

A Captivating Capstone

Review of
Merton & Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart
 Edited by David M. Odorisio
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In 1962 Merton was asked to write a preface to *In Search of a Yogi* by Dom Denys Rutledge. The book narrates Rutledge's pilgrimage in India and inquiry into the lives of yogis. Merton was concerned about the way the censors might respond, given their skepticism of Eastern religions. Even so, he decided to write the preface and notes the reason for doing so: "Yogis and Christian contemplatives both exist, and there is every reason why they should compare notes" (274). Six years later Merton made his own journey to the East. While his pilgrimage to the Buddhist site at Polonnaruwa and his interest in Buddhism and Zen have been well documented and studied, his visit to Mahabalipuram and his interest in Hinduism and Yoga have not received the same attention until now. *Merton & Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart*, ninth and final volume in The Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series, documents Merton's work in this area, encourages collaboration among scholars, and raises the question of how his understanding of Hinduism and his practice of Yoga might shed new light on other areas of his life and work.

Editor David Odorisio introduces this publication with an overview of Merton's interest in India's ancient religious traditions and practices (xv-xlvi). Observing the trajectories of Merton's interest, Odorisio identifies four phases. The first focuses on Merton's undergraduate years at Columbia. It was here that he discovered the *Bhagavad Gita* while writing his master's thesis on William Blake and here that he developed a friendship with Brahmachari, fellow student and Hindu monk.

While the first phase finds expression in *Ascent to Truth*, *The Inner Experience* represents the second phase. Here we see the influence of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras* on Merton's monastic formation and understanding of contemplation. The third phase occurs during the early to mid years of the 1960s. Merton's writings on Mohandas Gandhi appear and he is practicing and teaching Yoga at the monastery. The year 1968 marks the final phase. During this time, Merton returns to traditional sources. It is important to note that the list of those sources indicates that his study of Hinduism and Yoga was increasing in both breadth and depth as he prepared for his pilgrimage to India.

Odorisio organizes the volume in four parts. The first part (1-80) introduces the reader to

Hinduism and compares the spiritualities of Yoga and Hesychasm, thereby establishing a connection between two contemplative traditions that were at play in Merton's life. The second part (81-263) offers essays that explore and reflect on the various aspects of Merton's interest in Hinduism and Yoga. The seventeen contributors represented in the first two parts consist of scholars, professors, monks and priests with various expertise in Merton studies, Christian theology, Indian religions, literature and art, Yoga philosophy and practice, comparative religions and religion and psychology. Together they initiate this new field of Merton studies.

Parts three and four provide resources for the reader's research. The extensive third part (265-386) includes published and unpublished writings, almost all of which are by Merton himself: notes from his reading of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* and Hindu Philosophy; essays on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi and Bramachari; a preface to Rutledge's book regarding his pilgrimage to India and a review of a book about Abbé Monchanin who went to India to establish an ashram. Then there are transcriptions of conferences at the abbey on Hinduism and Yoga; Merton's notes for teaching yoga to novices; and Br. Paul Quenon's account of yoga with Merton in the novitiate. The fourth part (387-400), a short appendix, is a bibliography of many of the books Merton read and that informed his thinking, writing and practice.

Merton & Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart contributes to the series of which it is a part by providing additional insight into Merton as a twentieth-century bridge-builder. The differences between Christianity and Hinduism may represent one of the deepest and widest of religious and cultural divides to bridge. Merton's interfaith imagination, however, was sufficiently expansive and creative for the task. He was able to see that India had much to offer the West with regard to meditative practices, the integration of the body with spiritual formation and the grounding of social action in the contemplative life. We also see in these essays and documents something of how Merton went about building the bridge. As a practitioner of yoga, he immerses himself in the tradition and thereby sees it from the inside rather than from the outside and at a distance. There was an open attitude that allowed him to critically and respectfully examine ideas and practices. With regard to that openness, Amiya Chakravarty writes: "Readers of Thomas Merton know that his openness to man's spiritual horizons came from a rootedness of faith; and inner security led him to explore, experience, and interpret the affinities and differences between religions in light of his own religion. That light was Christianity" (213).

Odorisio describes this approach as interpenetration, whereby Merton finds in other religious traditions ideas and practices that enhance his own contemplative life as a Christian monk and at the same time cultivate mutual respect and dialogue (see xvii). In addition to the contribution of this volume to Merton studies, it should also be noted that it contributes to the ongoing history of Yoga in the West and establishes Merton as an important figure in that history. Odorisio notes in his introduction that Merton raises a popular movement focused on self-improvement to its rightful place as a ancient and honorable contemplative practice:

In a culture that has always craved – indeed, celebrated – fads, trends, and spiritual showmanship, Merton's uniquely monastic and truly "catholic" (universal) approach to yoga and Hinduism offers a model for authentic, honest, and engaged inter-spiritual practice. Merton's life-long search for an ever-widening,

ecumenical “truth” bears testimony to the self-sacrifice that lies at the heart of authentic spiritual surrender – an on-going yoga of the heart. (xvii)

There remain areas for further inquiry by others to pursue. For example, if we focus on Merton’s visit to Mahabalipuram, an interesting line of inquiry opens. First, consider what Merton says about his experience there: “I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for” (*Asian Journal* 235-36). Second, while Merton’s journal entry at Mahabalipuram (197-202) lacks the beautiful prose of the entry for Polonnaruwa, he does reference two erotic poems: the “Virgin Youth” by D. H. Lawrence and a poem by Vidyapati, a devotee of Shiva, regarding the lovers Radha and Krishna. Why did Merton include these poems? He apparently knew them well enough to have them either in memory or on his person. What might they suggest regarding his experience at the Shore Temple dedicated to Lord Shiva? Shiva’s Lingam, like the Buddha statues at Polonnaruwa, is a focal point at this Hindu site. Third, there is Merton’s last poem jotted in a notebook shortly after his time at Mahabalipuram: “Kandy Express” (222-28) places Shiva’s Lingam at the top of a mountain that Merton’s train is circling. There is a gentle eroticism in the images of the countryside and of the people along the way reminiscent of Vidyapati. Is he describing another mountain – his last mountain? Has the *aesthetic illumination* at Mahabalipuram offered insight into the way his sexuality and his experience of eros were becoming integral to his spiritual formation as a monk? Even though he had by 1966 understood how his experience of love with M was “a kind of contemplation” and “the place of sexual love in Hinduism” (*Learning to Love* 64), it may not have been until Mahabalipuram that an earlier interior experience found resolution and new expression: “Now yesterday was this slow, gradual new stage of ripening, and the grip of this deep warm sexual love disturbing me and flooding through me, shaking my whole being from the heart (not just genital excitation) – and it was as yet only a little! But this is awfully serious, because here in spite of all we were wanting and saying, nature placidly and inexorably said something more profound and perhaps irreversible” (*Learning to Love* 66). Hinduism and Yoga offers a perspective on the above experience very different from that which the West was able to offer Merton. Perhaps this too was something for which he was *obscurely looking*.

This review concludes with a note of appreciation to David M. Odorisio, editor of *Thomas Merton & Hinduism* and Virginia Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, General Editors of The Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series. Odorisio brought to the task knowledge of Hinduism and Yoga, an understanding of Merton’s life and work and fine writing and editing skills. Henry’s and Montaldo’s commitment to interfaith dialogue provided the vision and oversight for this series that celebrates Merton’s vow of conversation that inspires readers to seek common ground, mutual understanding and paths to peace between religious traditions and cultures.