works as "Seeds of Contemplation" remained undimmed throughout his life. His openness to the richness of the Asian traditions, despite their often profoundly differing perspectives to his own Catholicism is evident throughout this remarkable journal

Part II of "The Asian Journal", which offers a selection of excerpts from Merton's wide-ranging readings, provides some insight into his intellectual style. They reveal his preferred method of transcribing the central ideas of those whose works he studied as a means of incorporating more fully their message.

Later in the text, a series of appendices carry the brighter jewels of his thought. Unlike the journal entries, which offer his personal reflections on the experiences of a traveling monk, the writings presented in the appendices carry the essence of his refined thought, structured and presented in a way that would touch and influence a living audience of fellow monastics.

The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton is a rare treasure that transmits the high thought of a beautiful man, a lover of Jesus and of humanity.

VDS, Belgrave
March 2005

Foreword by Brother Patrick Hart

Thomas Merton's pilgrimage to Asia was an effort on his part to deepen his own religious and monastic commitment. This is evident from the prepared remarks for the interfaith meeting held in Calcutta in mid-November: "I speak as a Western monk who is pre-eminently concerned with his own monastic calling and dedication. I have

left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author (which I also happen to be). I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just facts about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.”

p xxiii

He spoke of his great desire to visit the Dalai Lama, and told me that a mutual friend was making the arrangements for the meeting. He did indeed have three audiences with the Dalai Lama at his monastic refuge near Dharamsala, about a month before the Bangkok Conference, which are described in this book.

pp xxiv-xxv

In one of the earliest letters I received from him after his departure, he referred to some rumors which had already reached him: “Give my regards to all the gang and I hope there are not too many crazy rumors. Keep telling everyone that I am a monk of Gethsemani and intend to remain one all my days.” Later, in a letter from New Delhi, dated November 9, 1968, just a month before his death, Thomas Merton wrote in part: “I hope I can bring back to my monastery something of the Asian wisdom with which I am fortunate to be in contact.”

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Part I

The mandala concept accepts the fact that cosmic processes (*maya*) express themselves in symbols of masculine and feminine deities, beatific and terrifying. It organizes them in certain schemas, representing the drama of disintegration and reintegration. Correctly read by the initiate, they “will induce the liberating psychological experience.”

First and foremost, a mandala delineates a consecrated superficies and protects it from invasion by disintegrating forces symbolized in demoniacal cycles. . . . It is “a map of the cosmos” which rotates round “a central axis, Mount Sumeru,” the *axis mundi* uniting the inferior, underground world, the atmospheric and the celestial. Here is the “palace of the cakravartin, the ‘Universal Monarch’ of the Indian tradition.” The initiate identifies himself with this center - his own center is the *axis mundi* - and is transformed by it.

Giuseppe Tucci¹

pp 57-59

For the ‘seeker after Truth’ only meetings with very great masters and very great sages can be really interesting. It is better to seek, seek, and seek again a real sage, a truly liberated sage, and spend perhaps no more than a single day with him, than to dissipate one's efforts in encounters and conversations with less representative persons, or persons who are in any case further from true Realisation. It is no longer a matter of talking to Tibetans who have the title lama; it is a matter of meeting masters.

Arnaud Desjardins²

p 59

In his discussion of the symbolism of the mandala, Tucci explains that the Shaivite schools:

divide men into three classes: first the common people, those who live a herd-like life, for whom precise laws and prohibitions are suited, since such men do not yet possess a consciousness which can, by itself, govern itself. Then come 'heroes' who have a tendency to emerge from such a night. But their capacity wearies them. They follow their own consciousness and make their own laws, different from and contrary to those of the herd. They are lonely men who swim against the current: courageously they put themselves into contact with God and free themselves from the uniform life of association. Then come the divya, the holy souls, who are fully realized and so beyond the plane of samsara.³

p 67

I am not exactly dizzy with the idea of looking for a magic master but I would certainly like to learn something by experience and it does seem that the Tibetan Buddhists are the only ones who, at present, have a really large number of people who have attained to extraordinary heights in meditation and contemplation. This does not exclude Zen. But I do feel very much at home with the Tibetans, even though much that appears in books about them seems bizarre if not sinister.

p 82

Whatever may be the value of all the details of mandala meditation - and all the emergences of all the Buddhas from all the diamond wombs - this passage remains exact and important:

The mystic knows that the principle of salvation is within him. He knows also that this principle will remain inert if he does not, with all his strength, *seek it, find it and make it active*. On the way of redemption, to which he has devoted himself, he has need of all his will-power and vigilance in order to put in motion the forces of his own psyche so that it, which keeps him bound, may furnish him nonetheless with the means of salvation, provided that he knows how to penetrate into his psyche and to subdue it.⁴

Giuseppe Tucci

p 88

The Dalai Lama is most impressive as a person. He is strong and alert, bigger than I expected (for some reason I thought he would be small). A very solid, energetic, generous, and warm person, very capably trying to handle enormous problems - none of which he mentioned directly. There was not a word of politics. The whole conversation was about religion and philosophy and especially ways of meditation. He said he was glad to see me, had heard a lot about me. I talked mostly of my own personal concerns, my interest in Tibetan mysticism. Some of what he replied was confidential and frank. In general he advised me to get a good base in Madhyamika philosophy (Nagarjuna and other authentic *Indian* sources) and to consult qualified Tibetan scholars, uniting study and practice. Dzogchen was good, he said, provided one had a sufficient grounding in metaphysics - or anyway Madhyamika, which is beyond metaphysics. One gets the impression that he is very sensitive about partial and distorted Western views of Tibetan mysticism and especially about popular myths. He himself offered to give me another audience the day after tomorrow and said he had some questions he wanted to ask me.

The Dalai Lama is also sensitive about the views of other Buddhists concerning Tibetan Buddhism, especially some Theravada Buddhists who accuse Tibetan Buddhism of corruption by non-Buddhist elements. . . .

It is important, the Dalai Lama said, not to misunderstand the simplicity of dzogchen, or to imagine it is “easy,” or that one can evade the difficulties of the ascent by taking this “direct path.”
pp 100-102

Thinking about my own life and future, it is still a very open question. I am beginning to appreciate the hermitage at Gethsemani more than I did last summer when things seemed so noisy and crowded. Even here in the mountains there are few places where one does not run into someone. Roads and paths and trails are all full of people. To have real solitude one would have to get very high up and far back!

For solitude, Alaska really seems to be the best place. But everyone I have talked to says I must also consider others and keep open to them to some extent. The rimpoches all advise against absolute solitude and stress “compassion.” They seem to agree that being in solitude much of the year and coming “out” for a while would be a good solution.
p 103

We [the Dalai Lama and Merton] got back to the question of meditation and samadhi. I said it was important for monks in the world to be living examples of the freedom and transformation of consciousness which meditation can give. The Dalai Lama then talked about samadhi in the sense of controlled concentration.

He demonstrated the sitting position for meditation which he said was essential. In the Tibetan meditation posture the right hand (discipline) is above the left (wisdom). In Zen it is the other way round. Then we got on to “concentrating on the mind.” Other objects of concentration may be an object, an image, a name. But how does one concentrate on the mind itself? There is division: the I who concentrates . . . the mind as object of concentration . . . observing the concentration . . . all three one mind. He was very existential, I think, about the mind as “what is concentrated on.”

It was a very lively conversation and I think we all enjoyed it. He certainly seemed to. I like the solidity of the Dalai Lama’s ideas. He is a very consecutive thinker and moves from step to step. His ideas of the interior life are built on very solid foundations and on a real awareness of practical problems. He insists on detachment, on an “unworldly life,” yet sees it as a way to complete understanding of, and participation in, the problems of life and the world. But renunciation and detachment must come first. Evidently he misses the full monastic life and wishes he had more time to meditate and study himself. At the end he invited us back again Friday to talk about Western monasticism. “And meanwhile think more about the mind,” he said as we left him.
pp 112-113

After reading Murti on Madhyamika, a reflection on the unconscious content and inner contradiction of my own drama. There I was riding through Lower Dharamsala, up the mountain, through McLeod Ganj, in the Dalai Lama’s jeep, wearing a snow-white Cistercian robe and black scapular. Smiles of all the Tibetans recognizing the jeep. Namaste gestures (palms raised together before the nose), stares of Indians. Am

I part of it? Trying to fit into an interrelation, but on my own terms? Trying to find a dogmatic solution to this contradiction? Learning to accept the contradiction? One must, provisionally at least, experience all roles as slightly strange, ridiculous, contrived. Wearing my monastic habit because Marco Pallis strongly urged me to - and it is right, I guess, thoroughly expected. Yet recognizing that it is at odds with my own policy of *not* appearing as a monk, a priest, a cleric, in “the world.” The role of “tourist” is less offensive. However, I have the feeling that everybody here knows all about everything and that as an “American lama” I am a joyful and acceptable portent to all the Tibetans. Smiles everywhere. Every Tibetan lights up, even when I am in no jeep, no habit, and only in corduroy pants and turtleneck jersey. p 116

Madhyamika does not propound “another truth.” It is content to reduce “the opponent’s position to absurdity on principles and consequences which the opponent himself would accept.” If he does not in fact accept them in this form the logic of his position demands their acceptance. But then argument is at an end. The purpose of Madhyamika is not to convince, but to explode the argument itself. Is this sadism? No, it is compassion! It exorcises the devil of dogmatism.⁶ p 118

He [Sonam Kazi, interpreter] probably knows as much as any one person about the whole Tibetan question, and he is by no means a reactionary about it. He has a definitely broad view, realizes to what extent the Tibetan landlords and abbots were wrong or shortsighted, and discounts stories about the Chinese poisoning lamas at banquets and so on. He was in Tibet in 1957 and spoke to various abbots of the big monasteries, asking what they expected to do. They had no idea, although the Chinese Communists were by that time right on their doorstep. The monasteries were too big and too rich. And too many monks who did not belong there were intent on holding on to their property until it was taken from them by force. The 13th Dalai Lama had foreseen this many years before and warned them but his warning was not understood. p 119

My third interview with the Dalai Lama was in some ways the best. He asked a lot of questions about Western monastic life, particularly the vows, the rule of silence, the ascetic way, etc. But what concerned him most was:

- 1). Did the “vows” have any connection with a spiritual transmission or initiation?
- 2). Having made vows, did the monks continue to progress along a spiritual way, toward an eventual illumination, and what were the degrees of that progress? And supposing a monk died without having attained to perfect illumination? What ascetic methods were used to help purify the mind of passions? He was interested in the “mystical life,” rather than in external observance.

And some incidental questions: What were the motives for the monks not eating meat? Did they drink alcoholic beverages? Did they have movies? And so on. . . .

It was a very warm and cordial discussion and at the end I felt we had become very good friends and were somehow quite close to one another. I feel a great respect and fondness for him as a person and believe, too, that there is a real spiritual bond

between us. He remarked that I was a “Catholic geshe,” which, Harold said, was the highest possible praise from a Gelugpa, like an honorary doctorate! pp 124-125

We went looking first for Chatral Rinpoche at his hermitage above Ghoom. Two chortens, a small temple, some huts. In the temple there is a statue of Padmasambhava which is decorated with Deki Lhalungpa's jewels. . . .

Chatral looked like a vigorous old peasant in a Bhutanese jacket tied at the neck with thongs, and a red woolen cap on his head. He had a week's growth of beard, bright eyes, a strong voice, and was very articulate, much more communicative than I expected. We had a fine talk and all through it Jimpa, the interpreter, laughed and said several times, "These are hermit questions . . . this is another hermit question." We started talking about dzogchen and Nyingmapa meditation and “direct realization” and soon saw that we agreed very well. We must have talked for two hours or more, covering all sorts of ground, mostly around the idea of dzogchen, but also taking in some points of Christian doctrine compared with Buddhist: Dharmakaya . . . the Risen Christ, suffering, compassion for all creatures, motives for “helping others,” - but all leading back to dzogchen, the ultimate emptiness, the unity of sunyata and karuna, going “beyond the dharmakaya” and “beyond God” to the ultimate perfect emptiness. He said he had meditated in solitude for thirty years or more and had not attained to perfect emptiness and I said I hadn't either.

The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow *on the edge* of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it - and that it was a grace for us to meet one another. I wish I could see more of Chatral. He burst out and called me a rangjung Sangay (which apparently means a “natural Buddha”) and said he had been named a Sangay dorje. he wrote “rangjung Sangay” for me in Tibetan and said that when I entered the “great kingdom” and “the palace” then America and all that was in it would seem like nothing. He told me, seriously, that perhaps he and I would attain to complete Buddhahood in our next lives, perhaps even in this life, and the parting note was a kind of compact that we would both do our best to make it in *this* life. I was profoundly moved, because he is so obviously a great man, the true practitioner of dzogchen, the best of the Nyingmapa lamas, marked by complete simplicity and freedom. He was surprised at getting on so well with a Christian and at one point laughed and said, “There must be something wrong here!” If I were going to settle down with a Tibetan guru, I think Chatral would be the one I'd choose. But I don't know yet if that is what I'll be able to do - or whether I need to. pp 142-144

I am still not able fully to appreciate what this exposure to Asia has meant. There has been so much - and yet also so little. I have only been here a month! It seems a long time since Bangkok and even since Delhi and Dharamsala. Meeting the Dalai Lama and the various Tibetans, lamas or “enlightened” laymen has been the most significant thing of all, especially in the way we were able to communicate with one another and share an essentially spiritual experience of “Buddhism” which is also somehow in harmony with Christianity. p 148

True love requires contact with the truth, and the truth must be found in solitude.
The ability to bear solitude, and to spend long stretches of time alone by

oneself in quiet meditation, is therefore one of the more elementary qualifications for those who aspire towards selfless love.

Edward Conze⁹

p 157

No use isolating consciousness and then *feeding* it, exacerbating it. The ruse of nourishing the self with ideas of self-dissolution. The “perfectly safe” consciousness, put on a diet of select thoughts, poisons itself. The exposed consciousness is in less trouble. It relaxes. Is free in fresh air. Is perhaps a little dirtied - but normal or more normal. Less garbage. Select garbage, luxury garbage is the worst poison. pp 159-160

There have been eight hermits making the three-year retreat at Chatral’s place. They have just finished and eight others have started. There is a long waiting list. When we were there the other day one of the monks was laying the foundation for a new hermit cell.

Dr Pemba was called in to attend to the ruined knee of one of the retreatants. He had gone into the long retreat with a bad knee and it had become progressively worse with a tubercular condition that by then was horrible. Yet he did not want to see a doctor because he feared he would be pulled out and sent to the hospital. He was within a few months of ending his retreat. Dr Pemba asked him why he withdrew like this instead of going out and helping others, and he replied that everyone had a different thing to do; most people needed to help others, but some needed to seek a very rare attainment which could only be found in solitude. Such attainment was good not only for the monk himself but improved the whole world. Anyway Dr Pemba fixed him up so he could finish his retreat. p 162

In his preface to a book by the Abbe Monchanin, a Frenchman who became a hermit on the banks of the sacred river Cauvery in South India, Pierre Emmanuel writes of vocation:

What is a vocation? A call and a response. This definition does not say everything: to conceive the call of God as an expressed order to carry out a task certainly is not always false, but it is only true after a long interior struggle in which it becomes obvious that no such constraint is apparent. It also happens that the order comes to maturity along with the one who must carry it out and that it becomes in some way this very being, who has now arrived at full maturity. Finally, the process of maturing can be a mysterious way of dying, provided that with death the task begins . . . there has to be a dizzying choice, a definitive dehiscence [rupture] by which the certitude he has gained of being called is torn asunder. That which - as one says, and the word is rightly used here - *consecrates* a vocation and raises it to the height of the sacrifice which it becomes is a breaking with the apparent order of being, with its formal full development or its visible efficacy.¹⁰

p 169

The root is this: guarding one’s speech, so that neither praising one’s own sect nor blaming other sects should take place . . . or that it should be moderate. Other sects ought to be duly honored in every case. . . .

If one is acting thus, he is both promoting his own sect and benefiting other sects. . . .

Therefore concord alone is meritorious, that they should both hear and obey each other's morals.

Asoka, Edicts¹¹

p 228

Polonnaruwa with its vast area under trees. Fences. Few people. No beggars. A dirt road. Lost. Then we find Gal Vihara and the other monastic complex stupas. Cells. Distant mountains, like Yucatan.

The path dips down to Gal Vihara: a wide, quiet, hollow, surrounded with trees. 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. The vicar general, shying away from "paganism," hangs back and sits under a tree reading the guidebook. I am able to approach the Buddha barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. . . .

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. the queer *evidence* of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda standing with arms folded (much more "imperative" than Da Vinci's Mona Lisa because completely simple and straightforward.) The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya. . . .

Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. 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. This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete. It says everything; it needs nothing. And because it needs nothing it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered. It does not need to be discovered. It is we, Asians included, who need to discover it. pp 233-236

POSTSCRIPT

We learned that death was caused by accidental electrocution at about 2 p.m. (Bangkok time) on December 10th. He [Merton] had delivered a paper entitled "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" at 10 o'clock that morning. It was received with great enthusiasm by the members of the conference, and all of them were looking forward to a discussion of the paper, with questions and answers, in the evening. A group of the participants had lunch with Father Merton, after which they

went to their respective rooms. He had told one of his companions that he felt rather tired, and that he was looking forward to the siesta. . . .

Thomas Merton returned to his cottage about 1.30 and proceeded to take a shower before retiring for a rest. While barefoot on the terrazzo floor, he apparently had reached for the large standing fan (either to turn it on or pull it closer to the bed) when he received the full 220 volts of direct current. (This is normal voltage for Bangkok.) He collapsed, and the large fan tumbled over on top of him. When he was discovered about an hour later by two of the monks who shared his cabin, the fan, still running, lay across his body. They could not get into the room at first because the door was bolted from the inside. One of them ran for help, and two of the abbots came immediately. They broke through the upper panel of the door, opened it, and entered. One of the abbots tried to remove the fan at once from the body, but though he wore shoes, he also received a severe electrical shock. Fortunately, someone rushed over to the outlet and pulled the cord from the socket. Later examination revealed a defective wiring in the fan. A Korean prioress, who was a distinguished medical doctor, came immediately. After examining the body, she pronounced him dead by electric shock.

The body arrived at the Abbey early in the afternoon of December 17th. Services in the church began almost immediately with the chanting of the funeral liturgy by the monks and the many friends who came to pay their last respects to our Father Louis and the world's Thomas Merton. At dusk under a light snowfall, his body was laid to rest in the monastic cemetery beneath a solitary cedar tree. A simple white cross marks his grave, no different from the rest of the monks who have been buried there during the past 120 years.

Brother Patrick Hart
pp 258-259

THE ASIAN JOURNAL OF THOMAS MERTON Part 2

Complementary Reading

“To hold that the world is eternal or to hold that it is not, or to agree to any other of the propositions you adduce, Caccha, is the jungle of theorising, the wilderness of theorising, the tangle of theorising, the bondage and shackles of theorising, attended by ill, distress, perturbation and fever; it conduces not to detachment, passionless, tranquility, peace, to knowledge and wisdom of Nirvana. This is the danger I perceive in these views which makes me discard them all.”

Buddha, in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, quoted by Murti, *op. cit.*, page 47.
p 276

“The rejection of theories (ditthi) is itself the *means* by which Buddha is led to the non-conceptual knowledge of the absolute, and not vice versa.”

Murti, *op. cit.*, page 49
p 277

“Bodhicitta comprises in it two elements, viz., enlightenment of the nature of essencelessness (*sunyata*) and universal compassion (*karuna*). This definition of Bodhicitta as the perfect comingling of *sunyata* and *karuna* had far-reaching effects in the transformation of the Mahayanic ideas into the Tantric ideas. After the production of Bodhicitta the adept becomes a Bodhisattva and proceeds on in an upward march through ten different stages which are called the *bodhisattva-bhumis* (i.e., the stages of the Bodhisattva).

The first of these is the stage of *Pramudita* or the stage of delight or joy. Here the Bodhisattva rises from the cold, self-sufficing and nihilistic conception of *Nirvana* to a higher spiritual contemplation. The second is styled as the *Vimala* or the stage free from all defilement. The third is the *Prabhakari* or that which brightens; in this stage the Bodhisattva attains a clear insight - an intellectual light about the nature of the dharmas. The fourth stage is the *Arcismati* or ‘full of flames,’ - these flames are the flames of Bodhi which burn to ashes all the passions and ignorance. At this stage the Bodhisattva practises thirty-seven virtues called *bodhipaksikas* which mature the *bodhi* to perfection. The next is the *Sudurjaya* stage or the stage which is almost invincible. This is a stage from which no evil passion or temptation can move the Bodhisattva. The sixth stage is called the *Abhimukhi*, where the Bodhisattva is almost face to face with *prajna* or the highest knowledge. The seventh is the *Durangama* which literally means ‘going far away.’ In this stage the Bodhisattva attains the knowledge of the expedience which will help him in the attainment of salvation. Though he himself abides here by the principles of void and non-duality and desirelessness, yet his compassion for beings keeps him engaged in the activities for the well-being of all the creatures. The eighth is the stage of *Acala*, which means ‘immovable.’ The next is the *Sadhumati* or the ‘good will’; when the Bodhisattva reaches such a stage all the sentient beings are benefited by his attainment of the highest perfect knowledge. The tenth or the last is the stage of *dharma-megha* (literally ‘the clouds of dharma’), where the Bodhisattva attains perfect knowledge, great compassion, love and sympathy for all the sentient beings. When this last stage of *Dharma-megha* is reached, the aspirer becomes a perfect Bodhisattva or a Buddha.”

Shashi Bushan. Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*,
Calcutta University Press, 1958, pp 9-10

p 281

“No moral life is possible without an insight into the complexities of concrete human situations. The individual yearns to enrich his self by assimilating the meaningful experiences of others. Spiritual enlightenment is dependent on our capacity to embrace the varied experiences of humanity. By recreating another’s experience in our self and by thus strengthening our imagination poetry provides us with an insight into the complexities of our moral existence.”

G.B.Mohan, *The Response to Poetry*, New Delhi, People's
Publishing House, 1968. pp 133-34.

pp 287-288

APPENDIX I

Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action. I pray that we may all do so.

Thomas Merton in his *September 1968
Circular Letter to Friends*

p 296

APPENDIX III

Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism (Informal talk delivered at Calcutta, October 1968)

Are monks and hippies and poets relevant? No, we are deliberately irrelevant. We live in an ingrained irrelevance which is proper to every human being. The marginal man accepts the basic irrelevance of the human condition, an irrelevance which is manifested above all by the fact of death. The marginal person, the monk, the displaced person, the prisoner, all these people live in the presence of death, which calls into question the meaning of life. He struggles with the fact of death in himself, trying to seek something deeper than death; because there is something deeper than death, and the office of the monk or the marginal person, the meditative person or the poet is to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life.

p 306

There are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their own vocation, and to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible.

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

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APPENDIX VII

Marxism and Monastic Perspectives Thomas Merton's Final Lecture, Bangkok, December 10th, 1968

I cannot possibly pretend to be an authority on Marxism. My purpose is perhaps to share with you the kind of thing a monk goes through in his, shall we say, identity crisis. . . the monk, I mean, who questions himself in the presence of the Marxist – who has certain answers and certain views of the world that are not necessarily those of the monk – trying to find where he stands, what his position is, how he identifies

himself in a world of revolution. And in speaking of this, I hope I will be able to give you at least a minimum of information about the kind of thought we stand up against, and against the light of which we try to identify ourselves. pp 326-327

I am addressing myself to the monk who is potentially open to the contact with the intellectual, the university student, the university professor, the people who are thinking along lines that are going to change both Western and Eastern society and create the world of the future, in which inevitably we are going to have to make our adaptation. p 328

I think it gets around to one of the things which is most essential to the monastic vocation, which we have to some extent neglected.

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. p 329

The difference between the monk and the Marxist is fundamental insofar as the Marxist view of change is oriented to the change of substructures, and the monk is seeking to change man's consciousness. p 330

Buddhist and Christian monasticism start from the problem inside man himself. Instead of dealing with the external structures of society, they start with man's own consciousness. 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. p 332

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. p 333

We come now to the ideas of Marcuse. I am not going to develop him at great length. I would simply recommend quite strongly that you make yourselves acquainted, in one way or other, with Marcuse's very important book, *One Dimensional Man*. This book is much more important for the west than it is for the East because Marcuse's theory is that all highly organized technological societies, as we have them now, all

so-called managerial societies, as found both in the United States and in the Soviet Union, end up by being equally totalitarian in one way or another. pp 334-335

I spoke of this to the Dalai lama, and I asked his ideas on this whole question of Marxism and monasticism. I suppose there are few people in the world more intimately involved in this question than the Dalai lama, who is the religious head of an essentially monastic society. The Dalai lama is very objective and open about this kind of thing. He is in no way whatever a fanatical anti-Communist. He is an open-minded reasonable man, thinking in terms of a religious tradition. He obviously recognized the problem of a ruthless communist takeover, a power move that had to get rid of monks, that had to drive monks out of Tibet. The Dalai lama himself made every effort to coexist with Communism, and he failed. He said frankly that he did not see how one could coexist, in the situation in which he had been, with Communism – on an institutional level, anyway. He then went on to admit the blindness of the abbots and communities of the great, rich Tibetan monasteries, who had failed to see the signs of the times and had absolutely failed to do anything valid to meet the challenge of Communism. They refused to do anything, for example, about giving land to people who needed it. They simply could not see the necessity of taking certain steps, and this, he said, precipitated the disaster, and it had to happen. pp 336-337

We can no longer rely on being supported by structures that may be destroyed at any moment by a political power or a political force. You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us, and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away, and if everything is taken away, what do you do next? p 338

What is essential in monastic life is not embedded in buildings, is not embedded in clothing, is not necessarily embedded even in a rule. It is somewhere along the line of something deeper than a rule. It is concerned with this business of total inner transformation. p 340

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 in 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.

I will conclude on that note. I believe the plan is to have all the questions for this morning's lectures this evening at the panel. So I will disappear. p 343

Endnotes

1. Giuseppe Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala.*, translated by A.H. Broderick, London, Rider & Co. 1969. pp 21-25
2. Arnaud Desjardins, *The Message of the Tibetans*, translated from the French by R.H. Ward and Vega Stewart, London, Stuart & Watkins, 1969, page 29

3. Tucci, *op.cit.* page 51
4. Tucci, *op.cit.* page 110
5. Marco Pallis, "Is there Room for 'Grace' in Buddhism?" in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, August 1968, Pates Manor, Bedford, Middlesex, England.
6. See Murti T.R.V. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* pp 145-46
7. Murti, *op.cit.* p 213
8. Murti, *op.cit.* p 112
9. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1967, page 85
10. Pierre Emmanuel: "La Loi d'exode," preface to *De l'esthetique a la mystique* by Jules Monchanin, Paris, Casterman, 1967, pages 7-8
11. *12th Rock Edict of Ashoka*