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I am dedicating this work to my wife, my family, and to the memory of Dr. Susan Conley-Weeks whose passion for teaching religion inspired me to pursue further education in this field.

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis will be to take a comparative look at the idea of forgiveness in two different traditions: Christianity and Buddhism. In order to keep the scope of the work both focused and manageable, we will narrow it down to one individual from each religion. The people whose works were chosen are Fr. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), who comes from the Catholic Christian tradition, and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), who was a Tibetan Buddhist. The first section will deal with Merton's writings and ideas on forgiveness, the second will tackle what can be found in reference to forgiveness in Chogyam Trungpa's works. Finally, in the third section, we will compare and contrast the two men's ideas.

Thomas Merton and Chogyam Trungpa were chosen for this work for three main reasons beyond a personal opinion that they were both interesting and complex characters. The first reason that they were chosen is because they were both figures that featured prominently in their traditions. Chogyam Trungpa has been called "The father of Tibetan Buddhism in America" for his work teaching and traveling in the United States; Thomas Merton was a well known figure in America due to his activism and his extensive writing – specifically his bestseller *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The second reason these two men were chosen is closely related to the first: the times and places that they were active overlapped. The final reason for the choice of Fr. Merton and Chogyam Trungpa is that they knew each other; in fact, during the final talk

that Thomas Merton gave, just hours before his death, he referred to Chogyam Trungpa as someone who he, “Considered a good friend of mine – a very interesting person indeed.”¹

The basis for the choice of forgiveness as the topic of this thesis started as a personal interest. Coming from the Christian tradition, forgiveness is held up as one of the highest and noblest of acts that a person can offer another. At some point in my academic study of religion, however, I was made aware of the fact that all religious traditions do not make use of the same specific terminology or the concept as I had understood it; instead, they may be more comfortable with the language of atonement, loving-kindness, or a myriad of other terms that each hold their own complex and weighted definitions, nuances, and meanings. In some cases, as in the case of Buddhism, the language and understanding is significantly different enough that it seemed worthwhile to undertake a comparative study of the two traditions’ teachings surrounding forgiveness, or what could be best approximated as forgiveness in the case of Buddhism.

Just as the scope of the work must be pared down from looking at forgiveness inside of Christianity and Buddhism broadly to seeking out two individuals’ writings, my hope for the contributions of this thesis to the academic study of religion is narrow. The goal of the thesis is to examine two individuals,

¹ Merton, Thomas. “Appendix VII: Marxism and Monastic Perspective,” *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1975), 337-338.

Thomas Merton and Chogyam Trungpa, both of whom wrote extensively and add to the discussion of their work by looking at one aspect of their writings and teachings. In the process of the thesis my hope is that a comparative work will deepen, in some small way, the understanding of what they had to say on forgiveness by first exploring what they each said individually then comparing and contrasting their ideas.

Thomas Merton was born in France on January 31st, 1915. His mother was from America and his father from New Zealand; both were artists. Merton's parents both died while he was still in his teens. He studied in England before moving to America and finishing up his education at Columbia University. Merton was a convert to Catholicism after what some would consider a "rambunctious" youth. In December of 1941 he joined a Trappist monastery and was also known as "Fr. Louis" after his ordination. Merton is best known for his writings, activism, and pioneering work in the area of interreligious dialogue. He passed away in December of 1968, on the 27th anniversary of his entrance into the Trappists.²

Born in Tibet, in 1939, Chogyam Trungpa was a Tibetan Buddhist in the Vajrayana School, specifically the Karma Kagyu Lineage,³ "The 11th descendent

² "Thomas Merton's Life and work" The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://merton.org/chrono.aspx#Chrono>.

³ Chogyam Trungpa, "Introduction to Volume Two," *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa Volume Two*, ed. Carolyn Gimian (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2003), ix.

in the line of Trungpa tulku, important teachers of the Kagyü lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.”⁴ He was also taught in the Nyingma tradition. In 1959 when he was 20 years old he fled Tibet, initially for India. Chogyam Trungpa studied in England at Oxford, moved to America in 1970 and set up his first meditation center in the United States.⁵ Chogyam Trungpa died in April of 1987 leaving behind a complicated legacy.

Merton and Trungpa did have a short-lived relationship, meeting for the first time slightly less than two months before Merton’s death, but in their limited interactions they did seem to find a genuine fondness for each other. Judith Simmer-Brown notes that the two men’s first encounter occurred by chance in Calcutta on Merton’s first day in India and only shortly after a month-long retreat that Trungpa had taken in Taktsang, translated as “Tigers Nest,” a sacred cave in the Himalayas.⁶ After the initial meeting, the two men spoke highly of one another. Merton noted in his journal that, “Chogyam Trungpa is a completely marvelous person. Young, natural, without front or artifice, deep, awake, wise. I am sure we will be seeing a lot more of each other...”⁷ Trungpa seemed to be equally impressed, saying, “Meeting Thomas Merton was

⁴“Chogyam Trungpa,” accessed March 15, 2015, <http://shambhala.org/teachers/chogyam-trungpa/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Simmer-Brown, Judith, “The Heart Is the Common Ground: Thomas Merton and Chogyam Trungpa in Dialogue,” *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010): 49-50.

⁷ Merton, Thomas, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hard and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 30.

wonderful; he was like a child, and at the same time, he was full of energy and life.”⁸

In his autobiography, Trungpa noted that the two even spoke of working together, “on a book bringing together sacred writings of the Catholic and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions.”⁹ During these interactions Merton and Chogyam discovered they shared a passion for “vibrant Spirituality, effective response to secularism and materialism, and a committed contemplative life.”¹⁰ After founding Naropa University in Colorado, Trungpa set up a series of conferences on meditation inside Buddhism and Christianity that he dedicated to Thomas Merton.¹¹ There is no doubt that the friendship was short-lived due to Merton’s sudden death, but from the words of the two men themselves it appears to have left a mark on both.

Both Merton and Chogyam Trungpa had deeply held personal beliefs and were at the same time friends. Like Merton, Chogyam took his tradition seriously but at the same time was open and respectful of other traditions, both inside and outside of Tibetan Buddhism. Gehlek Rimpoche reminisced in a chapter entitled “Chogyam Trungpa; Father of Tibetan Buddhism in the United

⁸ Simmer-Brown “The Heart is the Common Ground,” 51.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 52.

States” that he and Chogyam would often talk about their respective lineages of Buddhism, stating they “Made jokes. I would say mine was superior, and he would say his was superior. We didn’t mean anything by it.”¹² Gehlek Rimpoche also noted that, “Trungpa Rimpoche was a very strict monk. He carried very strongly the tradition of his own lineage, yet he was absolutely open to the other sects of Tibetan traditions. Not only that, but also he was quite open to the Judeo-Christian religion as well.”¹³

In the section of this paper on Fr. Merton we will begin by looking Thomas Merton’s experience of forgiveness and what forgiveness means in a Christian context. Then we will move on to what Merton brings to the table in his writings. We will start by looking at a Christian’s duty to forgive others as they have been forgiven, then see how Merton’s view of sacrament ties into forgiveness. We will also explore some of Merton’s writings on the necessity of self-reflection in relation to forgiveness, and then briefly look at some of his writings on relationships.

There are difficulties when writing a comparative work on an idea that has no direct correlations in two separate traditions. Writing on Fr. Thomas Merton’s and Chogyam Trungpa’s views of forgiveness is, to an extent, an

¹² Gehlek Rimpoche, "Chogyam Trungpa; Father of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States," *Recalling Chogyam Trungpa*, ed. Fabrice Midal (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2005), 417.

¹³ Gehlek Rimpoche, *Recalling Chogyam Trungpa*, 414.

example of such difficulties. While often times one can comfortably write about the concept of forgiveness from a Christian author's perspective, stepping into the sphere of Buddhism generally, and in this case the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism specifically, poses some difficulties. But while there is not a direct correlation, we can find aspects of teachings and beliefs that point to a common goal. So the purpose of the second portion of the paper will be to bring to light some of those teachings that Chogyam Trungpa wrote about that can approximate, in aggregate, aspects of the Christian ideal of forgiveness, at which point we can compare and tease out the similarities and differences in the approaches of the two in the third section.

Father Thomas Merton

While Merton did write extensively in his lifetime, he did not write extensively on forgiveness. This does not mean that we cannot glean some important conclusions about what may have been his views on forgiveness, both from his actual words on forgiveness and from other topics that he covered in more depth. Merton spoke about his view of mercy, as well as the Christian understanding of sacrament, baptism, peace, love, and relationships. It is from these perspectives, and from the limited writings on the specific subject of forgiveness, that we can gain insight into both the Christian view of forgiveness in general and how Fr. Merton's writings add to the conversation in particular.

When reading what Merton does have to say on the subject of forgiveness, one gets the feeling that Merton is in a sense renewing the word forgiveness with the ideals he espouses. Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams, in his book *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton*, compares some of Merton's writings to that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He notably compared Merton's struggle to find language that is not cheapened or too comfortable for believers,

The words of faith are too well-known to believers for their meaning to be knowable. And outside the language of faith, the temptations are to use your words as a demonstration of individual drama, an indulgence of the ego. Caught between clichés and posturing, what is the believer to do? ...He acknowledges that almost any words in the modern cultural setting will be worn and shabby or

illusory and self serving.¹⁴

The reader will get the feeling that Merton is attempting to renew the language of forgiveness. What he views as a more accurate meaning of forgiveness is so uncomfortably real and new to the believer that they have no choice but to grapple deeply with the concept, and rediscover a deeper meaning of the words.

In the following pages we will discuss a variety of writings and ideas that Thomas Merton laid out on the subject of forgiveness, but the place that one needs to start with Merton's thoughts on this subject is his experience of mercy and forgiveness. These have a dramatic effect on his views and how one understands them. Without his personal experience Merton's ideas can come off as based heavily on duty. While it is true that one can say that Merton felt that there was a duty to forgive, it is important that this is balanced by his realization that he had been shown so much mercy and forgiveness through his own life. The way in which he talked about the forgiveness that he had been shown tempers the idea that the necessity to forgive was only, or primarily, following rules or out of a fear of punishment; rather, it is more accurate to say that he felt forgiveness and mercy were important primarily because he had been shown so much forgiveness. Merton was well aware of his own failings and need for mercy both before his ordination and after,

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements With Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 65-66.

He picked [me] up out of the wreckage of the moral universe and brought [me] into His house... The truth is, I am far from being the monk or the cleric that I ought to be. My life is a great mess and tangle of half-conscious subterfuges to evade grace and duty. I have done all things badly. I have thrown away great opportunities. My infidelity to Christ, instead of making me sick with despair, drives me to throw myself all the more blindly into the arms of His mercy.¹⁵

He realizes that the mercy that was shown when his life was “wreckage” and was still being shown to him in the times when he feels he failed and made his life a great mess.

Merton fleshes out a view of mercy by a God who is not as much concerned with keeping score as showing mercy out of love. For Merton cruelty is not a part of God’s nature, but mercy is. One example from his writings that fleshes this idea out is found in *The Sign of Jonas* where Merton says,

I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin.¹⁶

This informs the view that Merton had of mercy and forgiveness. It is not only about the rules and obligations, which do enter the picture, but it is deeply intertwined with his feeling that God’s constant mercy was shown to him.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, “Fire Watch” in *The Sign of Jonas*, (New York, New York: Harcourt, 1981), Kindle Edition.

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, “To the Alter of God” in *The Sign of Jonas* (New York, New York: Harcourt, 1981), Kindle Edition.

While keeping in mind Merton's own personal experience of mercy it is also helpful to gain an understanding of forgiveness by laying out some sort of framework for the concept of forgiveness inside the Christian tradition generally and the Catholic tradition specifically. There are many passages throughout the Christian scriptures that deal with both God's offer of forgiveness to people and the believer's need, or duty, to forgive one another. At points, the Christian scriptures show these two separate forms of forgiveness as linked. Matthew chapter six verses fourteen through fifteen provide a quick example: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."¹⁷ This command is not a single incident inside the Gospels; the author of Mark chose to place a similar passage pointing to the idea of reciprocity in forgiveness in his gospel found in chapter eleven verse twenty five. In both of these cases the authors attribute the words to Jesus. It seems that one should keep in mind the concept of forgiveness is a mandate, or command, and that the promise of God's forgiveness is tied to this command in Christianity.

Merton did expound on this idea of reciprocity in forgiveness in an essay on mercy that was included in *No Man Is an Island*. It appears to be his view that this reciprocity has to do with modeling the divine. Merton shares his view that,

¹⁷ Matthew 6:14-15, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*.

God has left sin in the world in order that there may be forgiveness: not only the secret forgiveness by which He Himself cleanses our souls, but the manifest forgiveness by which we have mercy on one another and so give expression to the fact that He is living, by His mercy, in our hearts.¹⁸

Merton sees the idea of reciprocity not in a negative light; it is not something that one is simply obligated to do to gain a reward or, conversely, to avoid some sort of divine threat with the understanding that God will withhold forgiveness from mankind if forgiveness is not granted to one's fellow man. Rather, he sees the act of forgiveness as a way to make Christ real and present in the world by making Christ real and present in one's life. Merton sees the idea of reciprocity as a way in which God partners with man in bringing forgiveness to the world, as an integral and natural part of the process of God forgiving man:

Forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to the world in Christ, and is granted to each one who, in the act of seeking pardon, himself pardons others and makes himself an instrument of the divine mercy. Sin cannot be pardoned and healed without love, because all sin is, at its root, a refusal of love.¹⁹

The idea of making Christ present in the world by manifesting forgiveness or giving “expression to the fact that He is living,” as Merton puts it, calls to

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (San Diego, CA: A Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc., 1983), Kindle Edition, Chap. 11.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009) P181.

mind the Catholic idea of sacrament. The importance of sacrament in the Catholic Church cannot be understated. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes a sacrament as, “Perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature...They make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.”²⁰ For our purposes, it seems important to focus on this definition when looking at Thomas Merton’s views of forgiveness. We will start to see Merton’s views shaped by a similar understanding because, in this view of sacrament, the participant becomes a partner in the work of God, by making God’s grace present in the world.

The partnership found in sacraments between God and man, and the importance of sacraments, both go beyond the initial administration of any given ritualistic component that is always a part of a Catholic sacrament. As a quick example, let’s look at the sacrament of matrimony. The ritual act is the wedding ceremony. While the symbolism and ritual of the ceremony are important, it is not of utmost importance when we look at the sacrament of marriage as a whole. What is more important in the sacrament is the long-term effect that it has on the two subjects’ lives and the witness that it shares to the community. To continue to use our example of marriage: the married life, or ongoing relationship between the partners, is what makes Christ present to both the couple and the world. The hope is that the couple’s love and partnership will

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1084.

mirror Christ's love and partnership, through both good times and bad, with both believers individually and the Church as a whole. This expectation can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church."²¹

Fr. Merton shows that both sides of a sacrament, both the ritual act and the effect on the individual, are important when he explains sacraments in this way,

In each Sacramental "mystery" we have an outward sign, an action, the application or use of some material element... the outward sign is accompanied by an inward spiritual reality, which it signifies. This inward reality is an effect produced by God in our soul, through the instrumentality of the sacramental action.²²

One of the seven sacraments recognized by the Catholic Church is the sacrament of baptism. This is important for our discussion because baptism is seen as an expression of the divine forgiveness of human sins. If this is a sacrament in which God forgives man's sin, it stands to reason that this is the beginning of the aforementioned reciprocity. This is the point where the partnership begins. Merton writes in his book *The New Man* his view of what

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1617.

²² Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), Kindle Edition, Chapter on Sacramental Illumination.

exactly happens during the sacrament of baptism. He likens it to having died with Christ, stating that it is “a remedy for our sins as if we ourselves had died on the Cross.”²³ According to Merton baptism signals a “new creation.”²⁴ As mentioned above, in Catholic theology baptism is viewed effective for the forgiveness of sin; more precisely, it is effective for the forgiveness of what is often referred to as “original sin.”

When we view baptism taken in concert with Merton’s view of reciprocity and sacrament, we start to gain an understanding of the deep respect that Merton has both for baptism, in which God forgives man’s sin making him into a “new creation,” and for the duty that the Christian has to forgive others which makes that change and new creation present to the whole world. For Merton this new creation that he mentions is directly related to both Christ’s death on the cross and baptism. Specifically, something fresh and new can come from Christ’s death and resurrection: a rebirth that is signaled in baptism.

He believes that Christians should forgive others as Christ forgave on the cross. It is from this position of deep respect that Merton points out that this forgiveness is not a simple form of lip service, where one says “apology accepted.” This would be what Dr. Rowan Williams called, “an indulgence of the ego,” or

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

simply “cliché and posturing.”²⁵ Rather, Merton will call the believer to ponder something deeper, which is a much more humbling experience. Paradoxically, what Merton calls for is quite possibly more humbling for the one forgiving than for the one who is being forgiven.

Fr. Merton proposes that, to forgive, one must necessarily “understand the weaknesses and imperfections of other men.”²⁶ Picking out the imperfections of others in itself would not be humbling. One cannot truly understand weaknesses and imperfections in other men if one simply sits in judgment of others. Rather, s/he must look inside and understand the shortcomings that are inherent within him/herself. In doing this, forgiveness becomes a deeply humbling act for the one that is offering forgiveness, as s/he is brought face to face with his/her own imperfections and his/her own reliance upon the mercy of God.

Actual self-reflection, the kind that Merton speaks of, is not something that comes easily. If this is something that has to happen each and every time a person is wronged, one can quickly start to see how this practice could become exhausting. Every time there is a wrong, whether real or perceived, the offended Christian is commanded to recall his or her own sinful state and remember how,

²⁵ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 65-66.

²⁶ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (San Diego, California: A Harvest Book, 1983), Kindle edition, Chap. 11.

through divine grace, s/he was given forgiveness. The idea that forgiveness can be done without soul-searching and deep reflection on one's own nature is not simply foreign to Merton; he insists that it would be something entirely other than true forgiveness. It would simply be words. When reading what Merton has written on this subject, one is struck by his insistence that forgiveness is not simply the offering of hollow words. As he puts it,

If we forgive them without humility, our forgiveness is a mockery: it presupposes that we are better than they. Jesus descended into the abyss of our degradation in order to forgive us after He had, in a sense, become lower than us all. It is not for us to forgive others from lofty thrones... We must forgive them in the flames of their own hell, for Christ, by means of our forgiveness, once again descends to extinguish the avenging flame.²⁷

Merton rejects outright this cavalier view of forgiveness where the offended party is able to take some form of shallow pity on a person and simply utter words with no meaning. This is because, for Fr. Merton, the act of forgiveness is not something with which Christians are able to look with pity on others, but they are to see their own human condition in others and forgive, because mercy was shown to them when they needed it. Merton expects the Christian to be brought face-to-face with his/her own imperfect human nature.

This is a very clear example of Merton's sacramental view of forgiveness because there is a very real effect on both parties involved. Forgiveness models

²⁷ Ibid.

Christ's own forgiveness of the crowd and executioners in the story of his passion. True forgiveness also mirrors God's forgiveness of man, both in baptism and after baptism. In modeling this, the hope is that forgiveness makes the sacrament of baptism real again to both parties involved. It forces the one offering forgiveness to reflect upon his/her own fallen nature and need for mercy, and how in that fallen state God looked down with pity and forgave in perfect love. If Merton is to be understood correctly, Christians are to understand that the pity that Christ took upon humans caused him actual pain, both literal physical pain in his suffering on the cross and the pain of wrestling with the imperfections of humans on a more internal level. According to Fr. Merton, forgiveness, if it is genuine forgiveness that is going to have an effect on both parties involved, is not something that is painless. Christians are to suffer along with the one they are trying to forgive, and in doing so they share in the suffering of Christ,

Such compassion is not learned without suffering. It is not to be found in a complacent life, in which we platonically forgive the sins of others without any sense that we ourselves are involved in a world of sin. If we want to know God ... We must feel their poverty as Christ experienced our own.²⁸

This suffering is important; it is the Christian reliving their own need for forgiveness before baptism, recalling their own fallen state. This causes the

²⁸ Ibid.

individual to reflect and relive internally the moment of baptism. This may be more meaningful, or at least easier, for a Christian who is baptized as an adult, one who can more readily recall the reasons and desire that drove them to partake in the sacrament. As mentioned above, sacraments also make something present to the rest of the world; in this case the sacrament of baptism becomes more than a theological theory to the one who is being forgiven, in that they are shown the model of God's love and forgiveness. In a small way the one who forgives has become a partner in making real the kingdom of God on earth by modeling forgiveness that is not flippant or easy, but necessarily difficult.

Merton believes that this difficulty partly comes from a natural way that people view themselves and their sins. He believes that people have a tendency to rationalize and minimize their own shortcomings and offenses towards others. People do this by brushing off their sins and shortcomings as merely accidental or simple mistakes, or they justify their sins by focusing on a grave offense that was committed on them.

When we see crimes in others, we try to correct it by destroying them or at least putting them out of sight. It is easy to identify the sin with the sinner when he is someone other than our own self. In ourselves, it is the other way around: we see the sin, but we have great difficulty in shouldering responsibility for it. We find it very hard to identify our own sin with our own will and our own

malice.²⁹

While Merton wrote this passage on some of the causes of war, it is helpful to look at what he had to say in this area as it seems that the lessons that he shares, which were originally penned in reference to a collective (as in the case of war), also hold true for the individual.

His point here appears to be twofold. First, it is difficult to view the offenses of others the same way people view their own offenses. Merton points out that people have a tendency to view their own sin in a much more nuanced way. Sin is often viewed as an accidental oversight, or an action that they did not completely think through. On the other hand, they view the offenses of others as a form of intentional evil. It is much easier to justify hate and insist on holding onto the offense of others, not forgiving, if one views the offense as intentional and evil instead of accidental. Going further, Merton suggests that people also tend to see the person as evil instead of examining the act and the reasons behind the act.

The flip side to this observation is equally difficult for the person pondering his/her own offenses. It insists that one realizes that on occasion s/he, just as others, make choices that cannot be simply written off or marked up as accidental. Instead, s/he too has made choices that are intentional, thought

²⁹ Thomas Merton, "The Root of War is Fear," *Passion for Peace; Reflections on War and Nonviolence* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 27-28.

through, and wrong. With this view, Merton insists that s/he faces his/her own demons head on and realize that s/he is not, in fact, better than anyone else who commits wrong.

This view ties back into Merton's idea of inner reflection, the kind of inner reflection that makes forgiveness difficult, because it makes one recall both his/her own sinful state before baptism and the mindset that leads to any sin. While one can come to either of the conclusions above in any given situation, the individual must recognize both tendencies in themselves: the tendency to make an unconscious error that harms another and also the malicious error that was completely thought through and acted out anyway. With this in mind, Merton insists that a believer partners with God in showing mercy to even those that s/he believes has shown willful malice, those that s/he does not trust.

If we can love the men we cannot trust (without trusting them foolishly) and if we can to some extent share the burden of their sin by identifying ourselves with them, then perhaps there is some hope of a kind of peace on earth, based not on the wisdom and the manipulations of men but on the inscrutable mercy of God.³⁰

To state the obvious, parts of Merton's thinking on forgiveness can come off as depressing; one following this system of thought could easily see him/herself slipping into despair at the constant examinations of his/her unworthiness. This fact does not seem to be lost on Merton; in fact he appears to

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

think it best to find God's mercy and forgiveness at the edge of despair than nowhere at all:

Only the man who has had to face despair is really convinced that he needs mercy... It is better to find God on the threshold of despair than to risk our lives in a complacency that has never felt the need of forgiveness. A life that is without problems may literally be more hopeless than one that always verges on despair.³¹

Merton is pointing out that someone who leads a life without problems may very well never fully understand the need for God's mercy. It is his belief that all humans are in need of that mercy, and seeing in people the lack of knowledge of that basic need is enough for him to conclude that despair is not always a bad thing.

We have seen that Merton does not take the idea of reciprocating forgiveness lightly as he believes that there is something for the Christian to learn about his/her own relationship and standing with God. As mentioned above, the idea of sacrament does involve making Christ present in the world; sacrament is also necessarily a partnership. In an almost cautionary passage, Merton shares his belief that man cannot show mercy and forgiveness on his own; rather, they only flow from God, from the one great source of forgiveness.

Mercy is, then, not simply something we deduce from a previously apprehended concept of the divine Essence, but

³¹ Merton, *No Man is an Island*, chap. 2.

an event in which God reveals himself to us in his redemptive love and in the great gift which is the outcome of this event: our mercy to others.³²

In a journal article dated on September 19th, 1952, Merton writes of an example of people who are not capable of the self-reflection needed to attain forgiveness and mercy. Merton recalls the story found in Luke chapter seven, where Jesus forgives Mary Magdalen to the bewilderment of the Pharisees,

Penance is love which is simple enough and enlightened enough to seek mercy and because it seeks mercy, it has already been forgiven... 'Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved much'... It does not even occur to them that they themselves need forgiveness, and since they do not feel and need of mercy, the question of forgiveness and love is a purely abstract one...³³

It is Merton's assertion that this simple act of self-reflection makes one worthy of the mercy and forgiveness of God. In the same journal section Fr. Merton notes that for the Pharisees forgiveness is, "abstract ... a canonical question, a matter of jurisdiction."³⁴ This further fleshes out the passage mentioned above, in which Merton notes that it is better to find mercy at the "threshold of despair" rather than in complacency.

³² Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1965), 203.

³³ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume 3*, Ed. Lawrence Cunningham (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 16-17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

What Merton is calling Christians to do, then, is whole-heartedly embrace the idea of reciprocal forgiveness. For Merton, it is in the act of self-examination and forgiving others that Christians will again realize their need for forgiveness. It is by the process of self-examination that they will show themselves worthy of the grace of God.

Another area where we may be able to gain some insight into the Christian ideal of forgiveness is in Thomas Merton's writings on relationships and the value of the individual. It is in these passages that we can dig deeper into his views on forgiveness, specifically as it pertains to personal relationships. It is Merton's view that in his day and age people had taken a free-market approach to love and relationships. He thought people looked at themselves as products that need to be packaged in such a way as to attract customers. The following passage is speaking in the context of romantic love and physical relationships, but the passage seems to be applicable to relationships in general.

In doing this we come to consider ourselves and others not as persons but as products---as "goods," or in other words, as packages. We appraise one another commercially. We size each other up and make deals with a view to our own profit. We do not give ourselves in love, we make a deal that will enhance our own product, and therefore no deal is final. Our eye is already on the next deal---and this next deal need not necessarily be with the same customer. Life is more interesting when you make lots of deals with lots of

new customers.³⁵

Let's unpack what Fr. Merton is saying about relationships in light of the Christian ideal of forgiveness. Merton's thoughts on seeing ourselves and others as products may be even more apropos today than they were when he wrote them years ago. We can easily see how our society today fits into what Merton described. We have a tendency to be a "throwaway" society. When something or someone has outlived its usefulness, people simply walk away.

This free-market mentality may be exacerbated in our society by modern technology that Merton could not have dreamed of. So much of what we pass off as relationships has moved online where it is all too simple to just cut ties, or "unfriend" our acquaintances. With the ever more blurring of lines in modern society between one's lives online and in-person, it may be a shorter and shorter step from our digital lives to the "real world" where one can easily view a relationship as dispensable. People have the ability to choose their communities now in a way that they were not so easily able to in the past. This choice in community seems to be available partly because of a society that is mobile, in which individuals are moving from communities they lived in far greater numbers and further away than ever before. The choice is also made easier through the modes of connection and communication that are available. Social media provides one with an avenue to isolate oneself from people and ideas that

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, 29.

s/he does not wish to see. The ease with which people can pick and choose their communities and throw away their relationships makes forgiveness less valuable, because one is more concerned with practicality. But Merton is primarily concerned with showing mercy and not the practicality of relationships.

While certain parts of the situation are new, and others more extreme than what Fr. Merton was writing about, the gist is the same. People have a tendency to wheel and deal when it comes to relationships. When the deal does not work for one side, people tend to walk away and, with the pace of modern society, one now has the ability to walk away faster. People are able to walk away with greater ease as well due to a general lack of face-to-face communication, as there is no need to actually see or hear any person with whom one has interactions.

Merton is saying that this is precisely not the attitude that we should have with our fellow man. Rather, relationships, true and meaningful relationships, are not strictly business ventures. According to Merton, they are not where both sides attempt to squeeze every last bit of usefulness out of the other, whether it be for professional networking, status, or any other form of personal gain, before discarding and moving on. Merton's argument is that, for the Christian, people's value is deeper than simply what they can do for us. Indeed peoples' values are deeper than a wrong they can commit towards us.

This is why the topic of forgiveness, or showing mercy to others, is something that is of importance to him.

When we look at this through the Christian ideal of forgiveness, it gives us a deeper insight on a few different levels. Christianity's view of reciprocity in forgiveness points to the theological belief that no one is without sin, which places all humanity on equal footing. Beyond that, the idea of throwing out relationships due to a perceived wrong flies in the face of the sacramental view of forgiveness that we explored above. Fr. Merton explains that the "New Law" that Jesus came to establish on the earth is about,

Grace and forgiveness, that is to say, submission to a Law of accepting and being accepted, loving and being loved, in a personal encounter with the Lord of Life and with our brother in him.³⁶

That is to say that none of this can be done outside of community; it cannot be done alone. Reading Merton's passage it is easy to see why the very idea of relationships based on the principles of a free-market system will just not work. When a Christian practices this free-market approach to relationships, s/he is rejecting any real chance at forming meaningful relationships. Merton would argue that a free-market approach would be shortsighted. While the free market does anticipate highs and lows, it is operating on a different value system, one based solely on personal gain. One must remember that, in Merton's worldview,

³⁶ Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, 210.

humans will necessarily falter; it is in this faltering that deep relationships are formed, and it is there that true love, a love that is modeled after the love of God can be displayed. Fr. Merton states that, “Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone – we find it with another.”³⁷ The meaning of life is found with the other, because for Merton it necessarily takes an “other” to work out one’s own relationship with God and one’s place in the partnership with God of bringing grace to the world. It seems that, for Merton, this is why relationships with people, who are all just as flawed as the other, are important to nurture.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

There is no direct counterpart or translation in the Buddhist vocabulary for the word “forgiveness;” the word simply does not exist inside of the Buddhist worldview. This presents to us a bit of difficulty in writing directly on the subject. However, there are teachings inside of Buddhism that can give one some ideas of how a Buddhist would deal with harmful deeds and, taken together, those ideas do approximate what some would consider forgiveness. In the following pages we will first cover the idea of “maitri” or loving kindness, and “tonglen” which Chogyam Trungpa taught as a form of sitting meditation where one breathes in bad from the world and breathes out their own good. We will also cover some Buddhist principles that are, at times, wrapped up with maitri and tonglen and also can be taken on their own as aspects of what forgiveness means to many. We will be examining the idea of gratitude, particularly being grateful to others and for circumstances that can cause pain as those are specific opportunities for practice and growth. From there we will examine Chogyam Trungpa’s writings on ego and what he referred to as driving all blame into one.

Maitri is an important aspect of Buddhist teaching that holds some correlation to forgiveness. Chogyam Trungpa noted that, “The beginning point of Buddha nature seems to be the development of maitri, which could be translated as ‘love,’ ‘kindness,’ or ‘a friendly attitude.’”³⁸ When he says Buddha

³⁸ Ibid., 393.

nature in this context, he is speaking of an inborn part of every person's makeup that has the ability to attain enlightenment. According to Chogyam, maitri, the friendly attitude, needs to be developed in relation to the entirety of a person's makeup, not simply the positive things or the things that one finds pleasant about the other; rather,

You accept the neurosis of that friend as well as the sanity of that friend. You accept both extremes of your friend's basic makeup as resources for friendship. If you make friends with someone because you only like certain parts of that friend, then it is not complete friendship, but partial friendship.³⁹

He is reminding the adherent that the seemingly negative needs to be accepted, and used as a tool for realizing and awakening the buddha nature inside oneself.

Chogyam offers a further explanation of what he means when he uses the term "friend" in relation to maitri, saying that, in bodhisattva language, the term friend refers to any guest. A bodhisattva is someone who is on the path to enlightenment and has taken vows to postpone his/her own enlightenment in order to aid other sentient beings. For Chogyam the term "friend" then holds very specific connotations. He indicates the importance of the guest relationship, which is different than a friend that one sees on a regular basis. To illustrate that he draws a picture, reminding the reader that generally guests receive special treatment whether it be food, entertainment, etc. Some of the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 393-394.

importance of this imagery comes from the impermanence of the guest-host relationship. While it is something that can be cherished, it is not something that can be held onto indefinitely.⁴⁰ If that relationship is held onto indefinitely, the very nature of it changes into something that is completely different from guest-host.

While maitri ideally should be practiced with all beings, it must first be developed within oneself. The radical acceptance, or love, of others cannot be practiced without him/her first being comfortable with the duality inside his/herself: the things that s/he likes and the things that s/he is uncomfortable with. Chogyam Trungpa notes that,

Maitri is not only maitri toward others, but it is also maitri toward ourselves. In fact, the first step of awakening Buddha nature is friendship with ourselves. This tends to help a great deal. We don't have alternatives or sidetracks anymore, because we are satisfied with ourselves. We don't try to imitate anyone else because we hate ourselves and we would like to be somebody else.⁴¹

This comfort that Chogyam talks about is a sense of comfort in realizing that there are going to be things about oneself that s/he will not like. Instead of attempting to pretend to be something that s/he is not, the individual must acknowledge that character trait as his/her own. The practitioner should be

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 402-403.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 394.

more authentic, accepting, loving, even forgiving and realize that, “Maitri cuts the neurosis of wishful thinking, the idea that you should be a good person only.”⁴² The idea here seems to be that there will be less pain if one is open to acknowledging what s/he sees as his/her own character flaws and accepting those flaws as part of who s/he is.

This is not to say that these character flaws, or the actions that come out of those flaws, are “good” per se; rather, it is simply a change in mindset of the individual. Rather than coming in with preconceived notions “about how a good person should be or how we should improve ourselves,”⁴³ we are allowed to see things as they truly are. Chogyam Trungpa sees the act of taking off the filter of these preconceptions about how one should behave and feel as necessary in the process of enlightenment, which is seeing things as they are and not how one thinks they should be. Specifically, acknowledging one’s own traits and flaws without being overly harsh or judgmental is the starting point of allowing oneself to see the world as it truly is.

It is no longer hypothetical – it is real. Something actually does exist: relationships exist; love and hate exist. Because they exist, we are able to work with them as steppingstones.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 395.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The subject is learning to examine things for what they are, and not what s/he expects them to be. This simple change of perspective allows the practitioner to still notice the “bad” but not be as affected by it, by simply realizing that some of what they are perceiving as “hurt” is a false filter with which they have been seeing the world. Here, we can see why the word forgiveness may not be needed in the Buddhist vocabulary: if the some of the hurt that people experience is simply a self-imposed filter, then there is drastically less that is in need of forgiveness.

While Chogyam Trungpa noted that an adherent must start by developing maitri within and for themselves, he does not suggest that the practice should be stuck in that place. Rather, he states that having started to develop maitri inside of oneself, the individual will naturally be able to work on exporting loving-kindness to others. It is reasonable to assume that it is easier for someone to cut themselves slack and realize that some of the negative is from false, or harmful, assumptions about what is good and bad in human character. However, Chogyam Trungpa states that the same principle applies to others as well, in part because it is cyclical and self-reinforcing. When one starts to examine other people and their actions in a more accurate light, it can aid the individual in their own practice,

In a sense it is others; nevertheless, it is us at the same time. It is a very dubious relationship: it is not exactly the *other* other but the seemingly other, which constantly bounces back on us. So extending to others is

predominantly and basically a way of making friends with ourselves.⁴⁵

Let's move from maitri to tonglen, a form of meditation that was taught by Trungpa that builds on the ideas found in maitri. Tonglen seems to be one concrete way of developing or putting the Buddhist principle of maitri into action. The term is a combination of two Tibetan words, "Tong means 'sending out' or 'letting go,' and len means 'receiving' or 'accepting.'"⁴⁶ Chogyam Trungpa uses this technique as a way to cultivate and send out, loosely speaking, good from the practitioner and take in bad or suffering from the world.

How did Chogyam Trungpa teach what it was in practice? He says that tonglen can be practiced, at least initially, by doing something as simple as handing a piece of fruit from the left hand to the right hand, and vice versa.⁴⁷ Delving deeper, Chogyam asks the reader to keep it simple, while being as literal as possible. He suggest tonglen should be simple in that one should start out by thinking of all the people in one's life that have done so much good for the person. This could be family, friends, complete strangers, anyone who really has done good and the subject has not taken the opportunity to thank. Chogyam Trungpa suggests that you recognize and acknowledge that good, then breathe it

⁴⁵ Ibid., 395.

⁴⁶ Chogyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa Volume 2*, 137.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 139.

out, making it available for someone who is suffering. On the in-breath, one does not just think of the bad they are breathing in; they need to experience it, examine it and live with it in a very real sense. In order to do so, the individual taking in the pain of the other can not simply acknowledge that the other is hurting; rather, they need to immerse themselves in the situation. The one practicing tonglen needs to examine what the hurt individual is seeing, feeling and experiencing as closely as possible, trying to completely exchange themselves for the other – or put themselves as much as they can inside the situation that is causing the pain.

The following passage goes to show how whole-heartedly and literally Trungpa took the practice of tonglen and that he saw it as a way to help cleanse the world,

We might have difficulty taking in pollution, taking in what is bad, but we should take it in wholeheartedly – completely in. We should begin to feel that our lungs are altogether filled with bad air, that we have actually cleaned out the world out there and taken it into ourselves.⁴⁸

This practice should have a very real effect. In a somewhat intuitive way, the practitioner is bringing to mind the good that they have not acknowledged that others have done for them. They are visualizing “good” before they breathe it out. The goal is to do so just as concretely as visualizing the negative that they

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 141.

breathe in. When the practitioner starts to examine the good done for him/her, whether it be by a friend, family member, or a stranger, and acknowledges it, it will start to have an effect on how s/he interacts with people. It can break down the barriers that Chogyam sees people construct to help them protect themselves.

Chogyam points out that, in every situation in life, people have a tendency to put up walls, not simply around the bad — always trying to hold it at bay, but also around the good to keep it to oneself. One wants to protect oneself from the bad, but in doing so one is also isolated from other beings and allows oneself to keep the good locked in. Keeping out the bad and locking in the good seem to be two sides of the same coin in that both help to protect the person. Holding the bad out has its obvious benefits, but keeping the good in is also a measure to make one less vulnerable. Not allowing others to share in the “good” helps the individual feel like s/he is protecting and prolonging his/her happiness by not allowing others to affect him/her. It is exactly this isolation that Chogyam Trungpa is trying to break down with the teaching of tonglen, which he refers to as a practice of “overcoming territory.” He wants the practitioner to open up his or her good for the benefit of the world and also take on some of the suffering.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 138 – 139.

Chogyam Trungpa was practical about the effects of tonglen, both stating that there can be actual effects on interpersonal relations and also noting that the greatest effects are possibly seen within the person. He gives an example,

There is a story about a great Kadampa teacher who was practicing tonglen and who actually did take another's pain on himself: when somebody stoned a dog outside his house the teacher himself was bruised. And the same kind of thing could happen to us.⁵⁰

The point and effectiveness of tonglen, however, is not if the practitioner starts to show signs, physically, of the suffering in the world. In fact he states that the practitioner should also not expect to notice immediate effects, and when they do not they should continue to breathe in bad and breathe out good.⁵¹

One area that brings to mind the idea of forgiveness is when Chogyam Trungpa spoke about the likely effects of tonglen. The effects of tonglen have more to do with the effects on the one who is practicing, and from there that will have a real effect on the world around him or her.

On the one hand, you can't expect a friendly letter from your grandmother with whom you have been engaged in warfare for the past five years. She probably will not write you a kind letter after three days of tonglen. On the other hand, sending and taking will definitely have a good effect quite naturally. I think it is a question of your

⁵⁰ Chogyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa Volume 2*, 138.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

general decorum and attitude.⁵²

The decorum and attitude that he is speaking of is not as simple as letting go of hurt feelings with your grandmother, as mentioned in the example above. It is also about not being attached, nor holding onto, the “goodness” that is inside of the practitioner. Both of these things combined, not passing along hurt feelings and being available enough to put forth a positive attitude, helps to create a path. It brings to mind the old adage, “A path is made by walking.” So while he seems to temper the expectations of his students, telling them not to expect immediate results with personal relationships, or physical bruises as in the example listed above with the dog, he also consistently reminds them that this will have positive results, and that “Tonglen practice is not purely mind training. What you are doing might be real!”⁵³

Tonglen is, in a very practical sense, a way of putting the Buddhist principle of nonattachment into practice, by teaching and growing empathy inside the individual. The practitioner will no longer want to lock him/herself away with all their good when they see the suffering of other people; instead they will attempt to become less attached to the good and pass that along even at the risk of receiving the negative effects. The receiving of the negative is where one may find some analogies to forgiveness: the person will start to see

⁵² *ibid.*, 137.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 142.

that they can handle the bad and overcome it; also, by not becoming attached to the negative, it shows the individual that it is possible to let go of hurt and pain even if it is the hurt and pain of another. According to Chogyam Trungpa, in this way it allows one to “grow up and become the ultimate adult. The main point is to develop the psychological attitude of exchanging oneself for others: instead of being John Doe, you could become Joe Schmidt.”⁵⁴ It is a complete reversal of what seems natural: “The problem with most people is that they are always trying to give out the bad and take in the good. That has been the problem with society in general and the world altogether.”⁵⁵ From his perspective, people attempting to consistently give out bad and take in all the good leads to a cycle where pain, hurt, mistrust just keeps getting passed along from person to person. What Chogyam Trungpa is advocating for in being the ultimate adult seems to be the ability to look at a given situation from another person’s perspective, showing empathy, and being mature enough to take responsibility not only for one’s own feelings and emotions but examining how one can help alleviate pain in others around them.

While it is important for one to take the practice of tonglen seriously, and expect it to produce real results in the world, it is also important to not sit around and wait for the effects. Rather, Chogyam suggests that one use the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

effectiveness and ineffectiveness that one sees in the practice of tonglen, and the happiness and sadness that comes with both of those results, as a way to continue the practice of tonglen.

You don't practice tonglen and then wait for the effects. You just do it then drop it. You don't look for results. Whether it works or not, you just do it and drop it. If it doesn't work, you take in, if it works, you give out. So you do not possess anything. That is the whole idea. When anything comes out well, you give it away; if anything does not work out, you take it in.⁵⁶

So tonglen becomes a way to put both nonattachment and loving-kindness into action.

This does raise the question of how a person who practices tonglen deals, psychologically, with all of the negativity and bad that they are taking upon themselves. If the goal is to open one's self up completely, to not be attached to the good that people normally try to hold for themselves, and to tear down the barriers that people set up to keep out the bad, then the removal of that defense mechanism could leave the practitioner with an immense amount of negativity and despair if there is no way to cope. This is especially true in that the practice, as described so far, has not concerned itself with how to deal with those negative energies. As Chogyam puts it, "Relating to passion, aggression and ignorance in the main practice of tonglen is very intense," but as he continues he gives the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

reader hope by pointing out that, “the postmeditation practice is somewhat lighter.”⁵⁷

In his postmeditation technique revolving around tonglen, Chogyam taught that there are three objects, three poisons, and three seeds of virtue.

The three objects are friends, enemies, and neutrals. The three poisons are passion, aggression, and ignorance or delusion. And the three seeds of virtue are the absence of passion, aggression, and ignorance.⁵⁸

So if the goal of tonglen is to take the passion, aggression and ignorance of others, whether it be friends, enemies, and neutrals, keeping in mind that those three categories of people are thought to be somewhat arbitrary and based solely in the mind of the individual, the practitioner then places those poisons on one’s self. Chogyam instructed his students to take that passion, aggression and ignorance and say,

“May this aggression be a working base for me. May I learn to hold my aggression to myself, and may all sentient beings thereby attain freedom from aggression.” Or “May this passion be mine. Because it belongs to me by virtue of holding on to it, therefore may others be free of such passion.” For indifference, you do the same thing.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

The hope is that when the practitioner begins to hold onto those feelings, not build a wall around them to keep them out and not pass those feelings on to any other person in any of the three categories, those feelings will simply fall apart. The key is realizing that those feelings lie with the person feeling them, and not with the other person; they belong completely with the one feeling them. Chogyam indicates that this understanding, mixed with the idea of breaking down the false groups that we place people into, will help one dissolve those poisons.

By holding your poison, you let go of the object, or the intent, of your poison. You see, what usually happens is that you have objects of the three poisons. When you have an object of aggression, for example, you feel angry toward it – right? But if your anger is not directed toward something, the object of aggression falls apart. It is impossible to have an object of anger, because the anger belongs to you rather than to its object.⁶⁰

In practical terms, it seems that Chogyam is helping the individual see that, while the psychological or emotional harm that a person causes to another is real, it may be the perception of the actions and the perception of the person taking those actions that is the cause of a great deal of the pain. It raises the question: is there anything that actually needs forgiving? But, when one does experience those very real hurts, Chogyam Trungpa suggests s/he hold his/her feelings as their own. Chogyam asks the practitioner to make a conscious

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

decision to not pass those negative feelings along, adding another link to a long cycle of pain and hurt. The one practicing tonglen has a very concrete way of making a decision to stop a cycle that Chogyam sees as dysfunctional. As such, by holding onto one's feelings and in a sense taking accountability for those feelings, by viewing others with compassion and by not holding another responsible for them, one's anger and hostility can dissolve. All of the toxins that s/he is breathing in and visualizing, in a way get compressed in the individual and help form a more "gentile person. You don't become demonic, you become workable."⁶¹

While Chogyam Trungpa taught that maitri and tonglen can go a long way in an individual's practice and their relating to other people, he still realized that this practice alone cannot always help ease the pain of those who are in situations where they find themselves hurting. In painful situations he observed that blame is often a catalyst for further hurt feelings and wrongdoing. He insists that the best and most healthy way of dealing with negative or hurtful situations is to simply take the blame upon oneself. In his book, *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness*, he explains that attempting to lay blame elsewhere is likely to make a situation worse and blame becomes an item

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

that no one particularly wants to take possession of. He wants readers to take it and hold it as their own, as a way of working with people.⁶²

The basic principle here is that Chogyam wants the individual who is on the bodhisattva path to drive all blames into one. When he says “one” he is stating that the blames need to be driven into him/herself.⁶³ He gives a few reasons that this is helpful, practical, and necessary from his perspective for those on the bodhisattva path. Let’s look at a quick explanation of what he means,

Drive all blames into one means that all the problems and complications that exist around our practice, realization, and understanding are not somebody else’s fault. All the blame always starts with ourselves.⁶⁴

In some way this teaching completely turns the idea of forgiveness on its head. Instead of forgiving the other, he is asking that the practitioner simply takes the blame upon him/herself.

The first reason that Chogyam Trungpa gives for why driving all blame into one is helpful has been mentioned above: it is a way of stopping the process of passing blame from person to person. This idea is further developed in his

⁶² Chogyam Trungpa, *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving Kindness*, ed. Judith L. Lief (Boston: Shambhala Publication., 2003), 44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 42, 44.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

writings on “driving all blame into one.” Chogyam suggests that this has a real effect on people and that it will help “Reduce the neurosis that’s happening around you. You also reduce any paranoia existing in other people, so that those people might have clearer vision.”⁶⁵ The hope is that the clearer vision may help them deal with their own situation better. If nothing else the act of “Driving the blame into one” will help by not passing the blame on to another innocent victim. In a situation where blame is passed around from individual to individual, the neurosis is simply expanded each time one person is blamed and pushes that blame off on another. He suggests that, at times, it can be viewed as a positive if people attempt to blame one of his students because it can show that s/he would be able to handle the blame and not pass it along. He explains, the one who blames “probably think[s] you have a soft spot in your heart. They think that if they put their jam or honey or glue on you, then you actually might buy it...”⁶⁶

The second reason that this is necessary and useful has to do with the bodhisattva path, which, simply stated, is the path to enlightenment. Chogyam Trungpa tackles this from a few different perspectives. The first is to point out that the practitioner needs to view all that happens in their life, whether it is good or bad, as simply something that will help them out on their path to enlightenment.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

That is to say, whatever occurs in your life – environmental problems, political problems, or psychological problems – should be transformed into a part of your wakefulness, or bodhi.⁶⁷

Continuing on a similar idea, Chogyam Trungpa expands the idea of driving all blame into one by adding that the individual should “Be grateful to everyone” for the times when life becomes complicated.⁶⁸ He points out that no one walks the path alone. That is to say that, without some sort of other, enlightenment simply cannot be attained.⁶⁹ This gratefulness stems from that exact realization: without the other, and this “other” does not need to be a human but can be any sentient being, there would be no hassle or blame on the negative side or even encouragement on the positive side, and thus no way to practice. It is also helpful to keep in mind that, in no small way, part of the idea of those on the bodhisattva path is to help alleviate the suffering around them. So if the idea of driving blame into one helps alleviate neurosis, one can use negative situations to strengthen their own practice and should be grateful for that chance and the opportunity to help other beings.

While he insists that one should be grateful for the obstacles and pain that come in life and realize that these are making the practice of the individual

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

possible, he also is sure to point out that “driving the blame into one” is not some sort of martyrdom. The individual is not to actively go out and look for pain, harm, distractions, disappointments, etc. Rather, he realizes that these things will happen, organically, on their own:

You don't have to ask to be hurt, but when you come up with such a situation, then all the things we discussed apply. It is not that you have to stage the whole thing. Instead, somebody will blame you and you will think, “It is mine.” You don't have to avoid such situations and you don't have to cultivate them. You just lead your life, being very sane, and you don't hurt anybody else... Instead you are making a close relationship with the person who is hurting you.⁷⁰

He also suggests keeping in mind that it is important to not take hurt, or inconveniences, too seriously. In a way, for this practice to work, Chogyam Trungpa sees that this point needs to be realized at a deep level. These obstacles that people face are not some sort of ultimate end-all, but rather simply bumps on the road that have to be taken as they come and then overcome. He realizes that Buddhism cannot be practiced in a vacuum, and being grateful to others in all things, both good and bad, is an outgrowth of that realization.

One thread that runs through all of the above ideas is that of ego, both ego attachment on the negative side and egolessness on the positive. Teachings on

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

ego have interesting implications when one tries to stitch together what forgiveness might look like in a Buddhist context. Possibly the simplest way of explaining what Chogyam Trungpa meant when he was talking about the problems people face with ego is that he saw a lot of problems that individuals face as projections that people place on different scenarios. He would not go so far as to say that events, even unpleasant events, were not actually happening; rather, he would say that the pleasantness or unpleasantness of any given event is not intrinsic to those events. He viewed the perception of those events as arising from within, and that perception may be more unpleasant than the actual event.

This is a tendency to identify oneself with desires and conflicts related to a world outside. And the question is immediately there as to whether such conflicts actually exist externally or whether they are internal. This uncertainty solidifies the whole sense that a problem of some kind exists... That is always our biggest problem. It is ego's problem.⁷¹

Chogyam Trungpa emphasizes that ego is fed by how one sees the world, but there may be very little, if any, connection between how one perceives the world and how the world actually is. He writes that egolessness will occur quite naturally when one realizes that people are a part of a world that is “transitory,

⁷¹ Chogyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa Volume 2*, 239.

and transparent.”⁷² He is pointing out that there is an impermanence or fluidity to everything in the world, that it is not as black and white as people have a tendency to view it. He goes on to suggest that the ego is either harmed or bolstered by projecting one’s own interpretation of events onto the things that occur around the ego, such as hurt, pain, etc. Again, he does not seem to suggest that unpleasant things do not happen, but rather that the perception of those things changes when they are viewed in a larger context of impermanence and interconnectedness. This is an important idea as it aids the practitioner in not viewing every unpleasant occurrence as an attack on self, and it has bearing for some of the principles that have been talked about above. Egolessness can aid the practitioner in his/her application of tonglen by helping him/her examine hurt and pain, both his/her own and that of others in what Chogyam Trungpa considered a more healthy light and see events and actions for what they really are. Egolessness may also help the individual with driving all blame into one: if there is no ego to protect, then the blame that the individual is taking upon him/herself is less rattling to the person’s psyche.

⁷² Ibid.

Comparison

As we have seen, there are many differences between the beliefs and teachings of our two subjects when it comes to their ideas on forgiveness. Father Thomas Merton comes from the Christian tradition where the ideal of forgiveness is not just explored but explicitly commanded of its followers. Chogyam Trungpa, on the other hand, coming from a Buddhist context, does not have a direct discourse on forgiveness as the word has no counterpart in his tradition.

The lack of a direct equivalence does not, however, mean that there are no correlations. The effort of finding similarities between the two traditions is not completely futile. If not a direct correlation between ideas, at the very least there are teachings in the two traditions that, when taken in aggregate, can in some ways approximate each other.

One striking difference that cannot be overlooked when comparing anything in Christianity and Buddhism is that, by and large, Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. Whereas some concepts of deities might be discussed they are not generally seen as useful or necessary in teachings of Buddhism or in achieving enlightenment. This has obvious ramifications for multiple areas, the most glaring of which for our purposes is the fact that, without purporting a deity to be the source and purveyor of salvation and forgiveness, a person only has fellow “sentient” beings to forgive or be reconciled with. It completely takes

out the idea that there is some sort of higher power that one needs to seek forgiveness from. Instead, s/he is concerned mainly with gaining enlightenment and aiding others along that same path.

Terminology is also an issue when comparing these two men's writings. One term that is difficult to untangle from the idea of forgiveness in the Christian tradition is sin. Chogyam Trungpa was not a fan of using the word sin because of the weight that it carried in a heavily Christian culture. Instead, he chose to translate the Tibetan word "Dikpa" as "evil deeds" or "neurotic crimes" rather than "sin."⁷³ He noted that this indirect translation was a conscious decision, due to the perceived baggage mentioned above and the fact that he felt "evil deeds" and "neurotic crimes" have "psychological implications rather than being purely ethical."⁷⁴

It is interesting that one of the few times that Chogyam Trungpa did mention the word forgiveness directly was when he was giving a glimpse into his understanding of the Christian idea of forgiveness. He states,

This is the difference from the Christian tradition, seemingly. Nobody can wipe out your neurosis by saying, "I forgive you." Quite possibly the person you forgave would not attack you again, but he or she might kill somebody else. From that point of view, unless the whole crime has completely subsided, forgiving does not help. It not only does not help, it may even encourage you to do

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

more sinning.⁷⁵

That passage gives us a bit of insight from the Buddhist perspective. He explains that the type of forgiveness that is found in the Christian tradition, as he understands it, may give rise to more “sinning,” while the Buddhist idea is based more around helping rehabilitate the offender. One thing that is worth pointing out here is the focus that Chogyam Trungpa has on the helpfulness, or unhelpfulness, as he sees it, of the concept of forgiveness inside the Christian tradition. When he says, “forgiving does not help,” it is pretty clear that what he is most concerned with has to do with stopping the offender, not allowing the person to “do more sinning,” and helping the individual fix their neurosis. This is not a small difference. There seems to be a hope in Merton’s writings that showing one’s fellow man mercy and forgiveness will be a sort of beacon to the individual, guiding them to God. For Merton, though, even when this guiding-through-forgiving is not effective on other humans, there is still a divine command to forgive; in his view forgiveness is a gift and, at the point that one insists that forgiveness is earned, the very nature of forgiveness changes. Chogyam Trungpa’s position appears to be, arguably, more pragmatic in that he is concerned with changing the behavior.

To be clear, both men appear to want their faith traditions to be a beacon to others, but the Christian tradition seems to explicitly command forgiveness

⁷⁵ Chogyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa Volume 2*, 170-171.

even when the offender does not reform. Viewing forgiveness as a gift takes pragmatism out of the equation – even if there are benefits to both parties. Chogyam Trungpa goes on to point out that the basic principle is that the act that was considered “sinning” is not nearly as important as the factors that lead the individual to the action itself. The individual has to work on the “neurosis” inside him/herself and decide that the pattern of behavior and thinking that gave rise to the action is no longer useful for the person’s life; the person must become tired of his/her status quo. We have covered three ways that Trungpa suggests a person can deal with neurosis in him/herself and others. The first way is maitri; he suggests that the person is to examine his/her thoughts that people should only be good. This helps to alleviate some of the neurosis caused by the actions of others that are perceived as negative, and it helps the offended become more comfortable with the duality that people exhibit. Maitri also helps by allowing one to offer complete friendship to others, reducing their neurosis. Second, a person practicing tonglen can help heal neurosis by breaking down his/her barriers and sending out his/her good. Lastly, driving all blame into one instructs the individual to not pass the blame onto another, which only pushes the problem further down the line and may make the neurosis worse.

From the perspective of Chogyam Trungpa, the Christian ideal of forgiveness is too permissive and does not get to the root of the problem. In fact, it can do the opposite: it perpetuates the problem by glazing over a deeper issue. From his point of view, it is far more important to aid another being in getting

rid of their “neurosis” than to utter the words “I forgive you.” This mindset works well inside of Buddhism and the teachings of Chogyam Trungpa, but this does not match up exactly with what Thomas Merton would have considered to be a proper view of forgiveness in Christianity.

Thomas Merton may have argued against the point that his tradition takes an attitude that is permissive toward sin because of its views of forgiveness. These different judgments about sin and forgiveness, however, may be more of an issue of perspectives, imprecise vocabulary, and the theistic/non-theistic worldviews of the two religions. Merton saw sin as “a refusal of love” at its root.⁷⁶ It does not appear that Merton believed that forgiveness had no effect other than giving a pass to the offender. Rather, his talk about modeling divine mercy would seem to suggest that forgiveness then becomes a call for action and change on the behalf of the offender. He saw it as a way to show an offender, whether that person was a believer or not, that God’s mercy was alive and active in the world. For Merton, forgiveness shows that there is a different way to operate. It must be said that Merton does not appear to view this as a fix-all that will work every time, but it is the way that Merton believed that Christian believers should still operate.

While the difference does stand that in the Christian tradition there is no requirement for the offender to reform prior to the offended offering forgiveness,

⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009), 181.

it seems that there is some similarity between the two traditions in that there is at least hope for the transformation of the individual. The Christian tradition gives the offender a concrete example of mercy by instructing the offended to let go of the possibility of holding the offender responsible for his/her sin. This very well may be having the effect that Chogyam Trungpa said would be needed: the reform of the individual and not simply permission for the offender to go on his/her way. Given that Merton described sin as a refusal of love, and that sin cannot be “pardoned and healed without love,”⁷⁷ Merton seems to be pointing out that showing the sinner love may be the best way to lead him/her away from a “refusal of love.” This also may be why Merton believes that forgiveness is a divine command and expects believers to become a representation of God’s love and bring that love to others. He sees the believers as principal agents for making God present in the world. Merton sees asking God for forgiveness and forgiving others as so linked that he calls into question the sincerity of those who seek forgiveness from God and yet do not forgive their fellow man, “But no one sincerely confesses his own sin without at the same time pardoning his brother (Matthew 18:23-35).”⁷⁸

Continuing with the way that Merton’s ideas on forgiveness and Chogyam Trungpa’s are similar, specifically when it comes to how it affects the offender, both would suggest that the offender needs to be shown a different way of doing

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

things. Both would also see that the individual in question needs to come to the realization that their current mode of living is not working and the adherents to either tradition can and should help the offender to see a different way to live and aid him/her in making changes. There are some parallels between Chogyam Trungpa's writing about those on the Bodhisattva Path aiding all sentient beings, and Fr. Merton's ideas about sacramentality and making God real in the world. Both men believe that believers have a duty to aide their fellow man or, in Chogyam Trungpa's case, all sentient beings. That aid for Chogyam Trungpa specifically has to do with helping others find enlightenment.

One thing that is different is that Chogyam Trungpa sees forgiveness as secondary in the process of reforming of the individual while Thomas Merton sees the forgiveness and reform as linked in a very concrete way. To be sure, Merton does not say that reform always follows forgiveness, but he believes that forgiveness may aid the process of reform nonetheless. Merton sees forgiveness as an act of love that that points sinners to God. Chogyam Trungpa's concern is that offering forgiveness too quickly may very well derail the necessary process of reform before it even gets started. Instead of offering forgiveness prematurely, Chogyam Trungpa taught tonglen: taking on the bad in the world, and sending out – or not holding in – the good that an individual has. He taught that people have a tendency to build up walls in order to keep their good in, and to hold bad or possible harmful events and feelings at bay. He stated that, this practice can have very real effects both on the practitioner and the world around

the practitioner. This sounds similar to Thomas Merton's insistence that true forgiveness involves pain on the part of the person who offers it, and also that true forgiveness is about being in the world and helping make the "Kingdom of God" real in the world. While not an exact match, there are similarities, in that both men seem to be letting their audiences know that there are times when pain will come. Beyond that, they also both appear to be saying that it is not in the best interest of the world around them if people wall themselves off.

There are differences when looking at tonglen and forgiveness, while there are some comparable aspects as mentioned above between them; it is not an exact match. While tonglen, according to Chogyam Trungpa, can be practiced by letting go of wrongs that one experiences personally, and the positive side can be cultivated specifically for the person that has wronged the one practicing tonglen, this does not have to be the case. The writings of Chogyam Trungpa suggest the practitioner learn to use the meditative technique in a broader sense, exchanging the bad for good even if the bad was not done to the one practicing tonglen. While the idea of tonglen, when placed into the specific context of accepting the bad that others have done to the person practicing it and sending out the good to the offender does indeed sound like the Christian idea of forgiveness, it is an imprecise comparison. It is an imprecise comparison because this is a narrower view of tonglen than what Chogyam Trungpa probably would have been comfortable with. He might find the narrower view agreeable in that it is a good starting point, as it is something that is easily

applicable or relatable for the individual, but it seems that to stop there would not properly do justice to the teaching as a whole.

Both men also agree that, when bad or evil things happen, the individual at the receiving end of the unpleasant acts needs to do some serious reflection. This reflection is to a certain extent about the offender, but more importantly it is about introspection on the part of the person who is at the receiving end of the wrong deed. The two teachings diverge on the reasons for, and the methods of, reflection. Merton states that there is a necessity to reflect on the imperfections of others when evil occurs, but that is only part of the process. For Merton the process of reflecting on the imperfection of others is an aide in taking a look at oneself. It is a reminder of the times that the one doing the reflecting has failed both others and God. It is from this place of deep remembrance of the mercy of God that Merton believes that true forgiveness comes from. For Merton, it seems that, without this step, forgiveness can be simple lip service in small matters or disingenuous in grave matters.

Chogyam Trungpa, on the other hand, sees it as necessary to reflect, not just on oneself but also on the action, and he sees these two things as inextricably linked but in a different way than Merton does. This reflection needs to be done in light of his teachings on “ego”: one is instructed to see whether or not the perceived offense is actually an offense at all, or simply a negative projection of one’s ego on the situation. If it is simply an attachment to

ego, then there may, in fact, be nothing to forgive. Chogyam Trungpa is not minimizing the pain that the action could have caused an individual, however; what he is saying is that the action simply rubbed up against the subject's ego in a way that caused pain. The action considered to be offense may simply have reopened an old wound or caused the person discomfort due to some unique situation that is in their past. In these cases, he would insist that there is no actual offense that would need to be forgiven; rather, it simply was the practitioner's attachment to their ego that caused the discomfort. In the case of the ego being hurt, it is the offended that needs to take that situation and use it to deepen their practice.

It does not seem that Merton would dismiss out of hand the role of ego in the consideration of offense and forgiveness. Rather, it seems the issue of ego simply does not play a role in his ideas due to the fact that the Catholic tradition does not analyze egolessness as the Buddhist tradition does. Egolessness is an alien idea to Christianity just as forgiveness is an idea alien to Buddhism. For Chogyam Trungpa the teachings that surround ego ties into "driving all blames into one." Specifically, offenses done by others, and difficulties in life in general, help those that follow his teachings realize their unhealthy attachment to ego and learn to let it go. For this reason the practitioner should be thankful for the opportunity to deepen their practice and become less attached to their ego.

The Buddhist principle of maitri is another area that has some parallels to Merton's ideas of sin being a refusal of love and his notion that forgiveness is an act of love. Maitri is defined as "love" or "kindness" and was described by Chogyam Trungpa as "complete friendship." He uses the term to teach acceptance of an individual, flaws and all. Here again we have an area with some similarities on the surface; however, the differences should not be overlooked.

For both men, there is a need to accept and love "the other" even when those people are doing things that may be viewed in a negative light. Again, those paths diverge a bit when we attempt to examine the specifics of what constitutes wrongdoing. They diverge even further if forgiveness, as Chogyam Trungpa described it above, would actually hinder the offender, in which case he may actually see forgiving as a less loving act than holding the subject accountable. These two paths that Chogyam points out, forgiveness or holding someone accountable, are not mutually exclusive in the mind of Merton; he hopes that believers can love those that they can't trust but does point out that he is not asking that anyone trust "foolishly."⁷⁹ One other area of some contrast when it comes to maitri is Merton's ideas on self-examination. Merton wants the individual to explore his/her shortcomings and from there offer grace to the other because of the realization that God offered grace and mercy when s/he needed it.

⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, "The Root of War is Fear," *Passion for Peace; Reflections on War and Nonviolence* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 34.

Chogyam Trungpa taught that maitri helps the individual love and accept him/herself and others in a way that encompasses things that s/he may find unpleasant or uncomfortable like their flaws and neurosis. There is some examination of self that needs to occur for this acceptance, but this type of self-examination seems to be fundamentally different from the type of self-examination that Merton is speaking of. Trungpa does not seem to find it helpful for the offended to dwell on his/her own past mistakes. So while there are some points of Chogyam Trungpa's teachings on maitri and Merton's ideas of forgiveness being an act of love that do intersect, mainly that the love of one another is an important teaching, how they get there and what that looks like in practice do hold important differences.

When doing comparative work, there are often areas of contrast along with areas that are more closely matched. The goal of this thesis has been to first examine in detail the ideas in the writings of Fr. Thomas Merton and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche in respect to what they have to say on the area of forgiveness. In the case of Chogyam Trungpa we looked at what comes closest to approximating that ideal inside his tradition. The hope has been to gain a deeper insight into a narrow portion of the tradition of both of the authors, while taking a respectful look at their work. The comparing and contrasting gives us a way to examine these teachings even more precisely, by showing the similarities when they are there along with the stark contrasts that also exist.

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ABSTRACT

FORGIVENESS – A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE WORKS OF CHOGYAM
TRUNGPA AND THOMAS MERTON

by

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The purpose of this thesis is to take a comparative look at the idea of forgiveness in Christianity and Buddhism. In order to keep the scope of the work focused and manageable, it has been narrowed down to one individual from each religion. The people whose works were chosen are Fr. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), who came from the Catholic Christian tradition, and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987), who was a Tibetan Buddhist.

A vast majority of the material that was drawn upon for the research and writing of this thesis were written by the Chogyam Trungpa and Thomas Merton

themselves, with a few outside sources thrown in for background on either the individuals or the subject.

There is difficulty when writing a work on forgiveness from a Buddhist perspective as there is no direct translation for the word inside of the tradition. However, this thesis attempts to take a look at Buddhist teachings as explained through Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's talks and writings that can, in aggregate, approximate forgiveness and then compare and contrast those with what Fr. Thomas Merton had to say on the subject. The comparative approach helps to look at each of the individuals thoughts more precisely by seeing how they are similar and different from each other.

Autobiographical Statement

Zachary Trinka lives in the Cincinnati metropolitan area with his wife and graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2006 with a bachelor's degree from Siena Heights University in Adrian, Michigan.