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Beyond Words: Thomas Merton's Transformative Encounter with Tibetan Buddhism

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Abstract: This paper examines Thomas Merton's 1968 pilgrimage to Asia as a pivotal moment in the development of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. While Merton's journey is often remembered for its personal and spiritual significance, this study argues that it also represents an early example of comparative theology in practice. Drawing on his encounters with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and Chatral Rinpoche, the paper explores how Merton moved beyond surface-level exchanges to engage deeply with Tibetan Buddhist contemplative traditions. Through his dialogue with Trungpa, he confronted the dangers of "spiritual materialism" and recognized parallels with the challenges faced by modern Western monasticism. In conversation with the Dalai Lama, he reflected on the renewal of contemplative life, learning that discipline, wisdom, and compassion must be integrated for authentic practice. His meeting with Chatral Rinpoche, who emphasized direct realization and mystical language, prepared him for the culminating experience at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, where Merton articulated a vision of unity between emptiness and compassion. To frame this analysis, the paper draws on Catherine Cornille's account of the essential virtues for dialogue-humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality-and Francis X. Clooney's definition of comparative theology as "faith seeking understanding" across religious boundaries. The study concludes that Merton's pilgrimage anticipated later theological methods while offering a model of contemplative dialogue that is faithful to one's tradition yet open to transformation through encounter. His unfinished vision continues to inspire contemporary efforts toward interreligious understanding and peace.

Keywords: Thomas Merton; interreligious dialogue; comparative theology

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1. Introduction

It is important to situate Thomas Merton's transformative encounters with Tibetan Buddhism within broader theoretical frameworks of interreligious engagement. This paper focuses on two influential perspectives: Francis X. Clooney's articulation of comparative theology and Catherine Cornille's exploration of the "im-possibility of dialogue." These frameworks provide valuable conceptual tools for interpreting Merton's pilgrimage, helping to understand his engagement with Tibetan masters not merely as anecdotal experiences but as exemplary instances of contemplative learning across traditions [1].

Catherine Cornille's *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* emphasizes the virtues or preconditions necessary for dialogue to occur. Cornille argues that genuine dialogue is profoundly challenging-indeed, "impossible" without certain theological dispositions-but becomes feasible when participants cultivate five specific virtues:

- 1) Humility: Acknowledging the limitations of one's own formulations of truth and resisting the temptation to absolutize doctrines.

- 2) Commitment: Engaging from within a tradition, providing accountability and a community to which the fruits of dialogue can be returned.
- 3) Interconnection: Presupposing that religions can speak meaningfully to one another.
- 4) Empathy: Entering imaginatively into the consciousness of the other.
- 5) Hospitality: Remaining open to recognizing authentic truth in the differences of another tradition, rather than merely in its similarities.

Cornille's framework offers a lens for understanding why Merton's encounters were transformative: they embodied the virtues that make genuine dialogue possible [2].

If Cornille explains why Merton's engagement could occur, Francis X. Clooney clarifies the methodology through which its purpose and outcomes can be understood. In *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, he defines comparative theology as a discipline of "faith seeking understanding," deliberately engaging another tradition in order to return home with new insights. Clooney emphasizes that the theologian does not abandon commitment to one's own faith but, precisely from that rootedness, takes the risk of learning deeply from another tradition. His method involves close reading of texts, patience, deference, and openness to the other tradition's wisdom [3]. Crucially, Clooney insists that the results of such engagement do not dilute one's identity but rather renew it [4]. By borrowing conceptual resources, metaphors, and doctrinal insights, comparative theology offers a path toward a richer understanding of one's own faith.

This approach illuminates Merton's journey. He did not travel to Asia as an academic researcher compiling notes on Tibetan Buddhism. He consistently identified himself as a monk, committed to his Christian vocation, yet remained willing to learn from his Tibetan counterparts. Reading Merton through the lens of comparative theology frames his pilgrimage as an early, intuitive exercise in the type of deep cross-border learning that Clooney later theorized [5]. Merton's engagement with Buddhist categories was not syncretism but a constructive act of comparative theology, enriching Christian contemplation by listening attentively to another tradition.

Taken together, Cornille and Clooney offer complementary perspectives for analyzing Merton's interreligious journey. Cornille highlights the personal and spiritual dispositions that enabled Merton to enter dialogue, while Clooney clarifies the theological method at work in his appropriation of Buddhist vocabulary and contemplative insights, showing how such engagement can deepen rather than weaken Christian identity. Both frameworks move the interpretation of Merton's pilgrimage beyond a simple description of events toward a critical evaluation of its significance for interreligious dialogue. Applying these perspectives, this paper demonstrates that Merton's Asian pilgrimage was a pioneering act of comparative theology, transforming himself while offering a model for how contemplative dialogue can foster a deeper, more nuanced, and authentic faith.

2. Theoretical Framework

Thomas Merton's transformative encounters with Tibetan Buddhism can be better understood within broader theoretical frameworks of interreligious engagement. This paper draws on two influential perspectives: Francis X. Clooney's articulation of comparative theology and Catherine Cornille's exploration of the "im-possibility of dialogue." These frameworks help clarify how Merton's engagement with Tibetan masters represents more than anecdotal experience, functioning instead as exemplary instances of contemplative learning across traditions [6].

Catherine Cornille's *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* emphasizes the virtues or preconditions necessary for dialogue to occur. She argues that genuine dialogue is profoundly challenging-indeed, "impossible" without certain theological dispositions-but becomes achievable when participants cultivate five specific virtues:

- 1) Humility: Acknowledging the limitations of one's own formulations of truth and resisting the temptation to absolutize doctrines.
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Cornille's framework provides a lens for understanding why Merton's encounters were transformative: they embodied the virtues that make genuine dialogue possible.

While Cornille explains why Merton's engagement could occur, Francis X. Clooney clarifies the methodology for understanding its purpose and results. In *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, he defines comparative theology as a discipline of "faith seeking understanding," deliberately engaging another tradition in order to return home with new insights. Clooney emphasizes that the theologian does not abandon commitment to one's own faith but, precisely from that rootedness, takes the risk of learning deeply from another tradition. His method involves close reading of texts, patience, deference, and openness to the wisdom of the other tradition. Importantly, Clooney insists that such engagement does not dilute identity but renews it. By borrowing conceptual resources, metaphors, and doctrinal insights, comparative theology opens a path toward a richer understanding of one's own faith [7].

This approach aligns closely with Merton's journey. He did not travel to Asia as an academic researcher merely compiling notes on Tibetan Buddhism. He consistently identified as a monk, committed to his Christian vocation, yet remained open to learning from his Tibetan counterparts. Reading Merton through the lens of comparative theology frames his pilgrimage as an early, intuitive exercise in deep cross-border learning, the type that Clooney later theorized. Merton's engagement with Buddhist categories was not syncretism but a constructive act of comparative theology, enriching Christian contemplation by attentively listening to another tradition [8].

Together, Cornille and Clooney offer complementary perspectives for analyzing Merton's interreligious journey. Cornille highlights the personal and spiritual dispositions that enabled Merton to enter dialogue, while Clooney clarifies the theological method underpinning his appropriation of Buddhist vocabulary and contemplative insights. This demonstrates how such engagement can deepen rather than weaken Christian identity. Both frameworks move the interpretation of Merton's pilgrimage beyond a descriptive account toward a critical evaluation of its significance for interreligious dialogue. Applying these perspectives, Merton's Asian pilgrimage emerges as a pioneering act of comparative theology, transforming himself while offering a model for how contemplative dialogue can foster a deeper, more nuanced, and authentic faith [9].

3. Meeting with Trungpa: Spiritual Materialism and Grace

When Merton arrived in Calcutta in October 1968, the first Tibetan master he met was Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a young tulku of the Kagyu school and a pioneer in introducing Tibetan Buddhism to the West. Before fleeing Tibet in 1959, Trungpa had served as the supreme abbot of Zurmang Monastery in Kham, East Tibet. His line of tulkus is associated with both the mahamudra (the Great Seal) and dzogchen (the Great Perfection) meditation lineages. Merton, a Trappist monk seeking spiritual authenticity, wrote in *The Asian Journal* after meeting Trungpa: "Chogyam Trungpa is a completely marvelous person. Young, natural, without front or artifice, deep, awake, wise." Trungpa, in turn, acknowledged Merton's sincerity, later describing him as "an old friend, a genuine friend," and the first "genuine person" he had met from the West. Their dialogue was

mutually transformative, grounded in a shared concern for the erosion of authentic spiritual practice in the modern age [10].

Central to their discussions was the concept of "spiritual materialism," which Trungpa developed to describe the misuse of spiritual practices for personal status, reputation, or identity. Simmer-Brown summarized the phenomenon as "monks performed rituals for patronage, empowerments were collected like souvenirs, and sectarian rivalry flourished. Genuine practitioners were becoming as rare as stars at noontime." By outlining spiritual materialism, Trungpa cautioned that spiritual practitioners must prioritize internal transformation over external validation.

Trungpa later gave Merton a copy of the *Sadhana of Mahamudra*, encapsulating his vision for overcoming spiritual materialism. This gesture expressed both trust and respect and reinforced their shared understanding that authentic spiritual practice requires resisting institutional decay [11].

Trungpa's warning about overreliance on external structures resonated with Merton's critiques of Christian monasticism. In his journal, he noted that "[Trungpa] has the same problems we have with 'progressive' monks whose idea of modernization is to go non-contemplative, to be 'productive' and academic." He observed that such "progressive" monks trivialized monastic life through "exterior and formal ritualism" that was "emptied of its truly living traditional content." Their mutual concern over institutional complacency and the misuse of spiritual practices formed the basis for a profound dialogue. Merton believed that the erosion of tradition and discipline reduced the spiritual journey to empty formality rather than fostering genuine transformation.

This resonance between Trungpa's insights and Merton's concerns emerged in Merton's Bangkok address on December 10, 1968, delivered just hours before his death. In his talk, *Marxism and Monastic Perspectives*, Merton emphasized a key principle for contemporary monasticism:

From now on, everybody stands on his own feet. ... You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared.

Merton's statement underscores the need for individuals to take responsibility for their contemplative lives. He further argued that this principle is central to both Christianity and Buddhism:

This, I think, is what Buddhism is about, what Christianity is about, what monasticism is about-if you understand it in terms of grace.

Here, Merton's insights echo Trungpa's critique while framing it within the Christian theological notion of grace, which emphasizes that self-reliance in the spiritual life does not reject divine aid but cultivates the inner capacity to encounter it authentically. For Merton, true spiritual growth arises when practitioners take personal responsibility for their path, even in the absence of institutional structures such as monasteries or churches. This focus on interior responsiveness parallels the Tibetan Buddhist concept of *adhishtāna* (blessing or grace) in *Vajrayāna* practice. In this tradition, *adhishtāna* is not arbitrarily bestowed but represents regenerative energy transmitted through lineage and awakened by devotion in the presence of realized masters such as Padmasambhava. While Christian grace traditionally denotes a divine gift from God, Merton, drawing on his learning from Tibetan Buddhism, reinterpreted grace as mutual attunement and active transformation.

Building on this exchange with Trungpa, Merton subsequently met with another Tibetan Buddhist master, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama [12].

4. Meeting with 14th Dalai Lama: Renewal of Contemplation

Merton's three meetings with the 14th Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in November 1968 marked a pivotal moment in his pilgrimage, deepening his understanding of contemplation, monastic life, and interreligious dialogue. The connection between the two men was immediate and evident. Merton, a robust man of 53, and the young, energetic

Dalai Lama, then 33, found common ground not only in their shared contemplative routines-Merton rising at 2:30 a.m. and the Dalai Lama at 3:30 a.m. for prayer and meditation-but also in their humor and intellectual curiosity. Merton described the Dalai Lama as "strong and alert... a very solid, energetic, generous, and warm person," noting that their conversation focused entirely on "religion and philosophy and especially ways of meditation," without a single word of politics. These exchanges were genuine dialogues between two deeply spiritual individuals, which the Dalai Lama would later recall as one of his "happiest memories."

A central theme of their discussions was a comparative exploration of Christian and Tibetan Buddhist monasticism. The Dalai Lama was deeply curious about the specifics of the Cistercian tradition, asking Merton to explain the meaning of his vows and the structure of his monastic life. In turn, Merton discovered shared concerns: just as he worried about a "monastic crisis" in the West, he learned that Tibetan monks similarly lamented having "too much work to do and too little time for meditation." This mutual concern for preserving the authentic contemplative essence of monasticism amidst institutional demands reinforced their bond and highlighted a universal challenge within monastic traditions [13].

Although their discussions covered a range of topics, Merton's deepest curiosity focused on meditation and the yogic path, particularly the advanced practice of dzogchen. He approached the Dalai Lama not merely as a scholar but as an earnest practitioner seeking guidance. Recognizing Merton's spiritual depth, the Dalai Lama offered candid and detailed advice. He affirmed dzogchen as a "direct path" while stressing that its profound simplicity should not be mistaken for ease. He recommended that Merton first build a solid foundation through study of madhyamika (middle way) philosophy, ensuring his contemplative practice was properly grounded. This integration of experiential practice with rigorous intellectual discipline resonated with Merton's evolving convictions. He concluded that contemplative renewal depended on a process of disciplined practice, new self-discovery, and sound theological grounding, aiming to make contemplation accessible to all. In the Dalai Lama's guidance, Merton found affirmation that authentic contemplation required both philosophical wisdom (madhyamika) and direct experiential insight (dzogchen). This synthesis of method and understanding, disciplined learning and personal exploration, became a cornerstone of his vision for a modern, authentic contemplative life [14].

The impact of these meetings was profound and mutual. Merton wrote in his Journal that he felt a "real spiritual bond" had been forged, noting that they had become "very good friends." The Dalai Lama honored him with the title of "Catholic geshe," a high recognition in the Gelugpa school. Years later, the Dalai Lama stated that it was Thomas Merton who "introduced [him] to the real meaning of the word 'Christian'," opening his awareness to the depth of the Christian tradition. This rich exchange, grounded in both personal affinity and deep theological inquiry, prepared Merton for his next significant encounter with Chatral Rinpoche, one of the foremost dzogchen masters of the time [15].

5. Meeting with Chatral: Direct Realization & Mystical Language

Among all of Merton's encounters in Asia, none appears to have had a deeper impact on his contemplative journey than his meeting with Kyabje Chatral Rinpoche. Seeking a brief retreat in Darjeeling after his time in Dharamsala, Merton traveled to the nearby Ghoom area on November 16, 1968, to visit Chatral's small hermitage. The encounter proved so decisive that Merton later declared Chatral Rinpoche his dzogchen guru. Merton's Journal entry offers a vivid portrait of the master: "Chatral looked like a vigorous old peasant... He had a week's growth of beard, bright eyes, a strong voice and was very articulate." This image of a rugged, unpretentious yogi, free from institutional formality, immediately resonated with Merton. Their conversation lasted nearly two hours, covering

topics such as "the ultimate emptiness, the unity of *śūnyata* (emptiness) and *karuṇa* (compassion), going 'beyond the *dharmakāya*' (truth body) and 'beyond God.'"

Merton wrote that Chatral was "the greatest rinpoche I have met so far and a very impressive person," while Chatral reportedly called Merton a *rangjung sangay* (naturally arisen Buddha) and predicted they might attain complete enlightenment in this life or the next. Beyond verbal exchange, Merton sensed a profound, shared understanding: "The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow on the edge of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it." This mutual respect reflected their ease in crossing cultural boundaries and focusing on shared contemplative pursuits. Merton even considered an extended stay with Chatral, noting in his Journal: "If I were going to settle down with a Tibetan guru, I think Chatral would be the one I'd choose."

Prior dialogues had already acquainted Merton with Tibetan Buddhist epistemology and monastic structures, but his conversation with Chatral shifted the emphasis toward direct experience and yogic practice. They discussed *ngondro* (the four preliminary practices), *dzogchen*, and *Nyingmapa* meditation, reaching a shared understanding of the "direct realization" method. Chatral's comparison of Christian and Buddhist perspectives—on the Risen Christ, suffering, and compassion for all beings—while continually returning to "the ultimate emptiness," provided Merton with an example of integrating doctrine and intense personal practice. After this dialogue, Merton found new ways to articulate the Christian experience of God through Buddhist concepts such as *śūnyata* and *karuṇā*. Merton employed these terms not as facile syncretism but as precise tools to express aspects of Christian mystical life, borrowing language like *anatta* (no-self), *śūnyata*, and *satori* (enlightened experience) to convey inner experiences [16].

Thus, Merton's dialogue with Chatral equipped him with a more expansive vocabulary to bridge Christian contemplative theology and Tibetan Buddhism. It affirmed his conviction that authentic spiritual growth requires both interior discipline and the courage to engage with traditions beyond one's own. Although Merton remained Christian in faith and practice, Chatral's influence, alongside Merton's prior dialogues with Tibetan teachers, arguably prepared him for the "enlightenment" experience at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. Seventeen days after meeting Chatral, while gazing at a sculpture of the peacefully declining Buddha in Polonnaruwa, Merton wrote:

suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious... The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya*...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. 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 [17].

Merton's sudden perception echoed *dzogchen* teaching, which holds that enlightenment is not a distant goal but an ever-present reality directly apprehensible in experience. Although his knowledge of Buddhism was limited, Merton's inner realization revealed the fundamental source and method for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. The Polonnaruwa experience does not indicate that Merton became a Buddhist or a Buddha; rather, it demonstrates how his time in India expanded his contemplative perception, enabling him to apprehend experiences "beyond words." This moment has been described as the pinnacle of self-emptying in *dzogchen*, in which the totality of love, freedom, and awe became perfectly clear. While *dzogchen* is often presented as the culmination of a complex nine-stage path, it is more accurately based on a single, simple point: the direct realization of naturally abiding enlightenment within one's own experience. Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa thus stands as both the climax of his Asian pilgrimage and a testament to the transformative potential of interreligious dialogue [18].

6. Conclusion

Thomas Merton's 1968 pilgrimage to Asia presented a vision of interreligious dialogue in which Christian mystics and Buddhist practitioners could learn from one another's "lifetime of hard work in training their minds and liberating themselves from passion and illusion." By engaging with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Chatral Rinpoche, Merton not only reshaped his personal contemplative practice but also outlined a pathway for broader dialogue that transcends dogmatic and cultural boundaries. His pilgrimage thus stands as an early model of comparative theology in action, anticipating later developments in the discipline.

The encounters described in this paper demonstrate the progression of Merton's engagement with Tibetan Buddhism. From Trungpa Rinpoche, Merton absorbed the critique of "spiritual materialism," recognizing the dangers of reducing religious practice to external validation and institutional complacency. He saw in Trungpa's vision of authentic practice a reflection of his own frustrations with "progressive" monks in the West. Their dialogue affirmed that genuine spiritual growth requires interior transformation and vigilance against the trivialization of contemplative life [19].

With the Dalai Lama, Merton deepened his reflection on the renewal of monasticism and the contemporary meaning of contemplation. Their extended conversations, free from political concerns, revealed both a profound mutual respect and a shared commitment to preserving the contemplative essence of monastic institutions amid modern pressures. The Dalai Lama's insistence on combining wisdom and method resonated with Merton's conviction that contemplation involves both disciplined effort and personal self-discovery. This guidance helped him reconceptualize contemplation from a cloistered ideal into a practice accessible to all, rooted in responsibility and compassion.

The dialogue reached its most decisive moment with Chatral Rinpoche, whom Merton recognized as his Dzogchen guru. During their intense two-hour meeting, Merton encountered a form of contemplative life radically free from institutional structures, focused instead on direct realization. Chatral's integration of *śūnyatā* and *karuṇā*-emptiness and compassion-provided Merton with both a new vocabulary and a model of mystical authenticity. This encounter prepared him for the breakthrough experience at Polonnaruwa, where he was "jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things" and realized that "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion." The Polonnaruwa moment stands as the climax of Merton's Asian pilgrimage, when his Christian mystical sensibility and Tibetan Buddhist contemplative insights converged in an aesthetic illumination that transcended verbal expression.

Viewed through the theoretical frameworks of Catherine Cornille and Francis X. Clooney, Merton's pilgrimage gains additional significance. Cornille's five virtues-humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality-are evident throughout his journey. His self-description as a "pilgrim" signals humility and vulnerability, a willingness to receive rather than impose. His retention of Christian identity demonstrates commitment, distinguishing openness from syncretistic borrowing. His attentive listening to Tibetan masters reveals empathy, as he allowed their differences to challenge his assumptions. Most importantly, his hospitality toward Buddhist practices-recognizing authentic contemplative depth-reflects his openness to truths expressed in unfamiliar ways. These dispositions explain why his dialogues were both transformative and enduring.

Clooney's comparative theology illuminates the constructive theological dimension of Merton's engagement. He did not adopt Buddhist terms as syncretic borrowings but as tools to articulate Christian mystical life with greater precision. Terms such as *dzogchen*, *śūnyatā*, and *anatta* were employed to express aspects of Christian mystical experience, not to signify a shift in religious identity. Merton's pilgrimage exemplifies comparative theology as "faith seeking understanding" through deep learning across traditions, leading to a renewed and more authentic faith.

Merton's death in Bangkok hours after his final address left this vision unfinished. Yet even in his final speech, he articulated the enduring promise of contemplative dialogue, emphasizing that both Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity recognize an "inner secret" where "you attain to a liberty that nobody can touch." For Merton, this liberty was spiritual rather than political, grounded in contemplative depth that circumstances could not erase. He envisioned collaborative projects, such as collections of Buddhist writings introduced by a Christian monk, as a way to institutionalize the fruits of his encounters. Though unrealized, these ideas remain an invitation to subsequent generations.

Looking forward, Merton's unfinished vision suggests several paths for exploration. For scholars, his pilgrimage underscores the importance of comparative theology as a rigorous method for interreligious learning, balancing openness with rootedness. For monastics and practitioners, it demonstrates that authentic dialogue requires both deep commitment to one's tradition and openness to transformation through encounter. For the contemporary world, Merton's insistence that contemplation is accessible to all and can foster peace remains profoundly relevant. His aspiration for Buddhist-Christian dialogue embodies a belief in attainable freedom and transformation, inspiring ongoing efforts toward interreligious understanding and a more peaceful world, where each participant is simultaneously learner and teacher.

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