

“Park leads the reader on a fascinating journey through the spiritual and apostolic life of Thomas Merton. The prayerful journey within explores Merton’s life of self-transcendence in relationship with God that leads him to share with fellow contemplatives the riches of a deepening love and intimacy with God. Park’s *Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond* is a finely researched work well worth exploring.”

—Joseph Schner, SJ
Regis College, University of Toronto

“This is the first extensive study to explore Merton’s legacy in terms of how it has shaped the institutional church, through the activities of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) and through the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID), which functions under its aegis. This is a convincing portrayal of Merton’s pivotal importance in the history of interreligious dialogue.”

—Joe Raab
Professor of Religious Studies and Theology, Siena Heights
University
Coeditor of *The Merton Annual*

“This is a well-researched and readable analysis of Thomas Merton’s understanding of and engagement with Buddhism. The work is enhanced by an extended consideration of the Christian-Buddhism dialogue from a monastic perspective. Since the author himself is an Asian monk he brings a fresh angle to his task. Like the good householder of the Gospel, Father Park brings forth old things and new.”

—Lawrence S. Cunningham
The University of Notre Dame

“An intriguing and significant contribution to interfaith encounter. Provides fresh insight into the way that Merton’s evolving sense of contemplation and his exploration of experiential interfaith dialogue broke new ground. These explorations, both existential and intellectual, continue to provide a challenging yet fruitful model for interfaith dialogue that goes beyond theology and action-orientation to the contemplative core of religious experience however variously it might be conceptualized or experienced.”

—Wendy M. Wright
Professor Emerita of Theology, Creighton University

“Park explores Thomas Merton’s dialogue with Buddhism getting to the very heart of it as only a fellow monk, steeped in the daily monastic rhythm of prayer and work, could do. Park then builds on Merton’s legacy suggesting important ways monastic and contemplative interreligious dialogue can continue to develop in the twenty-first century and beyond.”

—Paul M. Pearson

Director, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University

“This book delves into the process of Thomas Merton’s spiritual transformation through his encounter with Zen and Tibetan Buddhist thought, and his involvement in the dialogue of religious experience with their practitioners. And indeed, because the practitioners of Buddhism emphasize the priority of experience over faith, a fruitful dialogue between Catholics and Buddhists may well be impossible without a dialogue on contemplative prayer.”

—Ovey N. Mohammed, SJ

Professor Emeritus of Catholicism and Eastern Religions
Regis College, University of Toronto

“Jaechan Anselmo Park has gifted us with a carefully written, well-organized exploration of Thomas Merton’s understanding of inner experience, interreligious dialogue, and inter-monastic/inter-contemplative dialogue. Whether readers have an interest in the work of Thomas Merton, interreligious dialogue, or inter-monastic discourse, they will find this book to be an essential companion.”

—Dennis Patrick O’Hara

St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto

Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond

*His Interreligious Dialogue,
Inter-Monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy*

Jaechan Anselmo Park, OSB

Preface by
Bonnie Thurston

Foreword by
William Skudlarek



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Foreword

Since 1996, the North American commission of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue has sponsored meetings of Buddhist and Catholic monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton's monastery in Kentucky. The fourth "Gethsemani Encounter," this one on the topic of spiritual maturation, was held in the summer of 2015. One of the presenters was Jaechan Anselmo Park, a Benedictine monk from Korea, who gave a paper entitled "A Christian Contemplative Approach to the Ten Ox-herding Pictures of Zen Buddhism: Interreligious Dialogue as Mutual Self-mediation."

Having recently returned from ten years in Japan, where my efforts to learn Japanese were a never-ending struggle, I was amazed that this Asian monk was able to speak so fluently and with such confidence about a topic as abstruse as "mutual self-mediation." I was even more intrigued when I learned that the focus of his doctoral research at Regis College of the University of Toronto was Merton's intense and transformative experience of contemplative dialogue with Buddhism.

At the closing session of that Gethsemani Encounter, Fr. Anselmo himself recognized how unusual his situation was. He noted that during his seminary studies in Korea he was required to become familiar with Western philosophy and theology. Now, as a doctoral student at a Canadian university, he was studying Eastern religions and examining their impact on a Western Catholic monk. He expressed the hope that his transcultural experiences and studies would prepare him to contribute to the advancement of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Asia.

The year 2018 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death in Thailand. On his last night at Gethsemani before embarking on his Asian journey, he wrote, "[I hope] to find something or someone who will help me advance in my own spiritual quest."¹ About a month later, in notes for a talk he gave in Calcutta, he maintained that his principal reason for being so interested in Buddhism—Buddhist monasticism in particular—was not simply to accumulate information about other monastic traditions. Rather, his interest was spiritual. He was concerned about his own monastic calling and dedication, and for that reason he wanted "to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience [in order] to become a better and more enlightened monk."²

Much has already been written about Merton's extensive and prophetic interest in other religious traditions and the special appeal that Zen Buddhism had for him. The particular and valuable contribution of Fr. Anselmo to the existing literature is his emphasis on the spiritual motivation of Merton's search, his description of the transformative effect that immersion in Buddhist teaching and practice had on Merton's interior life, and his thoughts on how Merton's approach to Buddhism could help Christian monks in Asia develop a deep spiritual friendship with Buddhist monks that could bring them to "trans-cultural maturity," a retrieving of humanity's original *unity-in-diversity*, which Merton put forth as the goal of contemplative dialogue.

Fr. Anselmo concludes his book noting that his encounter with the writings of Thomas Merton in 2012 changed his academic,

1. Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 336ff. The date was September 9, 1968.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1973), op. cit. Appendix IV, "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue (*Notes for a paper to have been delivered at Calcutta, October 1968*)," 312ff. In his journal entry for October 24, 1968, Merton wrote, "I spoke yesterday morning [at the Temple of Understanding Conference in Calcutta], but did not actually follow my prepared text."

spiritual, and monastic life. Now having returned to Korea, he hopes to devote his energies to the promotion of contemplative dialogue between Buddhists and Christians, the form of dialogue that Merton believed must be at the heart of all interreligious dialogue with the great world religions if we are to live together in peace as one spiritual family.

On behalf of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, I am profoundly grateful to Fr. Anselmo for so clearly articulating Merton's insistence that the core of interreligious dialogue must be spiritual and for his willingness to promote the legacy of this Western and yet universal monk among the Christians and Buddhists of Korea and beyond.

William Skudlarek, OSB
Secretary General
Monastic Interreligious Dialogue
December 10, 2018
Fiftieth anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton

Preface

In the late 1980s and early 1990s when a group of scholars were founding the Society for Buddhist Christian Studies, someone asked, “will you have any Buddhists to talk to?” What the questioner implied was “will you have any *Asian* Buddhists, cultural Buddhists with whom to engage in dialogue?” The implication was that *real* Buddhism was Asian. But while Buddhism arose in a particular place at a specific point in history, its beliefs and practices are not, by definition, the provenance of any ethnic, cultural, or racial group. For example, American Jews can be Buddhists. A Korean can be a Christian and a Benedictine monk. That the author of this book is Asian, Christian, and monastic brings special insight to his study of the well-known Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, who became enamored of Buddhism and traveled as a pilgrim to Asia.

In his introduction to Merton’s essay “Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom,” Patrick F. O’Connell provides a helpful comment worth quoting in full. Merton, he explains:

. . . does not believe that the Christian faith, or Christian doctrine, is somehow incomplete without an infusion from the East, but that the inevitably limited framework of Christian culture, the historical and geographical setting in which faith is embedded, could benefit greatly from an engagement with Eastern wisdom—not the belief system *per se* but the experiential knowledge, the spiritual insights of the great Asian religions.¹

1. Patrick F. O’Connell, ed., *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 103.

While many Western scholars have done serious work on Merton and Buddhism (Dr. Paul Pearson, director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, has compiled an extensive bibliography on Merton and Buddhism²), and several Asian scholars have written on this and related subjects,³ Merton readers have awaited a *full* analysis of Merton's dialogue with Buddhism from an Asian perspective. Fr. Park's book provides this analysis as well as descriptions of Merton's encounter with and contribution to both interreligious and inter-monastic dialogue. Fr. Park's insights are those both of an Asian Christian and a Benedictine monk. Being a monk and a Christian (a religion that arose far from his traditional historical, cultural context), Fr. Park sees both Buddhism and Christianity with "baptized eyes." The multifaceted jewel of this cross-cultural seeing is a special gift to Merton studies. His monastic perspective is critical, because if one does not understand monasticism, one cannot really understand or accurately interpret the life and work of Thomas Merton.⁴

Like the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, Buddhism is skeptical about solid essences; everything is in flux. As Teresa of

2. An example is the collection of essays in *Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness & Everyday Mind*, ed. Bonnie Bowman Thurston (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Press, 2007), which includes the work of several scholars and a large section of Pearson's bibliography. And see Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), and Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983).

3. See, for example, earlier essays by Joseph Chu-Cong, OCSO, "Thomas Merton and the Far East," *Cistercian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1979): 45–58; Kun Ki Kang, "Prayer and the Cultivation of Mind: An Examination Through the Writings of Thomas Merton and Chinul" [unpublished manuscript] (Chonju, Korea: Department of Philosophy, Chonbuk National University); Cyrus Lee, "Thomas Merton and Zen Buddhism," *Chinese Culture* 13, no. 1 (1973): 35–48.

4. For more on this important point see John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), and Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

Jesus (Teresa of Avila, whom Merton admired) succinctly put it, “*todo se pasa*.” I think Merton’s fascination with Buddhism might be summarized by the paradoxical phrase “changing stability,” because Thomas Merton was quintessentially two things: a person who changed and a monk. Writing in *The Sign of Jonas* Merton quipped, “I am the impression that will change.”⁵ It is exactly as Dom Armand Veilleux, OCSO, observed: Merton was “a monk on a spiritual journey, a man in a continual process of growth, whose field of consciousness was always both deepening and opening up to new horizons.”⁶

The trajectory of Merton’s life and interests followed an evolving trajectory. He understood conversion, not as a single event, but as a process. Christians, and there is no evidence that Merton was ever anything but deeply, committedly Christian, are in the process of conversion, open to conversion in every moment and at every level of life. This *metanoia* summarizes the Benedictine vow of *conversio morum*, conversion of life. Merton’s monastic vows were his stability. His “changeability” reflected his monastic convictions. Both came together in his openness to Buddhism (and to other religions, in particular, Islam). It is this paradox of monastic stability and *metanoia* that Fr. Park’s book illuminates.

Merton’s knowledge of Buddhism began (in history of religious fashion) with Hinduism and continued through study of the Mahayana Zen tradition. Then, in response to his experiences in Asia, it turned toward Theravadan Buddhism, represented by the great carved figures at Polonnaruwa and his epiphany there (so eloquently recorded in his *Asian Journal*), and then to Tibetan Buddhism (*Vajrayana* and *Dzogchen*) by means of audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and meetings with Tibetan monks

5. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York, NY: Doubleday/Image Books, 1956), 242.

6. Armand Veilleux, OCSO, “Monk on a Journey,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 50 (2015): 99. Originally published in *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983).

and lamas. In notes for a talk he was to deliver in Asia Merton wrote, "I speak as a western monk who is pre-eminently concerned with his own monastic calling and dedication. . . . I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek . . . to become a better and more enlightened monk. . . ."7

Merton understood religious dialogue as essential to his vocation as a monk, not defined in terms of "order," but of life orientation. For Merton, "monks" (a gender-inclusive term), whether or not they are in formal, religious orders, are "marginal persons," detached enough from their social and cultural contexts to see them clearly. In an informal talk in Calcutta, October 1968, he noted that ". . . the monk in the modern world is no longer an established person with an established place in society. . . . He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience."<8

This study brings together its author's own monastic formation and outlook, his knowledge of Asian monasticism (particularly in Korea, his own context), of the Buddhist traditions, and of Thomas Merton. Fr. Park places all this in the context of ongoing contemplative dialogue among monastics and contemplatives of different religious traditions. As do I, Park views Merton as a pioneer of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.⁹ His purpose in this book is to examine Merton's "self-transformation through contemplative experience" (chapter 1), to explore his encounter with Buddhism and Buddhist-Christian dialogue (chapter 2), to answer those critical of this endeavor (this he does particularly well at the end of chapter 3), and to present Merton's ongoing legacy in dialogue

7. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. N. Burton, P. Hart, and J. Laughlin (New York, NY: New Directions, 1968/1975), 312–313.

8. *Ibid.*, 305.

9. Bonnie Thurston, "Thomas Merton: Pioneer of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," *The Catholic World* 223 (May/June 1989): 126–128.

and cross-religious encounters especially in the Asian monastic context (chapter 4).

Fr. Park's evaluation of Merton's knowledge of Buddhism is balanced and helpful. He stresses that Merton "realized the dangers of a facile comparison and syncretism" and understood "that Buddhists and Christians must dialogue at a profound spiritual level since those who experienced self-transcendence were no longer in isolation but were able to accept others with openness, freedom, and love, and to dialogue with them at a mature level" (p. 119). Fr. Park's gentle but insistent stress on the necessity of self-transcendence (perhaps Buddhists would say "egolessness") before engaging in and during cross-religious encounter reflects Merton's own position and is absolutely spot on.¹⁰ Merton "saw that the way of self-emptying or self-transformation through self-forgetfulness or self-losing could become the basic principle for Buddhist-Christian dialogue" (p. 79).

To my knowledge, this is the first book-length study in English to evaluate Merton's studies of Buddhism, his dialogue with Buddhists, *and* its relevance for ongoing dialogue. This latter Fr. Park accomplishes by an overview of Merton's influence as represented particularly in the Gethsemani Encounters and inter- and intra-monastic encounters, experiences of "passing over and coming home." Fr. Park expands our knowledge of Merton's life, writing, and travel and its wider influence on the subsequent development of conversations between and among Christians, Buddhists, and monastics.

Each of the book's four chapters opens with a clear statement of its subject and the goal of the chapter; then, in orderly fashion, with pauses for summation, Fr. Park presents his argument and its supporting material. Each chapter's clear organization facilitates

10. See also Ryan Scruggs, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*, ed. Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart (Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012), chapter 7, and Bonnie Thurston, "Waking from a Dream of Separateness: Thomas Merton's Principles of Religious Dialogue," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 50 (2015): 83–97.

the reader's understanding of occasionally complex material. Of necessity, there is some repetition of previously covered ground. When Fr. Park revisits earlier material, it is usually from a different perspective, and is rather like looking into the same room from different windows and seeing its contents anew. Parts of chapter 2 (on the more theoretical aspects of Buddhist-Christian dialogue) may be hard going for the general reader (the genesis of this book was a doctoral dissertation), but it is critical when the reader comes to chapter 4 on Merton's legacy. Chapter 4 is perhaps Fr. Park's most valuable new contribution, and one hopes he might in the future expand it into a book-length study.

Throughout the book Fr. Park stresses that Merton's "contemplative dialogue was always directed to his inner transformation through engagement with the profound spiritualities of Asian contemplative traditions" (p. 223). In his introduction to Merton's remarks at a meeting in Santa Barbara, California, before the monk departed for Asia, Walter Capps noted, ". . . Merton understood his own engagement with Asian Spiritual pathways to be necessary to his own maturation as both a Christian and a human being. And what he understood as necessary for himself he also understood to be necessary for the world."¹¹ Indeed. And even more necessary now fifty years later. As Fr. Park's book presents it, Merton's engagement with Buddhism (and, of course, with others of the world's great religious traditions) points us toward the value, indeed, the necessity of openness to a similar "changing stability."

Bonnie Thurston, PhD
Feast of St. Nicholas, 2018
Wheeling, WV

11. Walter Capps, ed., *Thomas Merton: Preview of the Asian Journey* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989), 30.

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of St. Vincent Archabbey, helped me with my academic English writing and shared his spiritual wisdom with me as my spiritual brother. I would like to use this opportunity to thank my friends, Sr. Ann Delaney (Sisters of St. Joseph), Dr. Marie Dietrich (an Oblate of Benedictine Sisters of Eire), Theresa Shin, Fr. Young-Min Song, Dr. Richard Tetreau and Shirley Tetreau, Fr. Peter Bisson, SJ and Fr. Leonard Altilia, SJ and other members of the Jesuit Community in Toronto, and many Torontonians-Korean parishioners at the St. Andrew Kim Catholic Parish and Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of my community brothers in St. Benedict Waegwan Abbey, including a former Abbot, Simon Ri, who died in 2016. A big thank you goes out to my family: my parents and three brothers in South Korea.

List of Abbreviations

Merton's Works

- AJ *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*
- AT *The Ascent to Truth*
- CFMT *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 8*
- CGB *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*
- CMP *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*
- CWA *Contemplation in a World of Action*
- DQ *Disputed Questions*
- DWL *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*
- ES *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer*
- FV *Faith and Violence*
- HGL *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*
- IE *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*
- IEW *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*
- IM *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*
- LH *Thomas Merton, Life and Holiness*
- LL *Learning to Love*
- L&L *Love and Living*
- MZM *Mystics and Zen Masters*

NM	<i>The New Man</i>
NMI	<i>No Man Is an Island</i>
NSC	<i>New Seeds of Contemplation</i>
OSM	<i>The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey</i>
PP	<i>Passion for Peace: The Social Essays</i>
RJ	<i>The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends</i>
RM	<i>Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation</i>
SC	<i>Seeds of Contemplation</i>
SCL	<i>The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction</i>
SD	<i>Seeds of Destruction</i>
SJ	<i>The Sign of Jonas</i>
SS	<i>A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life</i>
SSM	<i>The Seven Storey Mountain</i>
TMR	<i>A Thomas Merton Reader</i>
TTW	<i>Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years</i>
ZBA	<i>Zen and the Birds of Appetite</i>
ZR	"The Zen Revival"

Inter-Monastic Dialogue

AIM	Aide à l'Implantation Monastique
DIM	Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique
DIMMID	Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue
MID	Monastic Interreligious Dialogue
NABEWD	North American Board for East-West Dialogue
PCID	Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

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Introduction

In 1968, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, and a well-known American Catholic writer and mystic, took part in the first Congress of Asian and Western monastics in Bangkok, Thailand. No one, including Merton, would have known that this would be his last Congress. The night before his accidental death at the Congress, he told John Moffitt, “Zen and Christianity are the future.”¹ His declaration, made with conviction, raises many questions. Why did this Christian contemplative monk mention Zen, despite how impressed he was with the Tibetan Buddhists he had recently encountered?² What did he see in the relationship between Zen and Christianity? Did he ignore other religions? What was the future he anticipated for them?

Commenting on his declaration, Moffitt wrote that “Merton held Zen to be not a religion in the usual sense, but essentially a technique for attaining enlightenment; thus it might conceivably be ‘included’ in Christianity.”³ Although Merton did not consider

1. John Moffitt, *Journey to Gorakhpur: An Encounter with Christ beyond Christianity* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 275.

2. During Merton’s Asian journey, he met many Tibetan rinpoches and lamas, and noted, “the Tibetan Buddhists . . . 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.” See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1973), 82 (hereafter AJ).

3. John Moffitt, “Memories of Thomas Merton,” *Cistercian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1979): 76.

Zen to be a “technique of introversion” when he distinguished Zen from Zen Buddhism, he did regard Zen as “a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness.”⁴ The common spiritual elements of the great world religions that he discovered through the lens of Zen were “a transformation of human consciousness” and a “spiritual liberation” through a contemplative or awakening experience.⁵

As we examine his pioneering works in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, his inter-monastic dialogue, and what he considered to be the center of monastic life, namely, contemplation, we can formulate the following hypothesis: through the lens of Zen, Merton saw the value and possibility of “contemplative dialogue” between monastics or contemplatives of different religious traditions, those men and women who look primarily to a transformation of human consciousness and a spiritual awakening from within their respective traditions. With regard to the future, he hoped that through contemplative dialogue, monastics would strive for “intermonastic communion” and a bonding of the broader “spiritual family” and thus become witnesses of the fundamental unity of humanity to a world that was becoming ever more materialistic and divided.⁶

As an Asian Benedictine monk, I was honored to participate at the celebration of the centennial of Merton’s birth organized by the International Thomas Merton Society in Louisville, Kentucky in 2015, the Gethsemani Encounter IV in 2015, and the meeting of the European Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (hereafter DIMMID) subcommissions 2016 in Norway and 2017 in Ireland. My presence at these events led me to the conviction that Merton’s legacy continues to grow

4. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 20 (hereafter MZM); Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1968), 4 (hereafter ZBA).

5. AJ, 333.

6. “Contemplative dialogue,” “intermonastic communion,” and “spiritual family” are Merton’s own terms. See *ibid.*, 316; MZM, x.

and remains worthy of development in Asia. Pending the successful completion of this conviction, I plan to spend the rest of my career effecting this development specifically in my own Korean context. The groundwork for that work has already been started during a multireligious pilgrimage with several scholars in Korea during the summer of 2016.

The purpose of this book is to examine Merton's role as a pioneer by: 1) delving into the process of Merton's self-transformation through contemplative experience; 2) exploring his encounter with Zen and Tibetan Buddhists and his pioneering engagements in Buddhist-Christian dialogue; 3) presenting and responding to the criticisms of those who raise questions about Merton's understanding of Buddhism; 4) studying his inter-monastic exchanges with Buddhists at the level of contemplative dialogue; and 5) presenting the ways in which Merton's pioneering legacy continues in the ongoing Gethsemani Encounters and monastic exchange programs as well as in *intra*-religious dialogue in an Asian monastic context.

The book will articulate and analyze the influences of Buddhist theory and practice on Merton's contemplative spirituality and the influence of Merton's legacy on inter-monastic and interreligious dialogue. To this end, I will examine some specific questions about how contemplative dialogue and inter-monastic exchanges influenced Merton's life and thought and also influenced the development of such dialogue. Some specific questions will be explored: 1) What motivated Merton as a practicing Christian monastic to turn to Buddhism in the first place? 2) To what degree did Merton integrate his inner experience and interreligious dialogue on his journey of self-transcendence? 3) In the dialogue between the nondual experience of Buddhism and the theistic mystical experience of Christianity, what did Merton discover that was useful for Buddhist-Christian dialogue? 4) What were the limitations in Merton's knowledge of Buddhism? 5) Why did Merton emphasize experiential dialogue and "intermonastic communion," and what was the relationship between these different levels of dialogue

and Merton's understanding of Buddhism? 6) What developments were inspired by his pioneering example, and how can they continue, particularly in an Asian monastic context?

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (hereafter PCID) asserts that monastic interreligious dialogue operates at a profound level: "Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one's respective religious convictions."⁷ Such a spiritual exchange occurred in 1996 when Buddhist and Christian monastics and lay contemplatives gathered at Gethsemani Abbey, where Thomas Merton spent his monastic life, for a dialogue on the spiritual life and inter-monastic communion. This vision of interreligious dialogue was one that Merton himself had suggested. He was convinced that Christian contemplative monastics who were striving for inter-monastic communion could easily become dialogue partners with Buddhist monastics and suggested that interreligious dialogue between East and West could benefit from these different perspectives on monastic experience.

Through his encounter with Buddhists/Buddhism, Merton's inner experience and his interreligious dialogue contributed to a dynamic evolution of his religious awareness.⁸ In his Louisville

7. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation," in *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963–2005)*, ed. Francesco Gioia (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 2006), 1170.

8. Merton used the term "the inner experience" to express both the Buddhist enlightenment experience and Christian contemplative experience. See Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2003), 6–18 (hereafter IE). Joseph Raab claims that this inner experience is an awakening of the inner self and "the subsequent affirmation of the primary unity between consciousness as intentional and the reality of its transcendental ground and goal in love and freedom. . . . Merton and Suzuki call [this experience] 'the inner experience.'" See Joseph Q. Raab, *Openness and Fidelity: Thomas Merton's Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki*

Epiphany of 1958, which occurred years after he had initially *fled* the world and lived a cloistered monastic life for almost seventeen years, Merton turned with an open heart and mind to the world and to other religions, including Zen.⁹ He had come to know Zen from his voracious reading and through personal contacts with such experts as Dr. D.T. Suzuki. Dialogue and friendship with Buddhists changed his outlook on Asian religions and classical Christian contemplation. Beyond intellectual discussion, he proposed that there be contemplative dialogue and spiritual communion between monastics of other religions. Just what these notions mean will be explained more fully in this book. His encounters with monks and lamas of the Tibetan diaspora on his Asian trip in 1968 reflected his growing interest in such dialogue up to the end of his life.

Merton's dialogue with Buddhist traditions reached its high point in his transformative experience at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka near the end of his life: "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion."¹⁰ This powerful *satori*-like experience represented a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity, a bridge rooted in his own religious experience. Although his knowledge of Buddhism was limited, Merton found, in the light of this inner experience, the fundamental source and method for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Given that he died shortly after this experience, we cannot be certain about directions in which he would have gone or how he would have subsequently interpreted the experience. There is some evidence that he was preparing to delve more deeply into Tibetan Buddhist practices under the tutelage of a famous and

and Self-Transcendence (PhD diss., Toronto School of Theology, 2000), 170 (emphasis in original).

9. As an example of his openness to Buddhism subsequent to his Louisville Epiphany of 1958, it can be noted that in order to explain his new understanding of contemplation, Merton began using Buddhist terminology in his book *The Inner Experience*, which was largely written in 1959, and in his letters to D.T. Suzuki, which he began writing in March 1959.

10. AJ, 235.

reclusive rinpoche.¹¹ Still, he believed that contemplative dialogue at the level of inner experience could lead to a mutual acceptance and affirmation of the wisdom of both traditions. In a “state of trans-cultural maturity,” he believed that “we are already one” and that contemplative dialogue could help to retrieve our original *unity-in-diversity*.¹²

Today, Eastern and Western monastics have appropriated Merton's insights as they engage in dialogue with one another in various monastic exchange programs, such as those organized by DIMMID. DIMMID is presently trying to promote Merton's legacy in Asia and in Africa. Thus, I, as an Asian monk, will show the urgent need for the development of monastic interreligious dialogue in Asia. Finally, I will suggest ways to develop his example and the model he proposed in an Asian context.

In Merton's contemplative life, spiritual transformation through inner experience was deeply connected to his understanding of interreligious dialogue and the method he proposed for engaging in it. Thus, chapter 1 will begin with an examination of Merton's biographical data to determine the relationship between his inner experiences and the transformation of his consciousness. These led to a greater openness to others that was complemented by openness to and dialogue with other religions, especially Buddhism. This, in turn, brought him to a deep inner experience of other religious traditions and to a deepened appreciation of contemplation in the Christian tradition. In this dynamic progress, Merton experienced the presence of God in the church, among people, and

11. See *ibid.*, 143–144; Judith Simmer-Brown, “The Liberty That Nobody Can Touch: Thomas Merton Meets Tibetan Buddhism,” in *Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness and Everyday Mind*, ed. Bonnie Thurston (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2007), 73–85; Bonnie Thurston, “Footnotes to the Asian Journey of Thomas Merton,” in *Merton & Buddhism*, 229–233. “Rinpoche” is the deferential title given to spiritual masters in Tibetan Buddhism.

12. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 206 (hereafter CWA); AJ, 308.

through other religions, and came to believe that final integration was a state of transcultural maturity. In order to express and interpret his inner experience of contemplation, Merton made use of various concepts taken from Buddhist spirituality. He realized that Buddhists and Christians could be mutually enriched by exchanging their different ways of expressing contemplative experience. His religious experience in Polonnaruwa is a striking example of the fruits of dialogue at the level of cross-cultural religious experience. This chapter will conclude with an evaluation of Merton's writings on inner experience and of the self-transformation that took place on his spiritual journey, which was key to his view of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

The purpose of chapter 2 is to explore how Merton paved a new way for Buddhist-Christian dialogue by identifying the strengths and limitations he brought to his dialogue with Buddhists. To this end, the chapter will first explore his encounters with Buddhism and Buddhists. His growing acquaintance with Buddhism moved him from intellectual dialogue to experiential dialogue and then to integrated dialogue at a deeper spiritual level. His attitude toward Buddhists also changed from naively seeing them as pagans to regarding them as teachers, friends, and brothers. Second, the chapter will present Merton's understanding of Buddhism intellectually, experientially, and spiritually to demonstrate that his knowledge of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism was advanced for his time and was developed primarily at the level of contemplative experience and spiritual communion rather than doctrine.¹³ His dialectical and ongoing involvement in Buddhist-Christian dialogue on contemplation revealed that his limited knowledge of Buddhism could be transcended by his transcultural perspective. Third, the chapter will explore the three types of interreligious dialogue that led Merton to Buddhist-Christian dialogue: the dialogue

13. Further evidence of his broader knowledge of Buddhism can be found in his acquaintance with Buddhist masters, such as the XIV Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Chatral Rinpoche.

of theology, religious experience, and action. He realized that since Buddhists focused more on experience and practice, inner experience had to become the primary topic for dialogue between the two religions. His lasting contribution was to make contemplative dialogue the goal of interreligious dialogue for monastics. Finally, in order to go beyond Merton's personal encounters with Buddhists, the chapter will discuss his limited exposure to Buddhism as a spiritual/philosophical system, his notion of transcendent identity, and his monastic approach to Buddhism. What he aspired to in his encounter with Tibetan Buddhists will be evaluated by looking at his dual approach to them as a pilgrim student and a contemplative monk.

Chapter 3 will demonstrate that through contemplative dialogue and inter-monastic exchanges, Merton created a new paradigm for interreligious dialogue. For this purpose, I will first present Merton's motives for interreligious dialogue with monastics. As a monk himself, he easily appreciated and identified with certain Buddhist monastic practices. He could see that monasticism was profoundly embedded in Asian religions. Their various forms of monasticism are a treasured "traditional religious way" that can cultivate a "contemplative, enlightened, or spiritually transformed [experience]."¹⁴ Merton believed that inter-monastic dialogue could contribute to mutual enrichment as well as challenge for both monastic traditions. It could, in fact, contribute to the renewal of Catholic monasticism and the discovery of a monastic and contemplative dimension in all religions. Second, I will explore how Merton's inter-monastic exchanges through contemplative dialogue proceeded from finding the *self*, to discovering *friendship* with other monastics, to a bonding of the *spiritual family*. He expected that an inter-monastic contemplative communion could foster a transcultural consciousness for contemplatives that went beyond religious and cultural boundaries. Merton believed that

14. AJ, 310 (emphasis in original).

Merton's Pioneering Work with Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

The climate among religions today has gradually evolved from that of isolation to one of mutual relation through friendlier dialogue and cooperation. For example, when Pope Francis spoke to a gathering of Buddhist and Christian religious leaders on June 24, 2015, he said, “[This] is a visit of fraternity, of dialogue, and of friendship, and this is good. This is healthy. And in these moments, which are wounded by war and hatred, these small gestures are seeds of peace and fraternity.”¹ His Holiness Dalai Lama in a similar manner also emphasizes the “necessity of friendship as a basis for genuine dialogue, one that reaches a profound level of mutual recognition of each other’s traditions, their equal authenticity, and their intrinsic complementarity.”² Persons engaged in interreligious dialogue are opening their minds

1. “Pope Francis, Catholics, Meet with Buddhists at Vatican” (June 25, 2015), <https://www.lionsroar.com/pope-francis-catholics-meet-with-buddhists-at-vatican>.

2. Cited in Wayne Teasdale, “The Ocean of Wisdom as Human and Spiritual Presence,” in *Understanding the Dalai Lama*, ed. Rajiv Mehrotra (New York, NY: Hay House, 2008), 106.

and hearts to each other's religion and considering ways to build a world community out of our divided societies.

Despite doctrinal differences, dialogue between Buddhists and Christians has occurred frequently. We may classify the main areas in Buddhist-Christian dialogue under three headings: 1) the dialogue of *religious experience*, 2) the dialogue of *theology*, and 3) the dialogue of *action*. As we shall see, in dialogue with Buddhism these issues are interconnected. For example, experience has shown that without dialogue between praxis and spirituality, Christians cannot really understand Buddhist theology. Moreover, without being grounded in dialogue as related to spirituality and social practice, there can be no real progress toward communion.

In this regard, Thomas Merton is one of the pioneers of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. He strove for an integrated dialogic path based on actual experience and for contemplative dialogue that facilitates openness to others and leads to friendship and self-transformation. Today, Merton's knowledge of Buddhism can be questioned, but his contemplative experience and paths of dialogue still provide a model for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Merton's journey toward his inner self through his continuous spiritual development, his openness to learning from others, and his transcendent experiences, offer a personal and spiritual model that enhances interreligious dialogue. DIMMID and other scholars are presently attempting to improve upon his insights regarding Zen and to give greater attention to his encounter with Tibetan Buddhism.

This chapter will explore how Merton paved new avenues for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. To this end, his encounter with Buddhists and Buddhism during his lifetime will be examined. This section will help to understand how his attitude toward Buddhists changed from seeing them initially as pagans to regarding them as teachers, friends, and brothers. Second, the chapter will present Merton's understanding of Buddhism intellectually, experientially, spiritually, and practically to demonstrate that his knowledge of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism was advanced for his time. Finally, the chapter will examine Merton's three areas for promoting

Buddhist-Christian dialogue. It will evaluate his contribution to the project and also speak to the limitations of his undertaking.

Merton's Encounter with Buddhists and Buddhism in His Life's Journey

Merton's life exemplifies a process of development: the methods and the goals of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. In a dramatic way, he experienced a personal transformation from exclusivism to openness, from triumphalism to respect, and from simply talking to a deeper listening that preceded the Catholic Church's more positive view of Eastern religions as signified by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The documents of Vatican II provided added incentive for the kind of monastic and contemplative dialogue with Eastern traditions that Merton envisioned.³

Merton encountered Eastern traditions, including Zen, in the process of exploring his own understanding of contemplation. These traditions had a significant influence on his view of the relationship between contemplation and openness to others. In order to grasp Merton's understanding of the relationship between contemplation and dialogue in Buddhist-Christian relations, it is beneficial to explore how his familiarity with Buddhism developed. Bonnie Thurston divides Merton's acquaintance with Buddhism into three periods: premonastic (1937–1941), monastic (1941–1968), and Asian (1968).⁴ Evidence of Merton's interest in Zen prior to his entrance into the monastery is very limited, as is also true of the first fifteen years or so of his monastic life. However, in *The Inner Experience*, written in 1959, Merton presented the fruit of a deep interest in Zen that began in the mid-1950s.

3. See Thurston, "Thomas Merton: Pioneer of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," 128.

4. See Bonnie B. Thurston, "Unfolding of a New World: Thomas Merton & Buddhism," in *Merton & Buddhism*, 15–22.

William Shannon claims that *The Inner Experience* is the first time in Merton's writings that he linked his notion of Christian contemplation to Eastern religious thought.⁵ Therefore, another way of showing Merton's increasing interest in Buddhism is by dividing it into three periods: The Exploratory Period (1937 to the mid-1950s), The Transformational Period (1959 to 1968), and The Intensive and Enlightened Period (1968).

The Exploratory Period: 1937 to the mid-1950s

The exploratory period commenced when Merton read Aldous Huxley's book *Ends and Means* in 1937. This book stimulated Merton's attraction not only to mysticism in general but to an apophatic mysticism that would later enable him to relate it to Buddhist teachings about the void and emptiness.⁶ However, when he initially encountered Asian thought, he looked at Buddhism through the lens of Christian soteriology and considered the practice of Zen to be primarily a useful practical tool. He noted, "The emphasis on technique, on bodily control, on interior discipline in both Oriental and Orthodox mysticism makes me realize how supremely indifferent we are to techniques. I have never had any method of contemplation."⁷ He also believed that Buddhism led to nihilism or heresy because of what he considered to be its life-denying emphasis on self-emptying.

5. See IE, xiv.

6. The most important effect of Huxley's book on Merton was to make him "start ransacking the university library for books on Oriental mysticism." See SSM, 204. Fabrice Blée argues that "under the influence of Aldous Huxley, Merton was deeply moved by the thought that employing mystical techniques could bring about peace, tolerance, and charity, ideals dear to his heart. However, his study of the East at this point in his life was superficial and scattered, and ultimately without much fruit." See Fabrice Blée, *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, trans. William Skudlarek and Mary Grady (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 40.

7. ES, 402; cf. SSM, 205.

In 1949, however, Merton's view of Buddhism gradually became more positive and he became absorbed in the practice of Zen. For instance, on June 4 he was impressed by the talk Archbishop Paul Yu-Pin of Nanking gave to the monastic community at Gethsemani. Merton wrote that the archbishop spoke about "China and the contemplative life and Buddhist monasticism—and about the reproach that Buddhists fling at us, that is, we are all very fine at building hospitals but we have no contemplatives."⁸ On November 24, Merton's interest in contemplation can be seen in his correspondence with a Hindu in Simla about Patanjali's yoga in which he asked him to send some books. He also wrote about a Hawaiian chemist, a former Zen postulant, who spoke to the monastic community about Zen Buddhism.⁹

In the mid-1950s, Merton's reading of Suzuki's works deepened his interest in Zen. He referred to Zen as an important instrument of his "apostolate" and began to see similarities between the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Zen Buddhists.¹⁰ These similarities included a search for the true self, an orientation toward self-transcendence, the use of *koans* and sayings, and the acceptance of suffering in the self-emptying process. After his Louisville Epiphany in 1958, when he was overwhelmed by the realization that he loved all people and that people could not be alienated from one another, he further opened his mind and heart to other religions, including Buddhism. Thus, we can say that Merton's interest in Zen and Buddhism did not emerge abruptly

8. SJ, 197.

9. See *ibid.*, 243.

10. See SS, 48, 57, 232, 272–273. Shannon claims that "[Merton's] studies in the mystical tradition of the West—the Egyptian fathers, St. Basil, Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Bernard and other Cistercian writers, Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, and so many others—gave him the elements of a way of viewing life and reality that finally prepared him to return to Eastern thought with an openness and an appreciation such as he could not have had earlier. He became an articulate and highly respected interpreter of Eastern thought to the Western world." See Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 279.

in the mid-1950s; it had been slowly developing during the twenty years following his reading of Huxley's book.

The Transformational Period: 1959–1968

After writing his book *The Inner Experience* (1959), and prior to his journey to Asia, Merton's attitude toward Buddhists was completely transformed. He no longer regarded them pejoratively, but positively as friends and brothers. He studied Zen and Mahayana Buddhism so assiduously that this period can be aptly called his Transformation through Zen (1959–1968). Following the publication of his book *The Wisdom of the Desert* in 1959, Merton began an earnest dialogue with Buddhists and Buddhism, especially with D. T. Suzuki, who at that time was the major interpreter of Zen for the Western world. Merton stated that “[the] uniqueness of Dr. Suzuki's work lies in the directness with which an Asian thinker has been able to communicate his own experience of a profound and ancient tradition in a Western language.”¹¹ He deepened his understanding of Zen through reading Suzuki's books, corresponding with him, and meeting with him in New York in 1964.¹² Merton also met or corresponded with Dr. John C. H. Wu, Fr. Heinrich Dumoulin, SJ, Masao Abe, Marco Pallis, and Thich Nhat Hanh, among others, and he wrote many books and articles related to the Asian traditions.¹³ His correspondence with

11. ZBA, 63. Thurston argues that “during the monastic years Merton's study focused on the Mahayana tradition of Zen, perhaps because it was most readily available to him in an English translation. There is no question but that Suzuki was formative in his understanding of Zen.” See Thurston, “Unfolding of a New World,” 17.

12. Merton's correspondence with Suzuki began in 1959 and continued until Suzuki's death in 1966.

13. These included *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), “Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom” (1962), “Zen: Sense and Sensibility” (1963), “The Zen Revival” (1964), and “The Zen Insight of Shen Hui” (1965).

Buddhists and Buddhist scholars helped him modify his earlier ideas about Zen. He now stated that “it is quite false to imagine that Zen is a sort of individualistic, subjective parity. . . . It is not a subtle form of spiritual self-gratification. . . . Nor is it by any means a simple withdrawal from the outer world of matter to an inner world of spirit.”¹⁴ Under the influence of dialogue with Buddhists, Merton’s enriched understanding of Zen contributed to his spiritual transformation, especially in the area of the integration of contemplation and action through nondualistic thought in Buddhism. His interest in social justice and in other Asian religions emerged from this expanding worldview.¹⁵

Through friendship with Buddhists, Merton saw the possibility of interreligious dialogue between Zen and Christianity in “a common spiritual climate.”¹⁶ He recognized that Zen could help Christians attain spiritual growth and integration, and it could also transform modern Western culture in a profound way.¹⁷ He believed that sharing common spiritual ground in fellowship with Zen practitioners could contribute to a transformation of consciousness for his contemporaries.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) also influenced his encounter with Buddhism. He emphasized the Council’s statement that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in [other] religions . . . [that they might] often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (no.

14. MZM, 13. Merton commented that a Buddhist neither “simply turns away from a world . . . [nor] cultivates meditation in order to enter a trance and eventually a complete negative state of *Nirvana*. But Buddhist ‘mindfulness,’ far from being contemptuous of life, is extremely solicitous [*sic*] for all life.” See ZBA, 93.

15. See Larry A. Fader, “Beyond the Birds of Appetite: Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Zen,” *Biography* 2, no. 3 (May 1979): 234.

16. ZBA, 138.

17. See *ibid.*, 59.

2).”¹⁸ In the light of that truth, Merton’s dialogue with other traditions, especially Buddhism, accelerated through greater respect for those traditions and from a deeper understanding of them.

The Intensive and Enlightened Period: 1968

The Intensive and Enlightened Period began in 1968 when Merton journeyed to Asia, where he looked forward to having “face-to-face, monk-to-monk” encounters with Buddhists.¹⁹ During his time in Asia, his meetings with Theravada and Tibetan Buddhist monks helped to extend his understanding of Buddhism, which had been limited to Mahayana Buddhism prior to his Asian journey. He was especially impressed by the profound spiritual depth of the Tibetan rinpoches and lamas, including the Dalai Lama, whom he encountered in Dharamsala. At Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, a predominantly Theravada context, Merton experienced a kind of spiritual enlightenment before the statue of the Buddha. Thus, these two months in Asia could be called the Intensive and Enlightened Period.

Although he read some books about Tibetan Buddhism before his journey, it had not been possible for him to encounter Tibetan Buddhists since they had not yet migrated to America in any substantial way. In the course of his Asian pilgrimage, however, he had the opportunity to meet various Tibetans, lamas, and rinpoches who had gone into exile in India following the destruction of Tibetan civilization by their Chinese conquerors in the late 1950s.

The first Tibetan guru he met was Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the youngest *tulku* (reborn master of Tibetan Buddhism) with whom Merton spoke. On October 19, 1968, the very day Merton arrived in India, they met at the Central Hotel in Calcutta. Merton wrote in his journal that “Chögyam Trungpa is a completely marvelous person. Young, natural, without front or artifice, deep awake wise . . . [and] a genuine spiritual master. . . . His own

18. MZM, ix.

19. Thurston, “Unfolding of a New World,” 18.

meditations and talks, from what I have seen, are extraordinary.”²⁰ Trungpa was also impressed by Merton’s open heart and deep spirituality, and felt like “an old friend, a genuine friend.”²¹ Trungpa and Merton talked about “spiritual materialism,” which is “spiritual practice or life used to promote and confirm personal status, reputation, and identity.”²² Their meeting showed that the way beyond spiritual egotism in the contemplative life involved “befriending one’s own state of being without the intention of changing or improving it . . . [since] two such authentic human beings should recognize each other immediately as genuine friends.”²³ In their bonding, Trungpa gave Merton a copy of the *Sadhana* text, which had provided inspiration to Trungpa himself in his search for the best teaching to overcome spiritual materialism.²⁴ Through meeting with Trungpa, Merton reconfirmed the value of friendship and a common spiritual concern in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

A few days later, Merton met with the Nyingma lama, Chokling Rinpoche, a *dzogchen* master and founder of a Tibetan monastery in Bir near Dharamsala.²⁵ They questioned each other about

20. AJ, 30–31.

21. Chögyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa III*, ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003), 477.

22. Simmer-Brown, “The Liberty that Nobody Can Touch,” 58.

23. Steven R. Shippee, “Trungpa’s Barbarians and Merton’s Titan: Resuming a Dialogue on Spiritual Egotism,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32 (2012): 120–121.

24. According to Simmer-Brown, “[t]he *sadhana* introduces the practitioner to the antidote to spiritual materialism, a genuine spirituality that awakens the naked and luminous mind.” See Simmer-Brown, “The Liberty that Nobody Can Touch,” 60. A month later, Merton and Trungpa briefly met again at the Canadian High Commissioner’s home in Calcutta. In his address on “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives” at the meeting in Bangkok, Merton referred to him as “a good friend of mine—a very interesting person indeed.” See AJ, 337–338.

25. Before meeting with Chokling, Merton met Khamtrul Rinpoche, who was known as a *dzogchen* master. In the meeting, Khamtrul was interested in Merton’s investigation of meditation and spoke “about the need for a guru and direct experience rather than book knowledge; about the union of study and meditation.” See AJ, 89.

enlightenment and reincarnation. Chokling spoke of the need of finding a master and meeting with some of the tulkus in India. When Chokling asked him “a koanlike question about the origin of the mind,” he seemed pleased with Merton’s non-answer.²⁶ Judith Simmer-Brown, a specialist in Merton and Tibetan Buddhism, comments that “Chokling Rinpoche’s testing and interrogation of Merton was excellent preparation for his later meeting with [Chatral] Rinpoche.”²⁷ Chokling introduced Merton to *phowa* transmission through “an esoteric practice associated with realization of the ultimate nature at death.”²⁸ Merton learned about a new way of enlightenment through the practice of conscious dying from the Tibetan Rinpoche.

On November 4, Merton had his first meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. The conversation was congenial and progressed in an atmosphere of mutual respect. He described the Dalai Lama as “a very solid, energetic, generous and warm person . . . a very consecutive thinker.”²⁹ Their conversation was about philosophy and religion, especially the way of meditation. Merton was impressed with the Dalai Lama’s clear explanation regarding *dzogchen* meditation. The Dalai Lama advised him to get a good basis in the *Madhyamika* “middle way” school.³⁰ Merton also talked about his personal concerns about Tibetan mysticism. The Dalai Lama described his concerns about partial and distorted Western views of Tibetan mysticism. The first meeting showed that dialogue on contemplative life was a familiar theme of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

26. *Ibid.*, 97.

27. Simmer-Brown, “The Liberty that Nobody Can Touch,” 66.

28. *Ibid.*, 83. *Phowa*, one of Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices, can be described as transference of consciousness at the time of death. About a month later Merton passed away, and Chokling Rinpoche’s son Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche comments, “Maybe [Chokling] Rinpoche saw what was coming and gave the transmission to help [Merton].” See *ibid.*

29. AJ, 101, 113.

30. See *ibid.*, 101–102, 115–116.

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