

# THOMAS MERTON AND THE DALAI LAMA

## A Special Friendship Remembered

by **Brother John Albert, O.C.S.O.**



*The Dalai Lama is loved by his people -- and they are a beautiful, loving people. They surround his house with love and prayer, they have a new soongkor for protection along the fence. Probably no leader in the world is so much loved by his followers and means so much to them. For that reason it would be especially terrible and cruel if any evil should strike him. I pray for his safety and fear for him. May God protect and preserve him.*

Thomas Merton



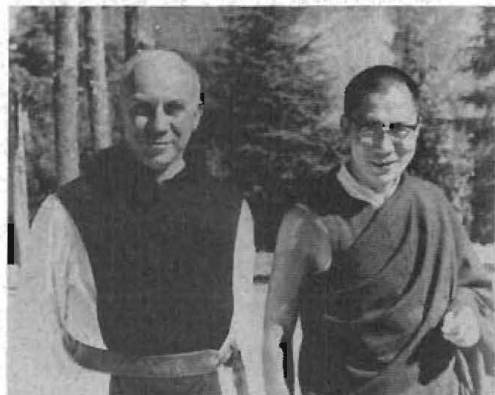
Thomas Merton did not take quickly to religious personages, no matter what their reputation. He debunked as often as he bowed. Portions of his journals remain unpublished because they offend. Nor did he easily express his affection, even in his correspondence. During one of his visits to our abbey, Dom Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., allowed me to read the ream of letters he exchanged with Merton. After many years a formality remained in Merton's writing style, and I asked Dom Jean about this. He commented: "That's the way we were in those days."

What strikes us, then, about the above passage from Merton's *Asian Journal* (p. 92) is the intimacy and affection indicated. Written in 3 November 1968 in Dharamsala, these lines are a record of the Trappist monk's feeling for the Dalai Lama *before* their first meeting the following day. The remaining passages in his journal in reference to the Dalai Lama take up from that point. Within a week Merton would write a surprisingly intimate account of one of the most remarkable relationships of his life.

### ONGOING INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Thomas Merton was 53, the Dalai Lama 33, at the time of their meeting in

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THOMAS MERTON & THE DALAI LAMA

North India nineteen years ago. Merton was on that last great spiritual endeavor of his life, and within weeks he would meet his Christian *parinirvana* -- death (and, we believe, his personal resurrection in Christ). For his part, the Dalai Lama has consistently spoken of Merton in terms of highest respect and deepest friendship as one of his "comrades to do something for mental peace, and for better understanding between Christians and Buddhists" (*Merton, By Those Who Knew Him Best*, p. 147).

His Holiness visited the United States during 18-28 September 1987, his fourth tour of North America, which took place at the same approximate time as the second visit of His Holiness Pope John Paul II. While preparing for this pilgrimage to see Tibetan exiles and American officials, the Dalai Lama learned of the presence of Trappist monks of Merton's order in Georgia and expressed an intention to visit our Abbey since Atlanta was his first stop on a six city journey. Pressing demands on his time and energy precluded his coming to Conyers (30 miles from Atlanta), but he invited a small group of Trappists to meet with him at Emory University for an exchange on monastic values and practices. Thus, on 19 September, with five other members of our community, I attended His Holiness's public lecture at Glen Memorial United Methodist Church (adjacent to Emory University) and participated in a video-taped session with the Dalai Lama, his Tibetan and American attendants, four other religious, Professor John Fenton of Emory who served as facilitator, and my brother monks. We were humbled by the rare invitation and privilege of being with him that grace-filled afternoon in Atlanta. Immediately after the public lecture (we were given seats right behind his attendants near the sanctuary), we were ushered out a side door of the church. Within minutes the Dalai Lama came out and we were introduced as Trappist monks. His Holiness began his dialogue at once, asking if any of us knew Merton. Fr. Matthew Torpey, O.C.S.O. (at one time a member of the Gethsemani community) replied that Merton had been his spiritual director. As we walked to the Emory campus (through a crowd of journalists, media technicians and well-wishers) little more could be said. In the greater seclusion later on, the Dalai Lama's friendship with Merton was the topic that opened and closed our session with him.

Who was it that Merton met when he met the Dalai Lama? Why did these two monks have such an impact on each other? Why should we who are interested in Merton turn our attention to the Dalai Lama today? To suggest some possible answers to these questions, we can first look at the Dalai Lama himself.

### "GREAT EXALTED OCEAN OF INFINITE COMPASSION"

The monk Gelong Tenzin Gyatso is the 14th incarnation of Chenrezi, the Tibetan personification of the Buddhist Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara -- the embodiment of Infinite Compassion. As "Precious Protector" of his country, he is the "Great Exalted Ocean" of loving-kindness and eternal wisdom (thus, in Mongolian: *Dalai* and in Tibetan: *Lama*), spiritual and secular ruler of his people. Born 6 July 1935, in Amdo, eastern Tibet, this child was first recognized as the possible "high incarnate one" at the age of 2, and he was proclaimed the 14th Dalai Lama at the age of 4. Educated under the finest monastic tutors in the Gelugpa ("Yellow Hat") tradition, Tenzin Gyatso became temporary ruler at the tender age of 16. In 1959 the Chinese take-over of Tibet was complete, and His Holiness fled into exile in Northern India with nearly 100,000 followers. In our time he exercised the sacred office of spiritual overseership for more than 6,000,000 Tibetans and millions more who follow the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual tradition. In a 1985 interview, His Holiness spoke of his role in these terms:

"When we say that the Dalai Lama is the head of both temporal and religious activities for Tibetans, this does not indicate any sort of rigid role in either secular or religious spheres. It is just a general title

meaning that the Dalai Lama is respected as a religious teacher while having a voice in Tibetan political affairs. I am free to express my opinions openly on both religious and political matters, and do not have to voice the viewpoints of any specific religious or political institutions. So I think that when we Tibetans say "combining religious and secular functions," it does not mean what Western people think of when they say "combining church and state." (*A Long Look Homeward*, p. 25)

Quite obviously, Merton was impressed by the man Tenzin Gyatso, and worried what effect the burden of his office would have on the Dalai Lama. In his 3 November journal entry, in the lines just preceding those already quoted above, Merton wrote:

Harold Talbott says that the Dalai Lama has to see a lot of blue-haired ladies in pants -- losers. And people looking for a freak religion. And rich people who have nothing better to do than come up here out of curiosity. His Western visitors are not well-screened. He has very few real advisers who know anything about the world as it is. The Dalai Lama is still studying under his tutor and also is going on with Tantric studies, and I was told by Tenzin Geshe, his secretary, that he enjoys his new house, where he has quieter quarters, is less disturbed, and has a garden to walk in now, without being followed by cops. (p. 92)

Definitely, security was tight when we met the Dalai Lama; body guards travel with him. Followers fear for his life, but Tenzin Gyatso seemed to me to bear the burdens of his office in peace, and with great joy.

### “... A REAL SPIRITUAL BOND ...”

As he so carefully noted in his journal, Thomas Merton had three meetings with the Dalai Lama, with Tenzin Geshe present as translator; these took place on 4, 6, and 8 November. Merton remained eight days in Dharamsala before moving on to meet other spiritual masters. Reading Merton's journal entries in Dharamsala from our present perspective tells us a great deal about why these two monks so influenced each other. On November 4, he wrote:

The Dalai Lama is most impressive as a person. He is strong and alert, bigger than I expected (for some reason I thought he would be small). A very solid, energetic, generous, and warm person, very capably trying to handle enormous problems --none of which he mentioned directly. (pp. 100-101)

On November 6, he added:

I like the solidity of the Dalai Lama's ideas. He is a very consecutive thinker and moves from step to step. His ideas of the interior life are built on very solid foundations and on a real awareness of practical problems. He insists on detachment, on an "unworldly life," yet sees it as a way to complete understanding of, and participation in, the problems of life and the world. But renunciation and detachment must come first. Evidently he misses the full monastic life and wishes he had more time to meditate and study himself.

After his third interview, which he concluded was "in some ways the best," Merton said:

It was a very warm and cordial discussion and at the end I felt we had become very good friends and were somehow quite close to one another. I feel a great respect and fondness for him as a person and believe, too, that there is a real spiritual bond between us. He remarked that I was a "Catholic geshe," which Harold [Talbott] says, was the highest possible praise from a Gelugpa, like an honorary doctorate! (pp. 124-125)

In reporting back to Abbot Flavian Burns at Gethsemani, Merton wrote on 9 November:

The talks with the Dalai Lama were very fine. He did a lot of off the record talking, very open and sincere, a very impressive person, deeply concerned about the contemplative life, and also very learned. I have seldom met anyone with whom I clicked so well, and I feel that we have become good friends. (p. 178, note 39)



Reflecting back on what he had experienced so far in his Asian pilgrimage, Merton wrote in his journal on 18 November:

Meeting the Dalai Lama and the various Tibetans, lamas or "enlightened" laymen, has been the most significant thing of all, especially in the way we were able to communicate with one another and share an essentially spiritual experience of "Buddhism" which is also somehow in harmony with Christianity. (p. 148)

A final selection from the journal shows an element of human friendship we all can recognize --having a keepsake. On 25 November, Merton wrote about the mail he had just received: "And contact prints had come from John Howard Griffin of the photos I had taken at Dharmasala [sic]. The one of the Dalai Lama is especially good . . ." (p. 171).

Two other sources of information about Merton's regard for the young Tenzin Gyatso deserve notice here: the first is Merton's "November Circular Letter to Friends" and the second is "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," the talk given at Bangkok on 10 December, the day of his death. In Merton's "Circular Letter" we read:

The Dalai Lama is much loved by his people, and they are the most prayerful people I have seen . . . The Dalai Lama is thirty-three years old, a very alert and energetic person. He is simple and outgoing and spoke with great openness and frankness. He is in no sense what you would expect from a political emigre, and the things he said about Communism seemed to me to be fair and objective. He is a religious leader and scholar, and also a man who has obviously received a remarkable monastic formation. We spoke almost entirely about the life of meditation, about samadhi (concentration), which is the first stage of meditative discipline and where one systematically clarifies and recollects his mind. The Tibetans have a very acute, subtle, and scientific knowledge of "the mind" and are still experimenting with meditation . . . but always and everywhere the Dalai Lama kept insisting on the fact that one could not attain anything in the spiritual life without total dedication, continued effort, experienced guidance, real discipline, and the combination of wisdom [prajna] and method [dhyana] (which is stressed by Tibetan mysticism) . . . I don't suppose the Dalai Lama has much time on his hands, but in the long talks we had on meditation I could see that he has certainly gone very thoroughly and deeply into it and is a man of high "attainment." (pp. 322, 333)

In his lecture, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," Merton spoke in these terms:

I will pass on now to something that might be more interesting to you -- some conversations I had with Tibetan monks who had gone through the experience of being thrown out of their country, driven out of their country, by Communism. First of all, I spoke of this to the Dalai Lama, and I asked his ideas on this whole question of Marxism and monasticism. I suppose there are few people in the world more intimately involved in this question than the Dalai Lama, who is the religious head of an essentially monastic society. The Dalai Lama is very objective and open about this kind of thing. He is in no way whatever a fanatical anti-Communist. He is an open-minded, reasonable man, thinking in terms of a religious tradition. He obviously recognized the problem of a ruthless Communist takeover, a power move that had to get rid of monks, that had to drive monks out of Tibet. The Dalai Lama himself made every effort to co-exist with Communism and he failed. He said frankly that he did not see how one could co-exist, in the situation in which he had been, with Communism -- on an institutional level, anyway. He then went on to admit the blindness of the abbots and communities of the great, rich Tibetan monasteries, who had failed to see the signs of the times and had absolutely failed to do anything valid to meet the challenge of Communism. They refused to do anything, for example, about giving land to people who needed it. They simply could not see the necessity of taking steps, and this, he said, precipitated the disaster, and it had to happen. (p. 337)

"I LOOKED INTO HIS FACE . . ."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama participated in *Merton: A Film Biography of Thomas Merton*, produced by Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn in 1984. In the full transcript of his reminiscences of

Merton, later published in *Merton, By Those Who Knew Him Best*, Gelong Tenzin Gyatso's most sustained comments on Merton can be found. On 19 September 1987, he repeated at times word for word what appears in that interview, and, therefore, his comments are worth re-reading in this context.

Before I met him, this Thomas Merton, I had not much information about him. So we talked just in this same place [the interview took place in Dharamsala] and looked on each other's faces and expressed things, and with each word, each minute, there was deeper understanding. I looked in his face. I could see a good human being. I don't know how to explain but . . . you can tell people who have some deep experience. And of course this is special. He was not the type of person who was cheating other people, or looking down at other people. Not like that kind at all. Honest. Truthful. (p. 145)

Concerning the inter-religious dialogue just in its nascent stage, the Dalai Lama said:

He was very open-minded. That is good. Such a person, I think, was very useful in this period, when the West and East were just coming to know each other . . . Ah, yes, through him my understanding and my respect about other religions, particularly the Christian, was very much increased. Because of meeting with him I found many common practices between Christian monks and Buddhist monks, the way of living, mainly, the simplicity and contentment and great devotion to one's spiritual development. (pp. 145, 146)

Speaking more personally about Merton, His Holiness went on to say:

As a result of our discussions, I got a certain feeling I was with a person who had a great desire to learn. So I thought it quite fit, appropriate, to call him a Catholic *Geshe*. This means "a scholar" or "learned one." Also I could say he was a holy man. I don't know the exact Western interpretation of this term holy, but from a Buddhist viewpoint a holy person is one who sincerely implements what he knows. That we call holy. And, despite his knowledge or his position, lives a very simple way of life and is honest, and respects other people. I found these qualities in Thomas Merton.

When he died, I felt that I had lost personally one of my best friends, and a man who was a contributor for harmony between different religions and for mental peace. So we lost one, it is very sad. I think if he remained still today, he would be one of my comrades to do something for mental peace, and for better understanding between Christians and Buddhists. I could learn still more from him . . . When I think or feel something Christian, immediately his picture, his vision, his face comes to me. To the present day. Very nice. (pp. 147, 148)

## A FEW CONCLUSIONS

Having answered the questions concerning who it was that Merton met when he met the Dalai Lama in November of 1968 and why they had such an impact on each other, we have already answered our question concerning our response to His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso today. In his public lecture at Glen Memorial Church on 19 September, the Dalai Lama spoke of the "future" of Buddhism. For him, in the days ahead, Buddhism can contribute to our understanding of human values, to our knowledge of the workings of the human mind, and to harmony among cultures and nations: and these three things can help bring world peace in our troubled times.

In his private session with us at Emory University, His Holiness concluded with these remarks about Thomas Merton: "When I think of Christianity, I think of Thomas Merton . . . If he were alive today his role in the dialogue between religions would be crucial." The Dalai Lama left us with a sense of hope, but with a challenge to take up "spiritual friendship" as begun by Thomas Merton.