

Merton and Basho: The Narrow Road Home

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While Thomas Merton consistently used superlatives to register his enthusiasm for authors who provided him great satisfaction, he often retracted his opinion just days or weeks later. In *The Other Side of the Mountain*, for example, he found B.F. Skinner important, but then dismissed him as boring. Lenny Bruce 'almost blows his mind', yet less than a month later, was excessively delusive and self-destructing. Kierkegaard was fascinating, but then deeply disturbing. One notable exception was Matsuo Basho (1644-94), probably the best known of all the Japanese *haiku* poets. While the purity and beauty of Basho's travel writings 'completely shattered' Merton and gave him a whole new view of his own life, the attraction was also perhaps due to the many similarities in their lives.¹

Desire for Solitude

In 1965, Merton moved full time to his hermitage in the woods about a mile from the monastery: 'bright hermitage settled quietly under black pines' (5 Jan). This change of place symbolized a deep inner change: what mattered was silence, meditation and, only secondarily, his writing. He needed the silence and the emptying. He was resentful when those he encouraged to come into his world actually did so and took up

1. In *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967-1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) Merton cites Basho three times: 28 Nov., 2 Dec., and 19 Dec. 1967. He read Basho in the Penguin edition: *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* (trans. from the Japanese with an introduction by Nobuyuki Yuasa; New York: Penguin Classics, 1966). All quotes by Merton in this article, unless otherwise noted, are from his journal entries of 1968 in *Other Side*.

too much time and space. He complained that real solitude was less and less possible: 'too much noise, too many people, unwelcome curiosity seekers' (23 June).

Basho, too, retired to take up Zen meditation in a small hermitage house, far removed from an urban setting on the outskirts of Edo (ancient Tokyo). Captivated by a basho (banana) tree presented to him by his disciples, he took his final pen-name from the tree. This tree outside his door symbolized his very being: the tree did not bear fruit, its trunk had no practical use, it was easily torn by wind and rain, and yet its wide leaves fluttered in the breeze and provided plenty of shade.

In his hermitage Basho wished to evade worldly involvement, hoping to discover and define a perception of himself which linked the beauty and simplicity of the countryside together with his poetry. Yet, because of his reputation as a master poet, he found himself deeply involved in worldly affairs. His large circle of friends and disciples provided financial support, invited him to splendid dinner feasts, and arranged verse-writing parties in his honor. He had to lock his gate to escape the many demands made upon his time. He firmly resolved to live a life with just the ephemeral morning glory for a friend. *Only for morning glories I open my door – During the daytime I keep it tightly barred.*²

Dissatisfaction with Writing

Often during his last year Merton questioned whether to give up his writing, dismissing it as provisional and inconclusive. Whether on politics, monastic problems, communion with God, social justice or interfaith dialogue, frequently he considered it trivial and dissatisfying. All the business of filing and cataloguing every little slip of paper was a comedy. 'Files too full. Shelves too full. Boxes' (20 Aug). Although he wanted to be liberated from what he considered a useless activity, his writing was like an addiction that he could not break.

Basho also felt there were many times when he was ready to drop the pursuit of writing: ever since he began to write poetry he never found peace with himself, always wavering between doubts of one kind or another. His writing was *mere drunken chatter, the incoherent babbling of a dreamer*. Poetry was a worldly temptation that prevented him from reaching an enlightened state of non-attachment. Still, the enchantment of poetry cast a spell so great that poetic sentiments invariably stirred his

2. Following the usual custom in Japanese literary criticism, I do not cite the exact source for Basho's *haikus*, merely placing them in italics. All the *haikus* here are taken from *Narrow Road*.

heart and something flickered in his mind. He thought he could attain total equanimity of mind by means of his poetry, but ironically, it was poetry itself that always unsettled his mind.

Desire to Travel

Merton wrote tantalizingly of his desire to travel – not so much to give seminars, retreats or conferences, but to find a site for a new monastery, to find the real Asia, to experience the great compassion (*mahakaruna*) of Buddhism. As much as the hermitage had meant to him, he needed to get away from Gethsemani – a distancing long overdue. Gripped with a sense of destiny, he was happy that he would finally be on the way after so many years of waiting and wondering. ‘Two daiquiris in the airport bar. Impression of relaxation. Even only in the airport, a sense of recovering something of myself that has been long lost’ (6 May). His travels in the last year of his life took him to New Mexico, California and Alaska, and finally, during the last few months, to holy places in India (Mahabalipuram), Sri Lanka (Polonnaruwa) and Bangkok. ‘If I am to begin a relatively wandering life with no fixed abode, that’s all right’ (29 July).

Merton went to Asia as a pilgrim with a completely open mind, without special illusions. He had visited the East so many times in word, thought and imagination, preparing himself both spiritually and intellectually. He had read commentaries, critical literature and textual interpretations, and now it was time for the ‘great adventure’. Now he could meet real Eastern Masters in their own monasteries and learn from them about their own spiritual traditions. He was buoyed by the possibility of attaining complete enlightenment, not after death, but in this life. On the day he left for the Orient, he was filled with joyful enthusiasm: ‘The slow ballet of big tailfins in the sun. Now here. Now there. A quadrille of planes jockeying for place on the runway. The moment of take-off was ecstatic. The dewy wing was suddenly covered with rivers of cold sweat running backward. The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. Joy. We left the ground’ (15 Oct).

Basho felt possessed by wanderlust and could not stop dreaming of roving. Roadside images invited him from every corner, and it was impossible to stay idle at home. After a massive fire destroyed his hermitage, he decided to expose himself literally to the ravages of the weather. He surrendered everything familiar and left home, hoping to emulate the example of the ancient monks who traveled thousands of miles and to attain absolute delight under the pure sky. Basho spent half of the last decade of his life traveling across Japan teaching and writing, returning to Edo only for short visits. He made short but happy sojourns in the houses of his disciples, leaving behind autographed texts that became

treasured family heirlooms. He celebrated the start of his journeys by scribbling on his hat *Nowhere in this wide universe have we a fixed abode*.³

Although there were times when Basho wanted to have an official post or live in a monastery, he continued his travels, motivated only partially by practical concerns, such as finding students, composing poetry with others or visiting acquaintances. He relished mainly the opportunity to wander where poets and sacred pilgrims of the past had walked and to visit famous places hallowed by natural beauty. He traveled most of all to renew his own spirit and to show his poetic mastery over the landscape. By deliberately planning his pilgrimages to remote areas, he renounced worldly concerns and absorbed the shocks and intrusions of life's uncertainties. *A traveler by that name will I be called, amidst first showers.*

The Self and Zen Buddhism

Both Merton and Basho pinpointed the human dilemma in our selfish cravings, our desire for pleasure and thirst for success and control. In our human frailty, we feel a compulsive need to be validated by the external trappings of money, power and leisure, thus alienating ourselves from our fellow humans, from nature and from who we really are. Though pleasure, success and control are impermanent and cannot provide us with lasting serenity and contentment, we continue to strive and crave for material things to prove our existence and guarantee happiness in life. How can we overcome this dilemma of our human frailty and selfish ego and thus live authentically? At this point, they took different approaches to the self (for Merton, the True Self; for Basho, the Real Self).

Merton looked to the contemplative life as the way to develop a new consciousness and awareness of the True Self. Through contemplation, he advised, we could realize our human interdependence and harmonious relationship with all that is in the world, thus overcoming the poisons of craving, hatred and ignorance of the illusory ego-self. His meditative experiences led him to envision the True Self as one who abandoned attachment to a particular ego for the service of others. Through opening our selves to a loving relationship with others, which comes as a gift of God's grace, we humans can experience the spark of divinity in others.

Through his contemplative meditation Merton saw Christ's self-emptying in the event of the Incarnation as the perfect experience of absolute

3. Cf. the classic opening lines of *Narrow Road*: *'Days and months are travellers of eternity. So are the years that pass by. Those who steer a boat across the sea, or drive a horse over the earth till they succumb to the weight of years, spend every minute of their lives travelling. There are a great number of ancients, too, who died on the road. I myself have been tempted for a long time by the cloud-moving wind – filled with a strong desire to wander'*.

love and compassion, of ready willingness to be moved by love of 'the other', rather than one's own desires. Indeed, if Christians were to take the doctrine of the Incarnation seriously, they would find Christ living in them in such a way that the self is somehow 'no longer I'. They would find the divine presence in all persons, regardless of their race, culture or geographical location.

Through his familiarity with Zen Buddhism during the last decade of his life, Merton gradually expanded this notion of the True Self.⁴ In correspondence with D.T. Suzuki he reflected on the Zen experience of emptiness (*sunyata*) and the search for direct perception of reality. He had a deep spiritual kinship with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and social justice activist, who taught the practice of mindfulness as the path to greater compassion and inner peace. Merton felt a special bond with the Tibetan Dalai Lama who helped him to a deeper ground of consciousness.⁵

Merton found in Zen Buddhism an approach to reality undiluted by philosophical systems or formulas of belief, an experiential approach which transformed his life. He came to the realization that nothing exists by itself alone. All things 'inter-are', arising in mutual interdependence. He located the essence of Zen Buddhism in the capacity to see life freshly, to look intuitively into the nature of things. This is *satori*, a direct experience of reality, a recognition of the ordinary because in fact, nothing is ordinary. *Satori* is the enlightened state where the True Self acts spontaneously without thinking, reasoning or planning. The self is both awake and aware, fully accepting and savoring the present moment. The self is merely a locus in which the dance of the universe is complete from beginning to end.⁶

4. For Merton's writings in the spirit of Zen, see *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965); *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967); and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

5. See Roger Corless, 'In Search of a Context for the Merton-Suzuki Dialogue', *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993), pp. 76-91, for a discussion of Suzuki's ambiguity as a leading Zen figure. See also Robert King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2001). Merton described his visits with the Dalai Lama (4, 6, 8 Nov) though he had already admitted that Tibetan Buddhism, with its ferocity, ritualism, superstition and magic did not exactly interest him (23 July).

6. Merton's attraction to Zen Buddhism has been extensively explored, especially in relation to the question of the True Self. For a fine bibliography of writings about Merton and his relationship with Buddhism, see Roger Corless, 'The Christian Exploration of Non-Christian Religions: Merton's Example and Where It Might Lead Us', *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000), pp. 105-122.

Before he returned to Basho's *Narrow Road*, Merton realized that in Zen Buddhism the True Self was the empty self, the self that is perfectly open in compassion to what is there, even something as simple as opening and closing a door. Going back to Basho he detected multiple examples of this emptiness and openness as the way out of the human dilemma.⁷

Basho found the Real Self, the everlasting self, not in meditation, but in writing his poetry. This self attains a freedom, detachment and wisdom that encompass all of nature, all living beings. The way beyond our human frailty is through identification with nature, out of great compassion (*mahakaruna*). The Real Self celebrates the beautiful in daily experience, just as rain quietly soaks the roots of trees. Intensely alive to the preciousness of everything that shares our world, the Real Self lets the present moment quietly penetrate inner sensibility. *Learn about pines from pines, and about bamboos from bamboos*. As the Real Self becomes one with the object, the sense of separate selfhood disappears in the immediacy of the direct experience of the delicate life and feelings of nature.

The Real Self identifies with the 'greater life' of the universe and is sensitive to the vibrating moments and profound suggestiveness of nature. Whether looking at mountains or flowers, listening to thunder or songs of birds, walking on smooth roads or in the mud, enjoying the falling blossoms or scattering leaves, the Real Self takes the universe as companion. All sense of separate selfhood disappears. *Real poetry is to lead a beautiful life. To live poetry is better than to write it*. Indeed, the Real Self is the poet, the one who recognizes ever-changing reality and is not attached to any particular aspect of it.⁸

Narrow Road

Basho is best known for his travel journals. The last and greatest of these, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North (Oku no hosomichi)*, is an artful and

7. Cf. Merton's early homage to Basho where he already indicated many of the themes that he would find so germane to his new vision of the True Self: 'When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts or when, like the Japanese poet Basho we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash — at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the 'newness', the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance' (*New Seeds of Contemplation* [New York: New Directions, 1961], pp. 296-97).

8. See *Narrow Road*, p. 28, the Real Self is not the soul, but poetry: *Everything we do has a bearing upon the everlasting self which is poetry*.

carefully sculpted diary, rich in literary and Zen allusions. Basho recorded the poignant feelings and perceptions that he encountered on his journeys of self-discovery to the wild northern provinces of Japan.⁹

The Japanese title *Oku no hosomichi* is very significant. Literally, it is the slender, delicate path far within. It alludes to Basho's 'narrow mind' which focuses on and penetrates to the depths of reality, beyond personal emotions and aesthetic sentiments. He points his finger at the mystery of life while avoiding any attempt to analyze it. While his journey takes him to an unsettled area in the north, the book primarily records his deep and difficult spiritual journey within. Basho's life and poetry are a spiritual journey – a journey charged with obstacles, but a journey that is its own reward in spiritual fulfillment.¹⁰

Basho gives us glimpses of those sharp moments of deep intuitive insight out of which poetry is born spontaneously. He shares moments of tranquil-mind-in-nature – moments of 'no mind', where not even a razor's edge splits his mind from what he writes. The temporal and visible, the eternal and concealed: all are real. With a mind so slender that it enters anything with plenty of room to spare, he discovers a vision of eternity in fleeting things, at once a celebration of the world and a whisper of his own mortality. When he observes a commonplace event and describes it with spareness, he makes us aware of a simple distilled moment, snatched from time's flow. *The secret of poetry lies in treading the middle path between the reality and the vacuity of the world.*

Basho's *Narrow Road* journeys into the interior of the self, where the landscape is both rugged and smooth. With firm resolve, he enters the Buddhist's path, searching for new perspectives on nature, the seasons and the carriers of poetic and cultural memory. He critically distances himself from the world of everyday life in order to purify himself from the attachments that tie him to this impermanent world. His destination is not as important as the journey itself to discover the sacred in the world of nature, whether visiting religious shrines or tradition-laden

9. In addition to recounting the journey on *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1689) which lasted over five months and covered more than 1500 miles, the slim volume actually records four other journeys. These include *The Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton* (1685), *A Visit to the Kashima Shrine* (1687), *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel* (1688) and *A Visit to Sarashina Village* (1689). Literary re-creations of his actual journeys, with some details deliberately altered and incidents invented, they were published only posthumously in 1702. Over the centuries they have inspired countless travelers to follow in his footsteps.

10. Cf. Merton: 'Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts' (*The Road to Joy* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989], p. 118).

mountains, whether moon-watching or cherry-blossom watching. He elicits joyful tears as the world of everyday life and the world of the spirit constantly hint at and reinforce each other. *The thought of the three thousand miles before me suddenly filled my heart, and neither the houses of the town nor the faces of my friends could be seen by my tearful eyes except as a vision.*

Travel in Basho's day was very precarious and uncomfortable: jagged topography, howling winds, pouring rain, leaking roofs – and especially the lice. *Shed of everything else, I still have some lice I picked up on the road – Crawling on my summer robes.* Though the miles his *Narrow Road* covered were very arduous, he always lived with the thought that everything should be welcomed. Sun or rain, kindness or animosity, food or famine, smiles or frowns, vitality or sickness, loneliness or fellowship, sadness or extreme pleasure – all were greeted equally. Cold winter rains, pine forests, and islands all shared their secrets with him. Flowers and birds, rocks and waterfalls transformed his self-conscious mind into a meditative mind that accepted and celebrated things just as they are.¹¹

He infused his writings with deep sensibility, sharp perceptions and startling revelations. In silence, awe and self-forgetfulness he pointed to the very heart of nature in order to get us to stop looking, and to begin seeing. *Few in this world Notice those blossoms: Chestnut by the eaves.*

The Haiku

The *haiku* is the most recognizable of Japan's classical literary forms, enjoying a place of honor with other cultural settings such as the tea ceremony, flower arrangements, calligraphy and various forms of theater. It is a poem, in a three-line stanza with a 5-7-5 syllable pattern, which evokes the mystery of nature or the human condition, usually with a reference to the seasons. Altogether Basho wrote more than 1000 *haikus*, with his brilliance often breaking away from the straightforward conventional requirements to give new freedom and energy to the form.¹²

11. Modern variations in translations of *Narrow Road* reveal the many ways in which great art may intensify and illuminate our engagements with the real. Among the many impressive recent interpretations are Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu, *Back Roads to Far Towns* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1986); Robert Hass, *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1994); and Donald Keene, *The Narrow Road to Oku* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1996).

12. In Japan during Basho's time the *haiku* was just one aspect of a technique of writing known as *haikai*, where several poets linked verses together in a sportive and playful, fresh and uninhibited manner. The verses carried cultural associations largely embodied in nature, historical objects, geographic places and the landscape. In

In *Narrow Road* Basho mastered the art of writing *haibun*, that literary technique which combines a descriptive sketch with a *haiku*, so that they completely illuminate each other – like two mirrors facing each other. On seeing a waterfall, for example, he ingeniously explained the relationship between the incessant sound of the rapids and the falling petals of yellow mountain roses: ‘The stream leaps with tremendous force over outthrust rocks at the top and descends a hundred feet into a dark green pool strewn with a thousand rocks. In the foreground he saw something lovely and delicate; behind it, he heard the powerful, violent force of nature. *One after another In silent succession fall The flowers of yellow rose – The roar of tumbling water*’,¹³

The language of Basho’s *haikus* is quite mundane and its imagery tends to be modest: *Avoid adjectives of scale – you will love the world more and desire it less*. Nothing is gratuitous or unassimilated: everything counts. There is no intellectual interpretation nor emotional artifice. He does not so much compose *haikus* as become them – dusty roads, bird songs, cool breezes, even a frog jumping into a pond. His *haikus* capture those moments of openness in which the inner reality and unobtrusive beauty of primitive nature assert themselves. With a sense of discovery and wonderment, Basho makes nature’s secrets transparent, thus returning us to the reality that we neglect most of the time.

Contented Solitariness

Buried deeply in Basho’s writings are subjective elements which have their roots in the Buddhist view of the transience of human existence. Three of these – ‘contented solitariness’, ‘non-attachment’ and ‘lightness’ – find their way into Merton’s *Other Side*.¹⁴

America since the 1960s *haikus* have thrived as a literary genre, and currently there are more than 50 English-language *haiku* magazines in print and online. See William J. Higginson, ‘Less is More: *Haiku* is Flourishing in the Internet Age’, *The Writer* 114.9 (September 2001), pp. 20-23. Scholars such as Nobuyuki Yuasa and Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) argue for terse style in their translations. They are opposed to any rigidity of form, such as the use of flush-left alignment, slashes, punctuation marks and number of lines and syllables. Here, I try to keep the rhythm flowing and the sense more intelligible by placing Basho’s *haikus* in italics and indicating the line breaks with capitalization.

13. Compare how Merton described a waterfall: ‘Driving rain, and a long spectacular thin waterfall down the side of the mountain becomes, in a concrete channel outside the house, the fastest torrent I have ever seen. It must be running fifty miles an hour into the choppy bay’ (27 Sept).

14. Many Japanese literary critics have provided commentaries on these aesthetic devices. See, e.g., Sam Hamill, *The Essential Basho* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999); Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Basho* (Stanford,

'Contented solitariness' or 'quiet loneliness' is the usual translation of the Japanese poetic principle, *sabi*. *Sabi* alludes to the natural poignancy and beauty of temporal things: cherry blossoms fading, leaves falling, the harsh sounds of hail spattering on Basho's traveling hat. *On a bare branch A crow has settled down to roost In autumn dusk*. Basho crystallizes this tranquil acceptance of our human transience in the powerful image of a crow opting for a bare tree. Even a bird that soars in the boundless sky singing of the beauty of nature has to rest somewhere, no matter how briefly. This lonely bird evokes a great Beyond. All things come out of an unknown abyss of mystery, and through every one of them we can glimpse into that abyss. We remain silent. We grow pensive over our human destiny: we are no more enduring than the rest of nature. Crows, frogs, cicadas, even the seasons – all are transient, ending in death. Life is but the disappearing dream of a moment. The indifference of the universe prevails. We are lonely. *Spring departs – Birds cry; fishes' eyes Fill with tears*.

Like a frog, Basho's *haikus* plop into the timeless, endless pond of our minds, expanding over the surface in an ever-widening series of ripples to encompass the entire cosmos. *The old pond; A frog jumps in – Plop*.¹⁵ Basho brings together the finite and the infinite in one profound experience: the pond has been there for centuries, yet the tiny splash disappears in a moment. The sound stirred up by the jumping frog grabs us with its immediacy and works on our sensibility. An insignificant change in nature suggests a weighty loneliness – the sound of water deepens the sense of surrounding quiet. Like Hakuin's sound of one hand clapping, the sound of the water is there and it is not there. Basho captures a

CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Ueda Makoto, *Basho and his Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Lucien Stryk, *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho* (New York: Viking Press, 1985); Robert Aitken, *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978). Also note the studies by Ihab Hassan, 'In the Mirror of the Sun: Reflections on Japanese and American Literature, Basho to Cage', *World Literature Today* 69.2 (Spring 1995), pp. 304-311; Richard B. Pilgrim, 'The Religious-Aesthetic of Matsuo Basho', *The Eastern Buddhist* 10 (1977), pp. 35-53; and James H. Foard, 'The Loneliness of Matsuo Basho', in Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (eds), *The Biographical Process* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), pp. 363-91.

15. There are more than 100 translations of Basho's most famous *haiku*. Here are just a few:

The old pond; the frog. Plop!

The old pond – A frog leaps in, And a splash.

The old pond, ah! A frog jumps in: The water's sound!

The old pond; A frog jumps in – The sound of the water;

Breaking the silence Of an ancient pond, A frog jumped into water – A deep resonance.

moment in which eternity manifests itself and, the next moment, there is stillness again. All is ambiguity, and there is no explanation.

Basho often expresses *sabi* in the lonely atmosphere of a cicada's raucous cry. *In the utter silence Of a temple, A cicada's voice alone Penetrates the rocks.* The fragile life of the little creature is fulfilled within the immense arena of the cosmos. The cicada sings out its life with hardly a hint of its imminent death. Its vigorous cry is loud and noisy, and its sound deepens the stillness by passing deep into our hearts. No other sound is heard. Listening to the cicada's cries, our minds attain tranquillity and our human desires disappear. We feel a loneliness as we encounter nature at its fullest and realize its quiet rhythm. Perceiving that all living things are evanescent is depressing; still, we are struck with a sublime feeling when we see a tiny creature enduring that sadness and fulfilling its destiny.

Basho shows how deeply he understands himself and his mortality in his *haikus* on the melancholy transience of the seasons, especially autumn, and at the New Year. *I could not help feeling vague misgivings about the future of my journey, as I watched the fallen leaves of autumn being carried away by the wind.* Autumn is as much the autumn of life as it is a season, and the journey is symbolic as much as geographic.¹⁶ Today becomes tomorrow in swirling petals, fading flowers and falling leaves. Today is about to waste away, and we remain silent because no words are adequate to explain the 'emptiness' or 'suchness' of things. *Buddha's death day – Old hands Clicking rosaries.* Unwilling to part with the passing year, Basho drinks till late on the last night of the year. Waking only in the afternoon on New Year's Day, he is too late to join in the early morning festivities: *On the Second Day I'll be more careful – Flowering spring.*¹⁷

16. The Zen Buddhist would naturally claim that every *haiku* is the best *haiku*, but here are just a few which evoke the existential loneliness of autumn:

This road! With no one going – Autumn evening.

This autumn Why am I aging so? To the clouds, a bird.

This autumn eve, Please turn to me – I, too, am a stranger.

First day of spring – I keep thinking about The end of autumn.

Hot radish Pierced my tongue, While the autumn wind Pierced my heart.

Still alive I am At the end of a long dream On my journey, Fall of an autumn day.

17. Merton echoed Basho's melancholy at the New Year: 'Only New Year's Day was bright. Very cold. Everything hard and sparkling, trees heavy with snow. I went for a walk up the side of Vineyard Knob, on the road to the fire tower, in secret hope of 'raising the sparks' (as the Hassidim say) and they rose a little. It was quiet, but too bright, as if this celebration belonged not to the new year or to any year. More germane to this new year is darkness, wetness, ice and cold, the scent of illness. But maybe that is good. Who can tell?' (3 Jan). This was for the New Year 1968, a year that

We should not confuse Basho's awareness of the transience of life with a premonition of death. True, he sold his house prior to his departure on the Narrow Road. Perhaps he did not expect to return from his journey, but more importantly, he was prepared to perish alone and leave his corpse to the mercies of the wilderness if that was his destiny. *Determined to fall A weather-exposed skeleton I cannot help the sore wind Blowing through my heart*. Even at the beginning of his journey, he imagined the coming hardships and he was ready to die. He could not prevent the brisk autumn wind from penetrating and chilling his mind. Basho traveled the Narrow Road seeking a vision of eternity in the things that are, by their own very nature, destined to perish. He was keenly aware that human life is ephemeral: *A thicket of summer grass Is all that remains Of the dreams and ambitions Of ancient warriors*.

When Basho was shown some strands of the white hair of his mother who had died a few months previously, the loneliness of old age quietly wrapped his world with its shadow. He plunged his personal sorrow into a more universal melancholy by imagining that the cluster of hair was frost, part of ever-changing nature. *Should I hold it in my hand It would melt in my burning tears – Autumnal frost*.¹⁸ Again he made us sublimely conscious that nature and humanity are one. No one can avoid the anguish of death. Even in his last *haiku*, written as death neared, Basho expressed the lonely, helpless feeling of someone who had fallen asleep during a journey. He wanted to travel, but his body was restricted by illness; only his dreams were free to fly to the sky. *Ill on a journey My dreams over withered fields Meander*.¹⁹

he felt was going to be hard all the way and for everybody (21 Jan), the year that he felt would be a beast of a year, when things would finally and inexorably spell themselves out (6 April).

18. Compare Merton's pathos when he heard about his Aunt Kit's drowning in a ferry-boat accident in New Zealand: 'What can be said about such things? Nothing will do. Absurdity won't. An awful sense that somehow it had to be this way because it was, and no one can say why, really. And yet 'what did she ever do to deserve it?' Such a question does not make sense, and the God I believe in is not one who can be 'blamed', for it is he who suffers this incomprehensibility in me more than I do myself (25 April).

19. Merton, too, was keenly aware of human mortality and transience. 'Bleak leap-year extra day. Black, with a few snowflakes, like yesterday (Ash Wednesday) when no snow stayed on the ground but there was sleet and the rain-buckets nearly filled. All the grass is white with, not snow, death' (29 Feb). He did not expect anything to go wrong on his journey to the East, but he acknowledged that he might not come back (29 July). Death was present to him: he understood that he would simply not continue to exist as a self. The fullness of life he aimed for came from honestly and authentically facing death and accepting it without care. He recalled the words of

While we can in no way escape human transience, we can overcome loneliness by following the way of nature. Basho evokes *sabi* so that we can experience what he realized: we should never attempt to be other than ourselves. If we wish to maintain equilibrium, we have to dissolve the ego – that root of all agonizing longings – by immersing the self in the impersonal life of nature, in the every day world of the vast, powerful, magnificent universe. *Journey's end – Still alive, this Autumn evening.*

Non-Attachment

Basho taught that those who take delight in the beauty and simplicity of all worldly things while recognizing their frailty and impermanence are living with a spirit of non-attachment, or *wabi*. This moral principle expresses the longing in the depths of the human heart to go as far back to nature as human existence will permit and to be at one with it.²⁰ *Wabi* means enjoying a leisurely life free from worldly concerns such as wealth, power, or reputation. It means living quietly in a modest hut, for example, but providing a tea ceremony when friends come and arranging a fresh bouquet of flowers to enhance their serene afternoon. *Wabi* is the inexpressible quiet joy of a monk sipping his tea and savoring flowers. *For his morning tea A priest sits down In utter silence – Confronted by chrysanthemums.*

D.T. Suzuki describes *wabi* as 'transcendental aloofness in the midst of multiplicities'.²¹ Those who practice *wabi* appreciate primitive simplicity and seek beauty in plain, simple, artless language. Recognizing the impossibility of escaping the transience of life in the world, they stand apart, taking a calm, carefree attitude to daily life. Indifferent to worldly

Meister Eckhart: 'Blessed are the poor in heart who leave everything to God now as they did before they ever existed' (30 June 1966).

20. Merton recognized the importance of this spirit of non-attachment and desire for oneness with nature and cited Basho at length: 'All who have achieved real excellence in any art, possess one thing in common, that is, a mind to obey nature, to be one with nature, throughout the four seasons of the year. Whatever such a mind sees is a flower, and whatever such a mind dreams of is the moon. It is only a barbarous mind that sees other than the flower, merely an animal mind that dreams of other than the moon. The first lesson for the artist is, therefore, to learn how to overcome such barbarism and animality, to follow nature, to be one with nature' (19 Dec. 1967). Note that in quoting Basho (from the Penguin edition of the *Narrow Road*, pp. 71-72), Merton is not exact.

21. Suzuki claims that 'In some ways, *wabi* is *sabi* and *sabi* is *wabi*; they are interchangeable terms' (*Zen and Japanese Culture*, p. 285). *Sabi* refers more to individual objects and the environment, whereas *wabi* is more subjective and points to living a life ordinarily associated with poverty and imperfection.

involvements, they feel at home in the world and radically affirm it with peace of mind. They are deeply aware of things modest and old, and they appreciate the simple and the ordinary. Satisfied with a little hut, a room or two, a dish of vegetables picked in the neighboring fields, perhaps listening to a gentle spring rainfall, they never entirely fail to interject a simple Ah! *Ah, it is spring, Great spring it is now, Great, great spring – Ah, great.*

Basho expresses non-attachment in many different *haikus*, for example, when he views pine trees, snow, flowers and, especially, the moon. He finds a sense of emancipating emptiness under the full moon on a clear night: we are free even of ourselves. Solitary and heavenly, the moon is a perfect object for contemplation, and there is no pleasure greater than enjoying the light of the full moon. There is something pure and authentic about sitting for a long time in utter silence, watching the moonlight trying to penetrate through the rifts made in the hanging clouds. In the emptiness of the new moon we can observe it keenly and listen to our still minds in the dark. *As I bent my ears to the noise of wooden clappers and the voices of the villagers chasing wild deer away, I felt in my heart that the loneliness of autumn was now consummated in the scene. I said to my companions, 'let us drink under the bright beams of the moon'.*

The pine tree, fresh and ever green amid winter's harshest storms, is true and beautiful because, like everything in nature, it has its own fulfillment. It leads its own life, and invariably pursues its own destiny. A pine tree does not have a selfish ego; it is a classical symbol of the vast silence, the 'suchness' of Zen. Basho, contemplating the beauty of pine trees on an island, marveled at their fascinating shapes. They are more beautiful and captivating than words can describe. *Pine islands, ah! Oh, Pine Islands, ah! Pine Islands, ah!* With a sense of awe and respect, Basho asks who else could have created such beauty but the great god of nature. His pen strives in vain to equal the superb creation of divine artifice. He declares that if anyone should dare to write more poems on the beauty of pine trees it would be like trying to add a sixth finger to the hand. *As I stood there, lending my ears to the roar of pine trees upon distant mountains, I felt moved deep in the bottom of my heart.*

Basho, stumbling into a country inn at nightfall, totally exhausted after long hours of traveling, is never too tired to admire a wisteria vine, drooping its delicate lavender blossoms over the veranda. He wants us to share his experience, to live it. He beckons us to travel over lonely, fatiguing mountain roads and to suddenly discover smiling violets along the roadside. Regard the flowers with awe, he tells us—regard their stems, their fresh green leaves, just as they are, bright in the sun. The flowers whisper the secret of the traveler's heart: modesty, gentleness

and simplicity are the truly beautiful things. *How I long to see Among dawn flowers, The face of God.*

Lightness

A third characteristic that Basho advocates late in his life and poetry – *karumi* – stresses simplicity and leanness. His poetry is not heavy – that is, conceptual – as he deliberately avoids abstraction, allegory or symbolism. *Eat vegetable soup rather than duck stew.* He focuses on everyday life of common people – harvesting radishes, planting bamboo, eating and drinking, having parties to view cherry blossoms. Expressing the familiar in simple, sometimes humorous, language, he leaves little to the imagination – and beauty emerges. With the playful spirit of a child, he sees the world with new eyes and a relaxed expression. *Beneath the trees In the soup salad, everywhere Cherry blossoms.*

Nodding with a puckered smile, Basho takes the cosmos on its own terms. Mixing humor with the loneliness of growing older, he expresses his heartfelt sentiments for the sake of poetic rapture. He awaits snowfall with eager expectation, for example, and would gladly go out for snow-viewing until he tumbles. *Come, let's go Snow-viewing Till we're buried.*

Equipped with the playful spirit of Zen Buddhism, he was open to chance encounters. With nowhere permanent to stay and no interest in keeping treasures, he traveled very lightly with few possessions – a raincoat, writing supplies, medicine, departure gifts, and a lunch basket. He accepted all things as they came, even smiling away an encounter with a robber. He remained in the mundane world with flexibility of mind, feeling neither anger nor sorrow, exuding instead the crackle of light-hearted humor. *There was a night, too, When a robber visited my home – The year end.*

Early in his travels Basho did not feel the need to share his experiences with others or to express compassion. For example, seeing a small abandoned child crying pitifully on the river bank, he felt the child could not ride through the stormy waters of life and was destined to have a life even shorter than that of the morning dew. Though he gave the fragile child what little food he had with him, he felt that this child's undeserved suffering had been caused by the irresistible will of heaven. Feeling powerless, he moved along, leaving the child behind, crying to heaven. He could only recall the heart-rending shriek of a monkey: nothing is more plaintive or pathetic. *The ancient poet Who pitied monkeys for their cries What would he say, if he saw This child crying in the autumn wind?*²²

22. Note how Merton similarly dramatized his despair and awful emptiness in an encounter with a young child in Calcutta. "The little girl who suddenly appeared at

It was only later in Basho's travels that the lightheartedness of *karumi*, with its undercurrent of compassion, came out in his poetry. Only later did his sense of the Real Self expand to include his relationship to other persons. He began to note the unexpected refinement of village urchins and farm-wives, and he began to praise the inherent honesty of inn-keepers and rural guides. He urged his young poetry students to be childlike, to rush out and make merry during a hailstorm. *For those who proclaim they've grown weary of children, there are no flowers.*

On one occasion when Basho's servant dozed off while riding precariously atop a horse and almost fell headlong over a precipice, Basho was at first terrified. On reflection, though, he perceived that we are all like the servant, wading through the ever-changing reefs of this world in stormy weather, totally blind to the hidden dangers. Surely the Buddha would feel the same misgivings about our human fortune: *It was as if the merciful Buddha himself had taken the shape of man to help me on my wandering pilgrimage.*

Basho thus only gradually came to realize the heart of compassion, the essence of the *bodhisattva*, the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism. The *bodhisattva* forsakes entering Nirvana out of compassion for other persons and returns to the realm of the ordinary people to help bring them to enlightenment. The *bodhisattva* resides amid humans with 'bliss bestowing hands'. The Real Self is not only one with the world of nature, but also with other persons: when sad, the universe is sad; when glad, the whole universe is glad. Basho thus turns his energy outward. *One needs to work to achieve enlightenment and then return to the common world.*

One anecdote that well illustrates the lightness, humor and compassion of *karumi* is Basho's encounter with two courtesans. One night he had to listen to the whispers of two prostitutes in the next hotel room until fatigue lulled him to sleep. The next day, these complete strangers approached him to ask if they could walk with him: 'If you are a priest as your black robe tells us, have mercy on us and help us to learn the great love of our Saviour'. After a moment's thought he replied that it was not possible, but that if they trusted in the saviour they would never lack divine protection. Just as the moon and flowers keep distance from each other, yet share their destiny, so too Basho and the women. *Under the same roof We all slept together, Concubines and I – Bush-clovers and the moon.*²³

the window of my taxi, the utterly lovely smile with which she stretched out her hand, and then the extinguishing of the light when she drew it back empty. I had no Indian money yet. She fell away from the taxi as if she were sinking in water and drowning, and I wanted to die. I couldn't get her out of my mind. Yet when you give money to one, a dozen half kill themselves running after your cab' (17 Oct).

23. Cf. Merton's story about the attractive college girl who starts a conversation

Other Side

Scholars often contend that *Other Side* has a fragmentary quality that Merton intended to revise after he put time and distance between himself and his Asian experience. Merton, they suggest, did not have the luxury to carefully refine his travel notes because of his untimely death; the jottings are not reflective and the intimate glimpses not polished. Actually Merton himself did not say that he had to rewrite his notes. He intimated only that he still had to reassess his whole Indian experience in more critical terms; for his journal notes, he wanted to leave everything and permit everything (30 May; 17 Nov).²⁴

In fact, *Other Side* is not always haphazard and in need of editing. Merton is a poetic visionary providing us with roughly hewn gems, crisp and sharp. He shares his 'whole new view of his own life' (28 Nov) with us in an imaginative and ingenious manner. In his refreshing juxtaposition of images he very much writes *haibun* – prose written in the spirit of *haiku* – after the fashion of Basho. Basho, despite continually revising his original scribblings right up till publication, claimed that writing *haikus* had to be spontaneous and impressionistic. *Composition must occur in an instant, like a woodcutter felling a huge tree, or a swordsman leaping at his enemy.* What Merton provides us in *Other Side* is his mature spiritual vision, made with minimal finesse. Freshly stimulated as he traveled, he often exhibited Basho's *haiku* themes of contented solitariness, non-attachment and lightness in his journal.²⁵

with him on a plane. He buys her a couple of drinks to make the smalltalk easier. He concludes in a humorous vein: 'A priest on a plane seems to be fair game for anyone' (26 Aug). Merton also retells a story about a Sufi at a reception where a courtesan had hastily been concealed behind a curtain so as not to give scandal when visitors arrived. She finally becomes tired, comes out and recites a pretty verse to the effect, 'I am what I appear to be. I hope you are the same' (30 Oct).

24. For a small representative sampling of commentaries on Merton's experiences in Asia, see Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998); William H. Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, his Life and Work. An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1997); Ron Seitz, *A Song for Nobody* (Liguori, MO: New Triumph Books, 1993); Alexander Lipski, *Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983); Anthony Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton – Symbol of a Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1982).

25. For some years Merton had celebrated his natural surroundings – the sweet-smelling air full of brilliant light, the monastery woods, the distant blue hills rising above the rolling Kentucky countryside. His terse observations of life around his hermitage – the shape of rocks and trees, train whistles, dogs barking, constellations

Contented Solitariness

For Merton the world is transitory and nothing has any value whatever, until it is connected to the totality of being and embraced by divine grace. He echoes the futility and solitariness of Basho's crow settling on a bare limb on an autumn evening: 'Chickens in the evening roosting in a line on a branch over the drinking fountain. No use' (30 May). A pervading sense of isolation emerges through his imagery of nature, especially the weather. 'Damp, leaden darkness. Falling snow (small wet flakes). Accidents' (6 Jan). There is a quiet beauty in solitariness, a depth of awareness beyond subject-object consciousness. 'Frost shines on the ground in the light of the setting moon. Very cold, very silent, when I was out during meditation — only a distant train — to have only one far noise is now equivalent to silence' (12 Feb).

Snow covers and subdues the muted colors of nature. 'The year struggles with its own blackness. Dark, wet mush of snow under frozen rain for two days' (3 Jan). In the evening, under a new moon, the hard snow crackles and squeals under his rubber boots. 'Snowflakes meet on the pages of the Breviary. Empty belly' (29 Feb). The hidden power of the universe that manifests itself in the human world with no concern for the welfare of its inhabitants makes him feel insignificant, lonely — the very crux of *sabi*. The intense icy loneliness of a cold night chills every part of his body. The sound of the frigid silent world penetrates his heart: 'I lay awake and listened to the hard ice cracking and hardening some more in the rain-barrel outside' (22 Feb).²⁶

Non-Attachment

Yet Merton celebrates the high in the low, the spiritual in the mundane. Watching a butterfly soaring above the fields in the sunlight, he is filled with wonder. He attests that a butterfly, fluttering on a white flower,

of stars — read like enigmatic and ironic *haiku* poetry. 'Extraordinary purple in the north over the pines. Ruins of gnats on the table under the lamp' (14 Oct. 1966). He especially enjoyed writing his two long poems *Cables to the Ace* (1967) and *The Geography of Lograire* (published posthumously, 1969) because they got him away from self-consciousness and introversion. Of all the works in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, published posthumously in 1977) these two best reveal his 'new way of seeing' that the True Self necessarily embraces and shows compassion for the natural world as well as other persons.

26. Note the similarity with Basho's *haikus*: *Tonight, the wind blowing Through the Basho tree, I hear the leaking rain Drop against a basin.* And again: *The sound of a water jar Cracking on this icy night As I lie awake.*

proves the real value of elements seemingly useless in nature. He finds serenity as a butterfly appears in the bright sunlight, zigzags across the view, hovers and settles briefly, and then vanishes. There is a sense of self-detachment reminiscent of Chuang Tzu's dream: was he only dreaming that he was a butterfly, or was he really a butterfly, dreaming that he was human? 'The dream changes. Two white butterflies alight on separate flowers. They rise, play together briefly, accidentally in the air, then depart in different directions' (5 Nov).²⁷

Like the butterflies, birds are tokens of love, providing Merton that touch of surprise and childlike joy which are characteristic of *wabi*. He exclaims his wonder as a towhee makes a discreet, questioning chirp in the rose hedge or a mockingbird patrols the hedge to keep other birds from nesting there. He delights as crows wheel in the sky, their dance mingling with the movements of their own shadows on the bare hillside. He is enchanted as a white crane stands in sunny water and briefly shakes herself while another flies low over a green paddy and alights. He is amused by golden crowned kinglets playing and feeding on the saplings, flipping and hanging upside down, almost somersaulting in the air. 'A flight of excited starlings passes in front of the moon' (23 Mar). Simple joys in our transitory complicated world.²⁸

Lighthearted birds, Merton marvels, 'listened without protest to my singing of the antiphons. We are part of a menage, a liturgy, a fellowship of sorts' (13 Feb). A fellowship indeed between the birds and the monk. They delight in the woods, constantly travel in search of some unspoiled place, and enjoy a vast panoramic view of the world. They seek shelter in the shade of trees, where they can stay quiet in the sun for a long time and enjoy warmth and peace. Sparrows frolic and play in the blossoms, oblivious to any unease inherent in the world. Birds have no desire for wealth, power, and reputation – and yet they possess the highest spirit. Chirping innocently, spontaneously, and naturally, birds are a gift from heaven. Cheerful and expansive, they cling to nothing and lead a happy,

27. When a young woman named Butterfly hands Basho a small piece of white silk and asks him to write a poem choosing her name as the subject, he compares her to a butterfly whose wings are perfumed by an orchid's fragrance. He joins together exquisite beauty and sensual dignity. *A Butterfly Poised on a tender orchid, How sweetly the incense Burns on its wings.*

28. Nothing is missing, nothing left over in Basho's *haikus* on birds: *The cry of the cuckoo Goes slanting – ah! Across the water.* Just that sound – out of nowhere. Not even a bird, only the cry, totally vivid. *A lightning flash – And, piercing the darkness, The night heron's cry.*

unrestricted life. 'Song sparrows everywhere in the twisted trees—neither accept nor reject anything' (13 May).

Lightness

For Basho, *karumi* was a poetic device to stress simplicity and leanness of language and to exhibit a sense of humor. More than this, it gradually broadened his understanding of the Real Self to include compassion and oneness with other persons. For Merton, lightness takes a different turn. Merton too finds his themes in familiar things and expresses them in uncomplicated language. He avoids abstract philosophical argumentation and allows beauty to emerge, especially when he records his reflections and experiences with animals such as rabbits, squirrels and woodchucks. He finds deer particularly fascinating. As they stand motionless out in the middle of the field, watching him, he perceives that they reveal to him something essential, something profound, about the True Self. Gradually, Merton's notion of the True Self expands: in his new way of seeing, it extends outward to embrace and show compassion for the natural world as well as for other persons.

While Merton identified closely with birds and deer, he also felt a special kinship with other animals, such as dogs and frogs. He was amused and entertained that dogs liked to go for walks, run from the guest house, chase cats away from their food, and jump on his bed with enormous tail wagging and saying 'I love you—*feed* me' (26 Dec. 1967). He reveled in a neighbor's dog that 'ran on the melting ice, rolled in the manure spread over the pasture (rolled twice!), came out of the brush with her tail full of dead leaves and in a final paroxysm of energy chased a cat into the cow barn. A completely successful afternoon for *her* anyway!!' (26 Jan). He enjoyed the small nation of frogs that chanted blissfully at night in praise of the spring rain and sang in the afternoon after the sun melted the ice.

Merton expresses his imaginative spirit of *karumi* not only in his compassionate solidarity with nature and animals, but in his energetic humor and youthful playfulness. He takes pleasure in dislocating accepted perceptions and purposely breaking with normal images and atmosphere. 'In the east, blue and purple clouds laid on lightly as if with a dry brush—and clear blue sky above them. The field is heavy with frost. Gas is getting low in the tank' (4 Feb). He juxtaposes humans and nature in an unexpected way. 'Today the plumbers finished installing bathroom fixtures, but they don't work yet—no septic tank. The white irises are beginning to bloom. The grass is deep and green' (4 May). When he hears a quail whistling in the field, he exclaims that 'perhaps it's that

mother gathering in her five ‘civilized’ ones. Hope she tells them a thing or two about people’ (27 July).

Merton peppers his journal with humorous *haiku*-like poetry once he departs on the airplane for Asia. ‘Flight yoga. Training in cosmic colors. Dull, concise bronze of ginger ale... Ginger ale has in it perfume of stewardess’ (17 Sept). In Calcutta, he is jarred by ‘three big, blue buffaloes lying in a patch of purple, eating the flowers’ (22 Oct). He places the noble side-by-side with the simple: ‘Gandhiji’s broken glasses – Johnson has stopped the bombing. Two magpies are fighting in a tree’ (3 Nov). Just prior to his first visit with the Dalai Lama, the incongruity greatly entertains him: the Lama’s private chaplain ‘was wearing tinted glasses. The usual rows of little bowls of water. A tanka. Marigolds growing in old tin cans. Artificial flowers in a Coke bottle’ (3 Nov).

Clarity

The Narrow Road to Basho’s Real Self and Merton’s True Self leads them to contented solitariness, non-attachment to the world, and a sense of humor and compassion for other persons and for nature. The road culminates – after much travail – in an inner clarity that is most evident in their experiences and descriptions of mountains and religious shrines.

For Basho, each mountain had its message of patience, with its pines bearing the marks of many long years, its moss lying on piles of massive rocks and ancient soil, its snows shining forth in purple robes. The quiet, lonely beauty of the peaks soaring above the horizon, rising into heaven, like swords piercing the sky, purified his heart. At the mysterious moment of daybreak, he prays: *God of this mountain, May you be kind enough To show me your face Among the dawning blossoms?*

With reticent tears Basho bemoaned that he could not speak of the holy secrets that mountains contain. He found Mount Fuji especially spiritually enhancing, with its beautiful formation and covering of spotless snow. He never tired of viewing it – in the crisp air of autumn, as it stood out boldly against the dark sky; in winter, when it appeared like a dream of white in a sky of palest blue; or even on a rainy day, when it remained deeply buried behind the clouds. On days when the clouds lifted only momentarily, the whole mountain still filled him with sacred awe. *In a way It was fun Not to see Mount Fuji In foggy rain.*²⁹

29. Here are two more translations of this *haiku* that attempt to express Basho’s fascination with this mountain:

A day when Fuji Is obscured by misty rain! That’s interesting.

Heavy falling mist – Mount Fuji not visible, But still intriguing.

Merton too was overwhelmed by mountains — the vastness, the snow-covered peaks, the patterns of glaciers. In California, he found the distant presence of the peaks like great silent gods, white and solemn. In Alaska he could not keep his eyes off the Chugach Range, struck by their beauty and terror. He found them sacred and majestic, ominous and enormous, noble and stirring. 'Dangerous valleys. Points. Saws. Snowy nails' (24 Sept). Even before he saw them, the Himalayas revealed a landscape that was interior, yet there: the unforgettable valleys with rivers winding at the bottom, the rugged peaks above, and the pines twisted as in Chinese paintings. 'O the mountains of Nepal... In the Mountains of Nepal, no trains... O the Mountains of Nepal' (19 July).

The mountains of his dreams were far from the reality of his first encounters with Kanchenjunga, though, and he was far from being astounded at its 28,000-foot height. 'On being tired of Kanchenjunga. On the mountain being mercifully hidden by clouds' (17 Nov). He is annoyed by its big crude blush in the sunrise. 'Fog hides the mountains. Fog gets in the sore throat. No matter' (17 Nov). A few days later, however, Merton does what he has done so often throughout his writings: he retracts his feelings and modifies his relationship with the mountain. 'There is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain — the side that has never been photographed and turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing' (19 Nov). This sacred mountain, even hidden by massive clouds, is transparent and symbolizes opposites in unity: impermanence and patience, solidity and nonbeing, existence and wisdom. 'The full beauty of the mountain is not seen until you too consent to the impossible paradox: it is and is not. When nothing more needs to be said, the smoke of ideas clears, the mountain is SEEN' (19 Nov).

In the majestic mountain silence, broken only occasionally by the sound of a goatherd's flute drifting up from a pasture below, Merton heard what was written within him: 'Thou art that'. He heard a prolonged 'OM' in the quietly droning monotonous humming of a Tibetan man trekking up the mountain. Perhaps he had found this ancient syllable long ago in the rocks, perhaps it had been born with him. The mountainside experience made him realize that he did not yet fully appreciate his exposure to Asia. Still, the mountains did bring him clarity, as he would repeat like a mantra several times.

Merton had clarity that mountains, firm and awesome, are divine incarnations in stone, and their peaks rising above the clouds are conduits through which sacred energy passes into our world. For him mountains are mandalas, centered on the divine presence, where heaven and earth are reunited. Mountains create a new inner vision, where we see a presence larger than ourselves, a spiritual landscape existing within the

physical landscape. Beholding mountains, we experience moments of triumph for our True Selves as we realize that the whole universe is a gift issuing forth moment by moment, ever fresh, astounding in its richness and beauty. Here we enjoy moments of discovery of the awesome glory of God. More than this, we experience those moments of transfiguration as we learn what it means to be human most fully and to recognize the divinity in each of us. It has been there all along, but we do not perceive or appreciate it until such moments. Such clarity does not lead us to disengage from the world, but to follow the path of compassion back down the mountain to share the sacred experience to others.

In addition to mountains, pilgrimage shrines brought moments of clarity to Basho and Merton. As Basho bowed reverently at a shrine of the Buddha, he felt the purifying power of the holy environment pervading his whole being. *The tall statue of Buddha, originally six feet and six inches tall had become covered with green moss save for the divine face that shone forth.* The bells from the temple struck deep to the innermost part of his being, his Real Self. A shrine's radiance was so awesome and extensive that he could forget the troubles and hardships he had suffered on the road to visit it.

The statues of Buddha evoked for Basho a sense of dignity, solemnity and refinement. When exquisite chysanthemums were set around the lonely appearance of old Buddhist images, the scent awakened nostalgic sentiments. The refined fragrance of flowers, like the pure and strong smell of incense, represented the Buddha and vice versa. *Chrysanthemum's scent – In Nara, many ancient Buddhas.* Basho rejoiced in the utter happiness at the joyful moments when he could visit a pilgrimage shrine. Here, he could overcome 'otherness', whether this otherness was the living memory of his ancestors, or nature with its crumbling mountains on the horizon, or the otherness within himself. This victory was his traveler's reward, moving him to joyful tears.

As with the mountains, clarity regarding the pilgrimage shrines did not come to Merton without much travail. He had been suffering inner turmoil for some time. Evaluating his short time in Asia, he chided himself: 'Too much "looking for" something: an answer, a vision, "something other". And this breeds illusion' (17 Nov). He had a definite feeling that philosophical dialogues with Buddhists were a waste of time. To talk about impermanence was one thing, to experience it another.

He came to realize that direct experience, rather than dialogue, was the way to dissolve his illusion about Asia. He was able to communicate with Buddhist monks and share with them an essentially spiritual experience which was somehow in harmony with Christianity. This was a very significant discovery: it was only by actually being in Asia that he could

adjust his perspectives. 'The sun is warm. Everything falls into place. Nothing is to be decided; nor is 'Asia' to be put in some category or other. There is nothing to be judged'. (17 Nov) Direct experiences of the follies of tourism are a catalyst in his process of coming to clarity. Visa problems, waiting for hours in strange airports, staying in hotels of faded splendor, not finding a decent drink in messy and smoky bars, being overcharged by the druggist—all this is the 'real Asia'. The illusion is gone. He is ready for Polonnaruwa.

In a narrative that has become classic, Merton describes his visit to three colossal stone figures of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa, a city of ruins in Sri Lanka.³⁰ Admiring their artistic beauty, he approached the Buddha barefoot and undisturbed. Merton felt gratitude at the obvious clarity and fluidity of the shape of the figures. Just as Basho had proclaimed that no one could dare to describe the beauty of pine trees, so Merton felt that he could never write adequately about this experience. He stood in awe at the design of the monuments composed into the rock shape and landscape. 'The silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle' (4 Dec).

The Buddha statues pulled him suddenly away from his ordinary outlook on nature, and an inner clarity became evident, as if bursting from the very rocks themselves. 'Clarity' was not a new metaphor for Merton. Many times he claimed that a 'vision' of the ordinary things of life in an extraordinary way brought him clarity. At such moments he saw beyond illusion to reality, and looked at the daily world around him with freshness and wonder. This was a 'virginal experience'—a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence—when he realized the presence of God within very ordinary, familiar and natural events. Such a profound experience got beyond the shadow and the disguise: it was what he had been obscurely looking for.³¹

What made the shrine at Polonnaruwa so powerful and energizing for Merton was that he discerned there the ultimate unity of all reality. He discovered it not in a moment of meditation, not in a moment of compassionate recognition of the unity of all people—but in the sudden illumination triggered by the statues. The Buddha statues were icons—windows into eternity—pulsating with divinity, reality and life. Merton

30. For an insightful commentary on Merton's transfigurative experience at Polonnaruwa, see Gary Commins, 'Thomas Merton's Three Epiphanies', *Theology Today* 56 (April 1999), pp. 59-73.

31. 'Something he had been looking for' is a signature statement for moments of profound experience, a marker of Merton's personal transformations. See William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 278, for other times when Merton uses this expression.

experienced what the statues asserted: all problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life — everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. In this experience he realized that the gate of heaven is in everything as well as everyone. With this, illusion was dissolved. That is why he could declare that surely with Polonnaruwa (and earlier at the shrine at Mahabalipuram) he had found the true way on his pilgrimage to the East. The world — self, others, nature — was transparent. Merton had found the Narrow Road back home.

Homecoming

It is curious that only after one journey to a strange land, a new country, that the inner voice guiding one's search is fully revealed. Just as fascinating is the fact that the one who reveals the significance of our journey is so often a stranger from another culture and religious tradition.³² Through our travels we discover treasures buried in the most secret recesses of our very being that perhaps would have remained hidden if we had stayed at home. Paradoxically, our commitment to the journey and our recognition of our transitoriness are the very paths for us to know at last our Real, our True, Selves. This is the genuine homecoming, arriving not where we started geographically, but at the very heart of our being.

And so it was for Basho and Merton. Basho was beckoned by roadside images from every corner, and it was impossible for him to stay idle in his hermitage. On the *Narrow Road* he found his Real Self in his poetry about the ever-changing aspects of nature. He was 'at home' with nature, with himself and with others. Dwellings — normally associated with home — were only temporary lodgings on life's journey. For him, *the journey itself is home. Each step is the first step, each step the last. Everyday is a journey, and the journey itself is home.*

Merton, as he left for Asia, sensed that his real homecoming was just about complete: 'I am going home, to a home where I have never been in this body' (15 Oct). Through his direct contact with the *Other Side* of the mountains and pilgrim shrines he found his True Self within himself, in that true sanctuary of his 'Father's house'. He felt he had come a very long way to where he really belonged and he was convinced that his revelatory experience at Polonnaruwa had something to do with his 'going home'. Gethsemani 'is my monastery and being away has helped me see it in perspective and love it more' (17 Nov).

32. See Leonard J. Biallas, *Pilgrim: A Spirituality of Travel* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002) for more on Merton as pilgrim and on the pilgrim's homecoming.

Merton found nothing in his travels that he essentially could not have found back home. 'The country which is nowhere is the real home' (30 May). Home, indeed, is not so much a place, but a simple being-alive, a basic presence, the way animals so beautifully seem to fill their skins, trees their bark, and rivers their banks. The True Self is not distant, but present, inside him. His real home is in his heart, the center of his memories and imagination that helps him focus his energy at the signature moments of his life. His real home roots him in eternity and his homecoming concludes his inner journey along the narrow and holy way. Home and homecoming are the symbol of his final fullness and wisdom, where he achieves that harmony in God which alone makes life worth living. He finally realizes that all the countries of the world are one under the one sky, and he no longer needs to travel.

The sweet taste of freedom in Merton's heart when he travels makes him feel wonderfully alive and uninhibited. He is free from trying to construct an image for others, unbound by illusion and pretense—'no room left for masks'. He breaks through the lamentable crust of ruins, decadence and misery, and sees things clear and complete as they really are—'the real Asia'. Discerning gifts worth cherishing, he has come home to a greater cosmic self in compassionate communion with others and with nature. He is at home everywhere. Home is the subtle energetic milieu, where everything around him extols the spirit.

Such is the magic of travel. Merton appreciates and responds with awe and wonder to all of life and pours out his nothingness to God in gratitude. As he had proclaimed when he had first encountered Basho on his spiritual journey many years earlier, he could now 'cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance'.³³ In his homecoming Merton thus completes the journey he began long before in *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

In one sense we are always travelling, travelling as if we did not know where we were going. In another sense we have already arrived. We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light. But oh! How far I have to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!³⁴

33. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 297.

34. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p. 419.