THOUGHTS ON THE EAST

Thomas Merton

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With an Introduction by
GEORGE WOODCOCK

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Excerpts from Mystics and Zen Masters by Thomas Merton

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Publisher's Note

This book is dedicated to the memory of George Woodcock, author of the acclaimed critical study *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, who before his death wrote the Introduction (to which very minor editorial changes have been made for this edition), as well as the short preface to the last chapter. Other material selected for this book has been taken from the following Thomas Merton works: for the chapter on Taoism, from *The Way of Chuang-Tzu* (New Directions, 1965; Burns & Oates, 1995); on Zen, from *Mystics and Zen Masters* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1976); on Hinduism and the Varieties of Buddhism, from *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New Directions, 1975); on Sufism, from *The Geography of Lograire* (New Directions, 1969).

INTRODUCTION

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Thomas Merton and the Monks of Asia

by George Woodcock

As with many people whom we suspect of being geniuses, Thomas Merton's breadth of vision lay largely in the self-contradictory nature of his interests and urges, their apparent fragmentation being a sign of a deep unity. He was a painstaking priest of the Roman Church and a monk in one of the strictest Catholic Orders, the Reformed Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or Trappists. And enclosed within the walls of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky he remained, with few sallies into the outer world, before that bold expedition to a monastic conference in Asia that ended in his lonely and premature death. He was then a man at the height of his literary and intellectual powers and of his moral influence; perhaps the only man who could stand beside him as a spiritual force was the Dalai Lama, with whom he discoursed fervently and as an equal.

Even in Merton's early monastic life he showed the contrary impulse, the urge away from the disciplines of congregational activities. He began to experience the desire for the minimalist and contemplative life of the hermit, and found that the Trappist rules were not so strict as he had imagined. In the great wilderness area of Gethsemani he was allowed his cinder-block hermitage, while he also took part in the collective activities of the monastery. He was also encouraged to write and publish under minimal censorship, and the monastery reaped his royalties. Merton started to write two kinds of verse: the poetry of the choir, poems of holy and collective celebration, full of triumphant noise and vivid, even gaudy imagery; and the very different poetry of the desert, austere and quiet, celebrating the unity of simplicity and true knowledge as projected years ago by the ancient hermits of the Egyptian desert.

From the beginning the poetry and the prose narratives Merton published established a surprisingly broad readership, not only among Catholics but also among dissenters of all kinds like the present writer. We were impressed by the lyrical talents of a young man who did not fit in with the general pattern of the poet in the 1940s and 1950s, but we were also intrigued, even as sceptics, by the revelations that Merton's prose works, like *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (*Elected Silence*, in the revised British version) gave of the devout mind. Here was someone to whom one might listen, someone to arouse one's discursive urges. And Merton, by what is perhaps the decisive paradox of his existence, remained orthodox in doctrine even as he allied himself with the radical urges that were reshaping Catholicism. Vatican II's revision of the great Tridentine forms of the Counter-Revolution provided the authorization he needed to draw near to other men and women of emeritical inclinations and mystical aims. He opened his mind to the treasuries of Protestant (including Anglican) theology and experience. He tentatively began, almost from the beginning of his monastic career, to discover the great Asian religions such as Buddhism and Taoism—many of them godless creeds—in which the disciplines leading to insight were comparable to those of his fellow Catholic mystics.

In all of this Merton revealed yet another paradoxical aspect of his nature, or perhaps rather of his situation. Enclosed from the world as a Trappist monk, and seeking within the Order for ever greater degrees of eremetic solitude, he found himself encouraged by his superiors to publish his writings, which developed an extraordinary popularity for the works of a man not—in the literal sense—in the world of letters. And the interest in him carried on period as Master of Novices and therefore spiritual director of these young men, Merton closely observed the minds of young Americans and was drawn into their concerns.

The great movement for Black civil rights in the 1960s appealed to him as a militant Christian (he had earlier done social work in Harlem), and it was in writing about this that he first made himself heard as a social critic. He admired the methods of Martin Luther King, Jr and his associates, and for the first time recognized the value and the validity of non-violent action. And thus it was through an American movement that he came to Gandhi, and through Gandhi and the *Bhavagad-Gita* to Eastern philosophy in general. By this time he had become, for his books of poetry and on the contemplative life, something of an international celebrity, a man with whom such spiritual leaders as the Dalai Lama and the Zen philosopher Daisetz Suzuki would be pleased to discourse.

Merton's involvement with the Asian thinkers he chose to study and write about was usually limited. He was fascinated by Gandhi's argument that the *Bhagavad-Gita*, though on the surface an exhortation to war, is in fact a paean to the dedicated life, and he was intrigued that Gandhi had first found this Indian classic in an English translation in London while he was trying to become an imitation white man.

But Merton had little to say about Gandhi's advocacy of direct action. In his own way in fact he became an expert on the indirect and the oblique approach, and was much happier as an anthologist than as a profound interpreter. His introduction to Sufism consisted of a book or two and talking to an expert witness.

The Way of Chuang Tzu is perhaps the most interesting of these "Asian" books because it represents a good deal of reflection on Merton's part regarding a thinker who was perhaps as near as one could get to his own opposite. For Chuang Tzu, perhaps the greatest of all Tao teachers since the old original Lao Tzu departed on the back of his blue buffalo, was a preacher of moral anarchy who quietly defied an emperor with his use of mockery.

Merton's closest and most intricate web of Asian contact was with the Tibetan Buddhists who had already been exiled for several years in India by the time of his visit there on the way to his monastical conference in Bangkok. The Dalai Lama had settled in his "palace" at Dharamsala, and a growing number of European and American students of Buddhism had made contact with him. Among them was Harold Talbot, a young American Catholic layman of ascetic temperament and some wealth, and I suspect Talbot helped to prepare Merton's way. The result, as it appears in *The Asian Journal*, was a curiously fragmentary view of Tibetan Buddhism.

To begin with, Merton became involved with a Sikkimese named Sonam Kazi, who acted as his guide to the Tibetan Buddhists. Described in *The Asian Journal* as a great teacher, in fact Sonam Kazi was a layman. Sonam Kazi had studied the religion not as a teacher in the Tibetan sense but as a devotee of one sect, the smallest if oldest of all the Tibetan groups, the Nyingmapa (Old Ones) and, except for the Dalai Lama, no teachers other than Nyingmapa appear in the narrative. It was rather like learning about Christianity from the Shakers, for while the Nyingmapa may be the oldest Tibetan sect, it is certainly less important historically than the other Red Hat sects (Kargyupa and Sakyapa), with whom Merton seems to have made no real contact. And—except for the Dalai Lama—he had no meetings with the Yellow Hat Geluppa Order, the Tibetan equivalent of the Church of England. Thus relatively minor teachers such as Chatral Rimpoche (who ran a tiny *gompa* or monastery near Darjeeling) tend to be magnified in the narrative.

While Sonam Kazi urged Merton to follow extreme Nyingmapa meditational techniques, Chatral Rimpoche was suitably self-deprecating (thirty years of effort and no enlightenment). And the Dalai Lama was suitably cautionary, urging Merton to think twice before he adopted rigorous practices other than his own.

It may be worth noting here that while Eastern meditation and contemplation in the Christian sense do overlap as quietistic religious practices, they are at root quite distinct. The main tenet of Mahayana Buddhism (*sunyata*) holds that all things are empty, or devoid of self-nature; the Prajna, the sixth and highest of their fundamental moral virtues of perfection (the Six Paramita), is a kind of insight into the truth of Emptiness. For Merton, however, contemplation is a state of fullness: "the religious contemplation of God . . . is a transcendent and religious gift." And as he stated in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "It is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God Who chooses to awaken us." And so it is very unlikely that Thomas Merton, despite his curiosity and interest, ever meditated in the Buddhist sense.

Throughout their conversations the Dalai Lama shows that wonderful equality of intercourse which all who know him value. He does not set out to be your guru, and will not suggest a guru for you. He may warn of excessive enthusiasm but in no way does he seek to command. One's sufficiency in one's space is what interests him, and so a conversation with him is always truly an exchange rather than a lecture. I am sure it was in this way, as a monk in the tradition of Sakyamuni (as he stresses), that he talked to Thomas Merton, a monk in the tradition of St Benedict and the Desert Fathers.

Merton's death shortly after his encounter with the Tibetan Buddhists removes the ground for suppositions about the effect of these meetings. But I think we can say they must have deepened his devotion to the traditions of what Huxley called "The Perennial Philosophy": his Christian and above all his Trappist values would have been undiminished.

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ON TAOISM