

# Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond: His Intermonastic Exchanges, Interreligious Dialogue, and Their Legacy

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This thesis explores the commonly held opinion that in his encounter with Buddhism Thomas Merton was a pioneer of monastic interreligious dialogue.<sup>1</sup> It argues that his “contemplative dialogue” (his term) with Buddhists and his inter-monastic exchanges with other Buddhists, limited as they may have been and reliant at least in part on a developing knowledge of Asian traditions, nevertheless leaves a legacy that has inspired succeeding generations of monks to continue to develop interreligious dialogue, often beginning with religious experience as a common starting point.

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue notes that monastic interreligious dialogue operates at a deep spiritual 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.”<sup>2</sup> Such a spiritual exchange initially occurred in 1996 when Buddhist and Christian monastics and lay contemplatives gathered at Gethsemani, the abbey where Thomas Merton spent his monastic life, for a dialogue on the spiritual life and “intermonastic communion” (his term). This new vision of dialogue was the model Merton himself had suggested. He was convinced that Christian contemplative monastics who were striving for intermonastic communion could easily become dialogue partners with Buddhist monastics and suggested that dialogue between East and West could benefit from these different perspectives of monastic experience.



The purpose of this thesis is to explore Merton 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 critical of Merton’s understanding of Buddhism; 4) studying his inter-monastic exchanges

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<sup>1</sup> See: Bonnie Thurston, “Thomas Merton: Pioneer of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,” *The Catholic World* 233 (May/June 1989): 126-128; Fabrice Bl e, *The Third Desert: The Story of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, trans. William Skudlarek and Mary Grady (Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 38-42. In the early twentieth-century some Christian monks, such as, Jules Monchanin (1895-1957), Abhishiktananda (1910-1973), and Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) were engaged in dialogue with Hinduism through monasticism. See: Pierre-Fran ois de B ethune, “Monastic Interreligious Dialogue: A History,” in *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Studies in Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality*, eds. Antony O’Mahoney and Peter Bowe (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2006), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> 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 (MA: Pauline Books, 2006), 1170.

with Buddhists at the level of inter-contemplative dialogue; and 5) presenting the ways in which Merton’s pioneering legacy continue in the ongoing Gethsemani Encounters and monastic exchange programs as well as to *intra*-religious dialogue in an Asian monastic context.



This thesis 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 inter-religious dialogue. This dissertation 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 non-dual 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? Why did Merton emphasize experiential dialogue and “inter-monastic communion”? What was the relationship between these different levels of dialogue and Merton’s understanding of Buddhism? 5) What are the developments that followed from his pioneering example, and how can they continue particularly in an Asian monastic context?

After his encounter with Buddhists/Buddhism, Merton’s inner experience and his interreligious dialogue contributed to a dynamic evolution of his religious awareness.<sup>3</sup>

In his “Louisville Epiphany” of 1958, following a heretofore life of monastic enclosure and cloister since his ‘fleeing’ the world, Merton turned with an open heart and mind to the world and to other religions, including Zen.<sup>4</sup> He had come to know Zen from his intense reading, and through personal contacts with experts like Dr. D.T. Suzuki. Dialogue with Buddhists in friendship changed his perspective regarding the nature of



<sup>3</sup> Merton used the term, “the inner experience,” in order 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: HarperCollins, 2003), 6-18. Joseph Raab claims that the 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 life 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 and Self-Transcendence* (Doctoral Dissertation: Toronto School of Theology, 2000), 170.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding his openness to Buddhism, for example, subsequent to his “Louisville Epiphany” of 1958, Merton began using Buddhist terminology in order to explain his new understanding of contemplation in his book *The Inner Experience*, which was largely written in 1959, and his letters to D.T. Suzuki began in March 1959.

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 thesis. His encounters with many other monks and lamas of the Tibetan diaspora on his Asian trip in 1968 reflected the 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."<sup>5</sup> This powerful *satori*-like experience represented a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity, the 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. Although, given that he died shortly after this experience, we can not be certain what directions 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 reclusive Rinpoche.<sup>6</sup> Still, he believed that inter-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, "we are already one" and contemplative dialogue could help to retrieve our original *unity-in-diversity*.<sup>7</sup>

With the recent 100-year celebration of his birth by the International Thomas Merton Society in Louisville in 2015, a celebration I participated in, it is clear to me that his legacy continues to grow and is remains worthy of examination. This is all the more so in that it has inspired, and continues to inspire, many who are dedicated to monastic life and to interreligious dialogue including my own nascent efforts to build such dialogue in South Korea. Today, Eastern and Western monastics have appropriated Merton's insights as they engage in dialogue with each other in various monastic exchange programs, such as those organized by *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* (Hereafter DIM/MID). Thus, I, as an Asian (Korean) Benedictine monk, will show why further development of monastic interreligious dialogue is urgently needed in Asia, and how it could greatly benefit from the patterns and goals that Merton proposed in his reflections



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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (N.Y.: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1973), 235. Hereafter AJ.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 206; AJ, 308.

on dialogue between Buddhist and Christian monastics. This study will provide the prolegomena to my own attempt to foster Buddhist-Christian inter-monastic exchange in Korea taking Merton as an inspiration and model, while seeking to go further.

## **BRIEF OVERVIEW**

### **1. Merton's Own Inner Experience and Interreligious Dialogue**



Following an introduction, a statement on the purpose and structure of the thesis, a description of the dissertation and of the methodologies employed, Chapter 1 will begin with an examination of Merton's biographical data to determine the relationship between his inner experience and the transformation of his consciousness. His contemplative inner experiences led him to a transformation of consciousness and, at the same time, an openness to others. Complementarily, his openness to and dialogue with other religions, especially Buddhism, led him to attain both a deep inner experience in other religious traditions and to arrive at a deepened appreciation of contemplation in Christianity.

In this dynamic progress, Merton experienced the Spirit of God in the Church, among people, and through other religions, and came to believe that final-integration was a state of trans-cultural maturity. In order to express and interpret his inner experience of contemplation, he used various concepts taken from Buddhist spirituality. Merton realized that Buddhists and Christians could achieve mutual enrichment by exchanging their different ways of expressing contemplative experience. His religious experience in Polonnaruwa is a fruitful example for dialogue on cross-cultural religious experience. Thus, this chapter will evaluate the contribution of Merton's writings on inner experience and his self-transformation in his spiritual journey, which was key to his view of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

### **2. Merton's Pioneering Work for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue**

The purpose of chapter 2 is to explore how Merton paved a new way for Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and to determine what were the strengths and limitations he brought to his dialogue with Buddhists. To this end, first, the chapter will explore his encounter with Buddhism/Buddhists in his life. His growing acquaintance with Buddhism moved him from intellectual dialogue to experiential dialogue and then to integrated dialogue on a deep spiritual level. His attitude to Buddhists also changed from 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.<sup>8</sup> Although his knowledge of Buddhism was incomplete, his dialogue with Buddhism developed primarily at the level of contemplative experience and spiritual communion rather than doctrinal discussion.<sup>9</sup> His dialectical and ongoing involvement in Buddhist-Christian dialogue on contemplation showed that his limited knowledge of Buddhism could be transcended by his trans-cultural perspective.

Third, the chapter will explore the paths that led Merton to Buddhist-Christian dialogue. He discovered that the inner self could become a starting point and self-transcendence could become a connecting point since the latter is a common spiritual path in both Buddhist and Christian traditions. He realized that Buddhists focused more on experience and practice, hence 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.

### 3. Merton's Pioneering Work for Intermonastic Exchange

Chapter 3 will demonstrate that through contemplative dialogue and inter-monastic exchanges, Merton created a new paradigm for interreligious dialogue. For this purpose, the chapter will first present Merton's motives for interreligious dialogue with monastics. As a fellow monk, he easily appreciated and identified with certain Buddhist monastic practices. He could see that monasticism was profoundly embedded in Asian religions, and that their various forms of monasticism have a treasured "traditional religious way" that can



cultivate a "contemplative, enlightened, or spiritually transformed [experience]."<sup>10</sup> Merton believed that inter-monastic dialogue could contribute to mutual enrichment while simultaneously mutually challenging each monastic community. It could, in fact, contribute to the renewal of Catholic monasticism.

Second, the chapter will explore how Merton's intermonastic 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 communion of contemplation could foster a trans-cultural consciousness for contemplatives beyond religious and cultural boundaries. Merton believed that spiritual communion between monastics could play a prophetic role for

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<sup>8</sup> Further evidence of his broader knowledge of Buddhism can be found in his knowledge of Buddhist masters, such as the XIV Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Chatral Rinpoche.

<sup>9</sup> Merton notes that "any attempt to handle Zen in theological language [was] bound to miss the point." See: ZBA, 139.

<sup>10</sup> AJ, 310.

universal communion with all contemplatives. But what did he mean by spiritual communion? Does Buddhism have the concept of communion? This chapter will explore this and other themes more explicitly.

#### 4. Merton's Legacy: Beyond Merton's Encounter with Buddhism

Chapter 4 will explore Merton's legacy within the context of current monastic interreligious dialogue in order to determine how his contribution can be expanded and move beyond the models he proposed. First, the chapter will present the history, the value, and prospects for the future of the Gethsemani Encounters. These Encounters, his direct legacy, have been centered on contemplative dialogue in a spirit of openness, spiritual friendship, communion, and concrete collaboration. The Gethsemani Encounters were not limited to communion between monastics, but were open to communion with all contemplatives.



Second, the chapter will explore the Monastic Hospitality program and the Spiritual Exchange program, which were indirectly inspired by Merton. During his Asian journey, he emphasized the significance of *living* and *sharing* the experience of monastic life and appealed to his fellow monastics to devote themselves to serious engagement with the spiritual riches of Asian monasticism. These programs and the Gethsemani Encounters may now be needed to encourage participation and provide opportunities for Eastern Buddhists and Christians to become involved in dialogue.

Finally, it will be suggested that Merton's legacy needs to be developed in an Asian context through an *intra*-monastic exchange program between different Asian monastics. To achieve this, I will attempt to develop Raimon Panikkar's term, "*intra*-religious dialogue," spiritually and geographically, which is an inner dialogue within one's self and an encounter with another religious experience on the intimate level, by looking at the practice and religious experience of Asian Buddhist and Christian monastics. Béthune and Blée argue the development of Panikkar's *intra*-religious dialogue in a monastic context, and I will further develop their ideas as a new term, "*intra*-monastic dialogue."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); Pierre-François de Béthune, "Monastic Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 34-59; Blée, 125-133.



*Intra*-monastic dialogue includes Merton’s contemplative dialogue as well as dialogue between monastics within same culture and region but different religions.

This approach, in fact, was already called for in the 1970s, and in 1980 by the Abbot Primate of the order of St. Benedict who requested that Asian monastics had the primary responsibility for engaging in *intra*-monastic dialogue in their regions. But at that time, Asian monastics were not fully aware

of the need for this dialogue. Now, it is time to engage in an *intra*-monastic exchange between Asian Buddhist and Christian monastics. *Intra*-monastic exchange is not separate from *inter*-monastic dialogue since it can pave the way to interreligious dialogue between different religions in a similar cultural and ethnic group.

In order to show further examples of the current trends of *intra*-monastic dialogue within the same cultural setting, I will explore the history and experience of the Benedictine monastic community of St. Joseph, which has attempted to blend a Christian lifestyle with a Korean Buddhist lifestyle since 1987. Finally, the Buddhist *Temple Stay* program and the Benedictine *Monastery Stay* program in Korea will be included as examples of exchanges between monastics and the laity which develop Merton’s original conception of contemplative dialogue. I will conclude the study with a synoptic general summary.



## CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This dissertation will contribute to three areas of current monastic interreligious dialogue where Merton’s legacy can be developed:

1. **The emergence of interreligious dialogue on contemplative experience as means of exchange, mutual enrichment, and mutual challenge for both traditions of monastic life.** The study of Merton’s interreligious dialogue on religious experience will contribute to a more widespread and deeper dialogue at the level of religious experience and to spiritual maturity as well as to mutual transformation.



2. **A renewal and development of contemplation and monastic life through intermonastic dialogue with Buddhism.** The study of Merton’s inter-contemplative dialogue between Buddhist and Christian monastics will reveal his expectation that intermonastic communion would contribute to monastic renewal and facilitate interreligious dialogue. Such interreligious dialogue is still embryonic because boundaries are still firmly in place between Buddhism and Christianity. Nonetheless inroads continue to be made by those who follow Merton’s way.

3. **Potential contribution to growth of such dialogic practices more broadly in Asian monastic communities.** The practice of monastic interreligious dialogue between Buddhist and Christian monasteries in Asia is still underdeveloped. Merton’s paths of monastic dialogue can inspire and foster dialogue between Asian Buddhist and Christian monastics. His legacy can be



extended to the development of *intra*-monastic exchanges as well as to the inclusion of lay contemplatives in dialogue in an Asian context. I will conclude with a brief summary of my own monastic context as a Benedictine monk in a large and vibrant monastery in South Korea and indicate how we are in a unique situation to initiate such dialogue with various Buddhist centres throughout the country.



# The Monastery Stay Program: Waegwan Abbey

## 1. The Participants of the Monastery Stay Experience



## 2. Experience of Prayer and Meditation





3. Experience of Simple Work



4. Experience of the Monastic Life





5. The Monastery Stay Experience for Family



The Buddhist Temple Stay in Korea

