

ORIGINAL BLESSING: THE GIFT OF THE TRUE SELF

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AN INTUITION SHARED by many of the high religions is the belief that the happiness which all women and men *now* seek is actually a reality which they possessed 'in the beginning'. It was the original blessing given to humanity: the blessing of self-awareness of the experience of one's own identity. To put it in terms of the topic of this article, the original blessing was the gift of the *true self* or, as the Zen Buddhists would express it, the experience of 'your original face before you were born'.

There is also in most of the high religions a realization that it is not this *true self* that we ordinarily experience. The myth of the 'fall' suggests the puzzling and unexplainable fact that we are alienated from that true self. A seeming abyss separates us from our true self. Indeed, a false self seems to take over the direction of our lives. The way to salvation (not just 'in the beyond', but in the here and now) is to discover our true self. This discovery is actually a 'recovery', since the true self is always there. It is simply that we have not been attentive to it. We have not been aware that it is there. Hence we have to be awakened to its presence. That awakening which makes us attentive to and aware of the presence of the true self is what Thomas Merton would call contemplation.

Thomas Merton wrote a great deal about the *true self* and the *false self*; and what he had to say about these two terms has been the subject of much writing by others as well as by myself.¹ In this relatively short article it is clearly not possible to deal with the many passages throughout the Merton corpus that deal with these elusive 'entities'. I should like to approach Merton's thoughts on this matter by using a quotation from one of his letters as a kind of centrepiece for what I want to say. The quotation is from a letter Merton wrote to Amiya Chakravarty and the students of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

The background of the letter is helpful in understanding Merton's words. In the spring term of 1967, Amiya Chakravarty, a Hindu scholar and a friend of Merton, was teaching at Smith College. One of the projects he set for himself was to organize a Merton evening for students and faculty. It was held on March 28, 1967 and involved readings and discussions of some of Merton's writings. The day following this brief symposium, Dr Chakravarty wrote to Merton:

We were immersed in the silence and eloquence of your thoughts and writings . . . The young scholars here realize that the absolute rootedness of your faith makes you free to understand other faiths.²

Several of the 'young scholars' also wrote to Merton telling him how pleased they had been with that evening's experience.

On April 13 Merton replied to Dr Chakravarty and the students. Nothing can be more rewarding to a writer, he told them, than to be understood and appreciated. He expressed his belief that they had indeed understood what he had written. But more than that they had come to see something most precious—and most available too: namely, 'the reality that is present to us and in us'. While we may give different names to that reality (*Being, Atman, Pnuma, Silence*), still, however we name it, the simple fact is that,

by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained; the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.³

This brief statement is of decisive importance in grasping Merton's understanding of reality. He is speaking about 'happiness' and makes clear his conviction that this sum of human blessings can be found only by going beyond the dualities of life: an enormously difficult undertaking, because these dualities seem so real to us. Merton *locates* true happiness in 'being at one' with everything. And that oneness is no pantheistic or impersonal melange, for it springs from a 'hidden ground'; and that 'Ground' is personal, for it is the 'Ground of Love'.

This happiness cannot be *explained*; nor can the hidden Ground of Love in which it is to be found. But it can be *achieved* by

attentiveness, by listening. For most of us, Merton seems to be suggesting, 'listening', which should be as natural to us as breathing, is in fact something we have to discover in ourselves or, rather, recover (for it is always there).

The attentiveness of which Merton speaks (and he often uses as synonyms 'awareness' or 'awakedness') is not so much something we *do* but something we *are*. Attentiveness is not the same thing as *thinking*. Thinking tends to divide: it implies a subject thinking and an object that is thought about. Attentiveness or awareness, on the other hand, is a very different experience: it reduces the distance between me and what I am aware of. A deep sense of attentive awareness closes the gap between me and that of which I am aware. It brings together and unites. In fact, in a deep experience of attentive awareness, the subject-object dichotomy disappears. I am not aware *of something*. I am *simply aware*.

Thus, the reader should note that Merton does not tell us that we achieve happiness by being attentive to the 'hidden ground of Love', as if 'It' were the object of our attention. Rather he says that through simple *attentiveness*, *pure awareness*, we find ourselves 'at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love'. To put this more explicitly: if we say, in a Christian context, that by the 'hidden ground of Love' we mean God, then Merton is making clear that we are not subjects who discover God as an object. It is rather that our subjectivity becomes one with the subjectivity of God. In *that* oneness, we find ourselves 'at one with everything'.

I would venture a step further and say that this simple attentiveness, this pure awareness where there is no object, is what Thomas Merton means by *contemplation*. Writing in *New seeds of contemplation*, he says:

[I]n the depths of contemplative prayer there seems to be no division between subject and object and there is no reason to make any statement about God or about oneself. HE IS and this reality absorbs everything else.⁴

This attentiveness, in which we discover our oneness with God and in him with all reality, may be thought of in at least two different ways. There is, in the first place, the most fundamental type of attentiveness or awareness: an awareness built into us so to speak. It is part of the package of being a creature. It is of the very necessity of our existence that we *be* in God; for apart from

the Source and Ground of my being, I am nothing. This deep awareness is buried within us. Many people do not know it is there. It belongs to the unconscious or superconscious level of our being; and many people never get in touch with that level of their being. And it really is a pity that we do not. As Merton wrote to a friend in England: 'All that is best in us is either unconscious or superconscious'.⁵

There is a delightful Sufi story that can perhaps concretize our understanding of this deep awareness of God buried in the deepest recesses of our being. According to the story, before he created the world, God said to Adam, 'Am I not your God who created you?' Adam answered, 'Yes'. Ever after, according to the Sufi tale, there has been in every woman and man this question: 'Am I not your God who created you?' This is the silent question that is 'built into' all of us: a question that calls us to acknowledge our creaturehood, our emptiness, our nothingness. The question is a prod to attentive awareness. God is there. He/She is our Creator: the Source of our being. And God goes on creating: he/she is, therefore, that ever present (though hidden) Ground that makes it possible for us to continue in being. That is why this question is created into me: 'Am I not your God who created you?'

But we are created, not only with this question, but also with the answer: 'Yes!' Our acknowledgement that he/she created us is not so much a 'Yes' that we *speak*, but a 'Yes' that we *are*. It too is 'built into' us, whether we are aware of it or not. It is the speech of our deepest silence.

This ontological awareness of God (this contemplative dimension of our being, if you will), which is 'built into' us, is present even if we never advert to it. It lies asleep in us, as it were, until it is awakened and we arrive at a *second kind of awareness*: conscious awareness. This is the meaning of contemplative prayer: to bring to the surface of our lives this fundamental awareness that is an essential element of our being. In moments of silent, quiet, emptying prayer, this awareness may surface in my life and I experience this awareness of God—which is at the same time an awareness of myself and all things else in God. Again, I must repeat, it is not an awareness of any Object or objects. It is simply pure awareness.

This, I think, is what Merton had in mind when he wrote in *New seeds of contemplation*:

It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and in awakening us to contemplation he answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time the question and the answer.⁶

Contemplation is the silent hearing of this question, 'Am I not your God who created you?' and the silent answering, 'Yes', but with the acute awareness that the question and the 'Yes' must be understood, not as something we hear and say, but *something we are*. The question and the answer put me squarely in God. Apart from him/her I am not an answer; I am not even a question. I am nothing.

I read recently a brief news item about a town in Arizona, a place of less than one hundred inhabitants. With self-effacing modesty these people had named their town 'Nothing'. One day a fire completely destroyed the town. The news headline read: 'Nothing is left of "Nothing"'. If we were to be apart from God even for an instant, that would be our story: 'nothing would be left of nothing'.

This is why I want to stress the point that attentive awareness of God in no sense means that I, as a separate subject, am aware of God as an object. For I as a separate subject simply do not exist. Nor can God ever be conceived of as an object, even as an object of thought and reflection. As soon as we try to grasp him/her in our thought and reflection, he/she disappears; what remains is the construct of our thoughts and words. Thus, it would be wrong to think of God as one existent among other existents. He/She is rather, as Merton says in our text, the Ground of all that exists. He/She is the Source whence all reality comes. He/She is the Ground in which they continue to be. God is in all and all exist because of him. That is why awareness of God is not awareness of an Object. It is pure awareness, simple attentiveness. Merton writes in *New seeds of contemplation*:

There is 'no such thing' as God because God is neither a 'what' nor a 'thing' but a pure 'Who'. He is the 'Thou' before whom our inmost 'I' springs into awareness [and love. He is the living God, Yahweh, 'I AM', who calls us into being out of nothingness, so that we stand before Him made in His image and reflecting His infinite being in our littleness and reply: 'I am'. And so with St. Paul we awaken to the paradox that beyond our natural being we have a higher being 'in Christ' which makes us as if we were

not and as if He alone were in us . . .]⁷ (The section in brackets was added by Merton to the French text.)⁸

Speaking to a group of contemplative nuns in December of 1967, Merton said:

We should have an *immanent* approach to prayer. God is not an Object . . . God is Subject, a deeper 'I'. He is the Ground of my subjectivity. God wants to know Himself in us.⁹

When at that same conference the question was put to him: 'How can we best help people to attain union with God?', his answer was very clear. We must, he says, tell them that they are already united with God. Contemplative prayer is nothing other than 'the coming into consciousness' of what is already there. We must, Merton tells us, 'love God as our other self, that is, our truer and deeper self'.

The true self, then, whether in hiddenness or in conscious awareness, is always there: my being springing out of God who is Being. I am distinct from God (I am obviously not God), yet I am not separate from him/her (for how could a being be separate from its very Ground?). The happiness of the true self is 'the happiness of being at one with everything'. That 'at-oneness' with everything is experienced not statically, but dynamically, in the intercourse of love that flows through everything: the love which rises out of that hidden Ground which is All in all.

At this point I am quite ready to admit that all I have said thus far must seem remote indeed from our actual experience of daily living. Seldom, if ever, do we experience this oneness in love. All too frequently what we experience is separateness, alienation. We see people being used and manipulated by others. We see injustice, exploitation and division.

Why is it that what we actually experience is so different from what it would seem we ought to be experiencing? If we look for the villain in the story, that role—according to Merton's thinking—would be played by the false self. At this point I need to warn the unwary reader that this term, as Merton uses it, is somewhat elusive and difficult to understand. I confess to struggling with it for a long time and finding myself still a bit diffident about offering my present view of what it means. It surely is a term that can easily be misinterpreted. Thus one could easily make the mistake

of reading it in a *moral sense*, in which case, one would be inclined to think of the 'false self' as being untruthful, sinful, immoral. Now there is no doubt that it can, perhaps often does, mean that. But, as I see it, such a meaning is *derivative* and does not catch the primary sense in which Merton uses the term 'false self'. In speaking of the *false* self, Merton, if I understand him correctly, is thinking primarily in ontological terms. By this I mean that the adjective 'false' conveys the notion of unsubstantiality, of lacking in any fullness of being. The 'false self' is, one might say, deficient in being: deficient especially in the sense that it is impermanent, not enduring. It cannot survive death.

That 'false self' has primarily this ontological meaning for Merton is borne out, I think, by reflection on other adjectives he often uses as substitutes for 'false', for example, 'external', 'superficial', 'empirical', 'outward', 'contingent', 'private', 'shadow', 'illusory', 'fictitious', 'smoke', 'feeble', 'petty', etc. All these adjectives suggest, in different ways, that we are dealing with a self that is real, but only at a very limited level of reality. The false self keeps us on the surface of reality: both its fears and its joys are superficial. It is limited *by* time and space and *to* time and space: it has a biography and a history, both of which we write by the actions we perform and the roles we play and both of which are destined to cease with death. That is why Merton calls it 'the evanescent self' or the 'smoke self' that will disappear like smoke up a chimney. Its well-being needs constantly to be fed by accomplishments and by the admiration of others. It is the ego-self, the self as object or, in Merton's words:

the self which we observe as it goes about its biological business, the machine which we regulate and tune up and feed with all kinds of stimulants and sedatives, constantly trying to make it run more and more smoothly, to fit the patterns prescribed by the salesman of pleasure-giving and anxiety-laden commodities.¹⁰

What must we do to move beyond this empirical ego, which alienates us from our true being, and recover that true and substantial self which is beyond and above the level of mere empirical individuality with its superficial enjoyments and fears? The Christian answer (and there are similar answers in other religions) is that there must be death and rebirth. To quote Merton again:

[I]n order to become one's true self, the false self must die. In order for the inner self to appear the outer self must disappear: or at least become secondary, unimportant . . .

True Christianity is growth in the life of the Spirit, a deepening of the new life, a continuous rebirth, in which the exterior and superficial life of the ego-self is discarded like an old snake skin and the mysterious invisible self of the Spirit becomes more present and more active.¹¹

This growth involves an on-going transformation, whereby we are liberated from selfishness and grow in love so that, in some sense, we become love or, in the words of our basic text, we are 'at one with everything in that hidden ground of love', which we can only experience but never explain. We die to selfishness and come alive in love.

How is this blessing achieved, whereby we are able finally to transcend the empirical self and discover, once and for all, our true self? Thomas Merton's answer, I believe, would be that this consummation occurs either in death or in contemplation, which is to say that it is either an eschatological experience or an in-depth prayer experience that transforms my consciousness.

Most people, he would say, arrive at this full awakening of the true self only in death. For death is better understood, not as the separation of the soul from the body, but as the disappearance of the false self and the emergence of the true self. Seen not as a passion (namely, something that happens to a person), but as an action (i.e. something that a person does) death is the moment of the fullest human freedom. In that moment, a person, freed from the limitations of space and time, is able to cast aside the illusions that once were so captivating and, in an emptiness hitherto unexperienced, is enabled at last to affirm his/her true identity. A person dies into God. He/She discovers in death what was always true, but not adverted to, that we are in God. Death is being in the hidden ground of Love in full attentive awareness. This is eternal happiness.

This side of that eschatological awakening, it is possible to realize one's true self only in the experience of contemplation. Contemplation is the highest form of the 'spiritual life'. It means that one is totally empty (i.e. of all separateness) and at the same time totally full (i.e. at one with all that is and with the Source and Ground of all). In contemplation, 'the infinitely "fontal" (source-like) creativity of our being in Being is somehow attained

and becomes in its turn a source of action and creativity in the world around us'.¹²

How absurd, then, to think—as some people do—that contemplation has to do with God to the exclusion of all else: as if God were an 'Object' that must be preferred to 'all other objects'. In *A vow of conversation* Merton reflects on the 'unutterable confusion of those who think that God is a mental object and that to "love God alone" is to exclude all other objects and concentrate on this one. Fatal. Yet that is why so many misunderstand the meaning of contemplation . . .'¹³

The discovery of the true self—whether in contemplation or in death—is the termination of the experience of duality. More than that it is the end of dualistic speech. At this point it seems proper for me to admit that the principal difficulty in reading this article, not to say in the writing of it, is that the language we speak rises out of the experience of duality. The language of non-dualism is silence: a communing that is beyond words and beyond thoughts. One of the problems I have experienced in writing this article is that I have had to put words on silence. I have been obliged to describe non-dualism with terms that are dualistic. Almost inevitably this means that I have given an impression that I do not intend to convey: namely, the notion that when I talk about the 'true self' and the 'false self' there is somehow a third party who *has* these 'two' selves and in whom 'they' battle to see who wins out. I will mention just two examples of what I mean. Early in the article I said, '*we* are alienated from our true self', and later, something similar: 'The false self keeps *us* on the surface of reality'. The obvious question that comes to a perceptive reader is: whom are we designating when we speak of the 'alienated we' or the 'us kept on the surface of reality'? And, lest you think that it is I who am muddling language, let me cite yet another example of this dualistic writing, but this time from one of Merton's works. In his book *The wisdom of the desert*, he speaks of the spiritual journey of the Fathers of the Egyptian desert: an inner journey more important, he believes, than any flight into outer space. For Merton asks, 'What can we gain by sailing to the moon, if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?'¹⁴ What he is saying is that we have to cross the abyss that separates our surface consciousness from the deep and creative realm of the unconscious. Only when we cross over do we become our true self. At this point, dualistic language simply breaks down. For if my true self is on the other

side of the abyss, who is it that crosses over the abyss? I simply cannot give an answer to this koan-like question. There is no real crossing over. For the true self simply is. And that is it. As Merton once expressed it: 'You have to experience duality for a long time until you see it's not there'.¹⁵

Meanwhile, by being attentive, we come to realize our inner potential and begin to 'find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations'.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Carr, Anne E.: *A search for wisdom and spirit: Thomas Merton's theology of the self* (Notre Dame, 1988); Thurston, Bonnie Bowman: 'Self and the world: two directions of the spiritual life', *Cistercian Studies*, vol 18 (1983), pp 149-155; Shannon, William H: 'Thomas Merton and the discovery of the real self', *Cistercian Studies*, vol 13 (1978), pp 298-308; Shannon, William H: 'Thomas Merton and the quest for self-identity', *Cistercian Studies*, vol 22 (1987), pp 172-189; Kilcourse, George: 'Personifications of the true self in Thomas Merton's poetry', *Cistercian Studies*, vol 24 (1989), pp 144-53.

² Merton, Thomas: *Thomas Merton letters: the hidden ground of love* (New York, 1985), p 115.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Merton, Thomas: *New seeds of contemplation* (New York, 1962), p 167.

⁵ *Hidden ground of love*, p 341.

⁶ *New seeds*, p 3.

⁷ *New seeds*, p 13.

⁸ Unpublished Letter to Marie Tadie, (Merton Center, Louisville, Kentucky): 22 November 1962.

⁹ Unpublished Notes (Merton Center, Louisville, Kentucky).

¹⁰ Merton, Thomas: *Faith and violence* (Notre Dame, 1968), p 112.

¹¹ Merton, Thomas: *Love and living* (New York, 1979), p 199.

¹² *Faith and violence*, p 115.

¹³ Merton, Thomas: *A vow of conversation* (New York, 1988), p 142.

¹⁴ Merton, Thomas: *The wisdom of the desert* (New York, 1960), p 11.

¹⁵ Steindl-Rast, David: 'Recollections of Thomas Merton's last days in the West' *Monastic Studies* (September 1969), pp 1-10.