

MERTON'S QUARREL WITH KANCHENJUNGA

—by Donald Grayston

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When Thomas Merton died in Bangkok in 1968 he left behind some notebooks of bewildering complexity, next to indecipherable and tantalizingly incomplete. Four friends worked on them for five years, and in 1973 they were published by New Directions as *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.

In a review article on the *Journal* which *Monastic Studies* published the following year, his friend and correspondent David Steindl-Rast comments that it "contains a good many traces of the process by which Thomas Merton integrates his experience, examples of how his own method of exposed consciousness works." According to Merton the goal of this spiritual method was "total inner transformation" (AJ 340), a process sufficient in the western view to occupy at least one lifetime, and in the eastern many more. (He contrasted his preferred method with other methods of spiritual "growth" he had encountered, which followed the ultimately destructive path of feeding the spirit on "a diet of select thoughts" [AJ 159].) On this last geographical journey of his life, to Christian, Buddhist and Hindu communities in South Asia, he was doing in a particular way what he had done throughout his adult life, in exposing his spirit to the full experience profane or sacred. And he was doing it as a fully-formed Catholic Christian, a person with the capacity to integrate whatever his exposed consciousness presented to his deep and true self.

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One of the most interesting examples of this method of exposure and integration is Merton's "quarrel" with Kanchenjunga, one of the most spectacular peaks of the Himalayas. Merton first caught glimpses of the great mountain on his October 28 flight from Calcutta to New Delhi and on his November 12 flight from Calcutta to

Bagdogra on his way to Darjeeling, where he spent almost two weeks in retreat and encounter (November 12-25). Here is his first extended comment on the mountain, recorded the day after his arrival in Darjeeling.

And there was Kanchenjunga, dim in the dawn and in haze, not colored by the sun but dovelike in its bluegray—a lovely sight but hard to photograph. I went back after breakfast when the light was better. The view of this mountain is incomparable. I need to go back for more (AJ 135).

But four days later he is already making a journal entry of a different tenor. He is irritated with what is happening between himself and the mountain.

On being tired of Kanchenjunga. On the mountain being mercifully hidden by clouds. On sneaking a look at the mountain anyway On being tired of blue domes. ... On being tired of icebergs 30,000 feet high (AJ 146).

A day later he explains his irritation. It is at least in part a reaction to the hurried pace of the first part of his journey, an experience of haste and busy-ness very much in contrast with the monastic regimen he had lived for twenty-seven years at Gethsemani. But now the chance to stay in one good place for a while had given him some leisure.

All morning alone on the mountainside, in the warm sun, now overclouded. Plenty of time to think. Reassessment of this whole Indian experience in more critical terms. Too much movement. Too much “looking for” something: an answer, a vision, “something other.” And this breeds illusion. Illusion that there is something else. Differentiation—the old splitting-up process that leads to mindlessness, instead of the mindfulness of seeing all-in-emptiness, and not having to break it up against itself.

Hence the annoyance with Kanchenjunga (AJ 150).

In the late thirties and early forties, Merton had been through a long engagement with scholasticism, that “old splitting- up process” which at first fascinated him and finally repelled him, though not without leaving its mark on him. In his last years he would simply walk away from conversations about scholastic topics. His mind and his intuitive temperament had been exhausted by the analytic approach of scholasticism, and he turned for relief and balance to vehicles of synthesis, particularly to Zen with its meta-synthetic perspectives.

Probably it was his attempt to photograph Kanchenjunga that brought to the surface the inner



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4 irritation caused by the intensity of his efforts to appropriate and understand what his journey was meaning.

Later: I took three more photos of the mountain. An act of reconciliation? No, a camera cannot reconcile one with anything. Nor can it see a real mountain (AJ 153).

Here is the wise man from the west, trying in typical western fashion to dominate whatever he encounters, to “break it up against itself.” Here is the critic of western technologism taking a technological approach to the holy mountain.

He was struggling with western modes of perception, with his longtime tendency to differentiate: in this case, between a mountain that is “hard to photograph” and a mountain (how many mountains are we talking about?) that is easy to photograph. He was struggling between his desire to believe that the mountain in all its immensity and solidity was permanent (“A permanent post card for meditation”—AJ 150), and his recognition that the landslides which frequently occur on it spoke rather of *anicca*, of impermanence.

Not surprisingly, the resolution of the quarrel comes not from intellectual reflection but from the image-creating and synthetic depths of the unconscious.

Last night [the night of November 18] I had a curious dream about Kanchenjunga. I was looking at the mountain and it was pure white, absolutely pure, especially the peaks that lie to the west. And I saw the pure beauty of their shape and outline, all in white. And I heard a voice saying—or got the clear idea of: “There is another side to the mountain.” I realized that it was turned around and everything was lined up differently; I was seeing it from the Tibetan side. This morning my quarrel with the mountain is ended (AJ 152-53).

This is a dream of many parts. From one point of view it demonstrates Merton’s openness to the unconscious, to the intuitive and nonrational. From another it demonstrates the fruitfulness of his method of “exposure” as a way of integrating experience. From another it may point forward to his death, less than a month in the future (“white,” “the west,” “another side” are all symbolic of death in various traditions). In relation to the quarrel, it points out to Merton that there is another side to the mountain, a side which in his irritation and semi-exploitation of the mountain he has not been seeing. Thus it is by his dream-view of “the Tibetan side” that he learns where he has been going wrong. Steindl-Rast again:

After nearly three weeks of exchanges with Tibetans he suddenly could view the mountain in his dream “from the Tibetan side.” What the dream exposes in an image, Thomas Merton’s awake consciousness expressed in more abstract terms when he said: “The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion.

The dream is telling him to stop analyzing his attempts to photograph the mountain, to dominate it by capturing it perfectly on film, and simply to permit the

mountain to be to him what it is to the Tibetans—a mountain beautiful whether we analyze its beauty or not, a mountain with a side to it that he will never be able to photograph, a side which in his non-seeing of it remains mysterious and so beyond the reach of the “old splitting-up process.” Beyond this, the dream is pointing to the possibility of Merton and Kanchenjunga being in communion with each other.

So released, Merton is now ready to let the mountain be itself (as the mountain has all along been happy to let Merton be himself).

Kanchenjunga this afternoon [November 19, the same day on which he recorded the dream]. The clouds of the morning parted slightly and the mountain ... put on a great, slow, silent ... dance of snow and mist, light and shadow, surface and sinew, sudden cloud towers spiraling up out of icy holes, blue expanses of half-revealed rock, peaks appearing and disappearing with the top of Kanchenjunga remaining the visible and constant president over the whole slow show. It went on for hours. Very stately and beautiful (AJ 155-56).

Merton has now reached a state of *jinen*, that sense of common participation in the natural order in which both man and mountain can reveal their true natures to each other. He has become *sunya* (“empty,” particularly of projection), at least as far as Kanchenjunga is concerned. In this experience of *sunyata* (the “all-in-emptiness” which is beyond analysis) the boundaries between himself and the mountain are no longer a problem: by being empty in this sense he has become fully open to whatever the mountain wishes to give him. He has been delivered from utilitarianism and from the temptation to exploit; now he is free for celebration.

O Tantric Mother Mountain! Yin-yang palace of opposites in unity!
Palace of anicca, 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 (AJ
156-57).

In tantric union, Merton and the mountain (which now reveals its feminine character to him) are one: one in their agreement to let each other be or not-be, to experience their illusory opposition in unity, and to part, finally, in peace (see AJ 168-70 for Merton’s last glimpses of Kanchenjunga).

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On November 2, ten days before going to Darjeeling, Merton had talked to the Tibetan lay monk Sonam Kazi about the “‘child mind,’ which is recovered after experience. Innocence—to experience—to innocence” (AJ 84). By the first use of “innocence” here, Merton means something very close to *sunyata*, or to the non-clinging orientation of Adam and Eve in Paradise before the fall: original innocence, in fact. This innocence is then followed (biblically, mythologically, developmentally) by “experience”—by knowledge, by *scientia*, by the human tendency to trust in ratiocinative power in a hyperautonomous way. Finally comes

6 the second innocence (cf. Ricoeur's *second naivete*). This is a post-experiential innocence, a "purity of heart" (to use the term of the Desert Fathers and Mothers loved by Merton and admired by D. T. Suzuki) in which we are one with God. This was a dynamic with which Merton had long been familiar, as this comment from his 1968 collection, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, testifies.

Hence the Zen saying: before I grasped Zen, the mountains were nothing but mountains and the rivers nothing but rivers. When I got into Zen, the mountains were no longer mountains and the rivers no longer rivers. But when I understood Zen, the mountains were only mountains [Kanchenjunga] and the rivers only rivers.

It seems to me that the ascetical schema applies directly to Merton's quarrel with the mountain. The first innocence is there in the first glimpse; the experience of trying to capture the mountain photographically then leads to annoyance; and the dream restores the innocence of all-in-emptiness. By going to India "looking for" enlightenment (the mountain constellates all the symbols and images of this quest), Merton had slipped back into the utilitarian mode which always wants to know what something is *for* (raw material for postcards, of course). He was looking for something *out there* which would be different from, superior to, the reality "in here". In Buddhist terms, he had forgotten that *nirvana* (enlightenment) is *samsara* (day-to-day reality: "the trivial round, the common task"); in Christian terms, that the Kingdom of God was within him. The whole sequence can be taken as an image both of Merton's whole Asian journey to this point, as also, in a very real way, to his entire spiritual journey (and thereby to ours).

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So far, I believe, a Christian and a Buddhist would find themselves able to consider Merton's quarrel/no quarrel with the mountain and agree on its dynamic. But if as Merton (following Cassian) believed, purity of heart/the second innocence is only the intermediate end of life in the spirit, the take-off point for the Kingdom of God, then must not Buddhist and Christian go their separate ways from here on? For purity of heart, as Merton also says in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, is

the necessary preparation not for further struggle between good and evil, but for the real work of God which is revealed in the Bible: the work of the *new creation*, the resurrection from the dead, the restoration of all things in Christ. This is the real dimension of Christianity, the eschatological dimension which is peculiar to it, and which has no parallel in Buddhism.

And so Merton leaves Darjeeling, and Kanchenjunga. The mountain, however, does not/will not/cannot/need not move: the monk, the Christian pilgrim in Asia, must go on. He was on his way to a meeting of the Christian monastics of Asia in Bangkok, and (as we know and he did not) to his death. But more to the point in relation to the concerns of this article, he was on his way to meet friends who would share with him the mystery of where anyone goes from the reaching of *sunyata* or the recovery of Paradise.