

**The Jesus Lama: Thomas Merton in the Himalayas**  
**An Interview with Harold Talbott**

**Tricycle:** How much did Thomas Merton influence your decision to convert to Catholicism?

**Talbott:** When people ask why I became a Catholic, I often answer, I'm ashamed to say, that it wasn't *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, it was *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

**Tricycle:** Why ashamed?

**Talbott:** Because *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a terrific book, but it's a paperback.

**Tricycle:** When did you first meet Merton?

**Talbott:** In 1957, I was working on a newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee during my summer vacation from Harvard and reading *The Sign of Jonas*, the journal Merton kept on his way to becoming a priest. And I went to Gethsemani to meet him but the world was beating a path to his door, and the abbot wouldn't let me in. The next Thanksgiving I returned after being baptised. I had decided to take my first communion not with the Jesuits but with the Cistercians at Gethsemani.

**Tricycle:** And you saw him then?

**Talbott:** This time the abbot said yes. Merton took me into a room and said, "I'm always very glad to meet someone who has just come into the church because they are full of grace and the grace overflows from the person who has just been received. And I have only one thing to say to you: the Church is a very big place. Always remember to go your own way in it." Ten years later in India I reminded Merton about that remark and he said, "Did I say that? That's pretty good. And look at where we both are."

**Tricycle:** When Merton arrived in Dharamsala (the seat of the Tibetan government in exile), did he ask you to arrange an audience with the Dalai Lama?

**Talbott:** No. I said, "An audience is scheduled for you with His Holiness the Dalai Lama," and he said "I'm not going." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "I've seen enough pontiffs." And I said, "Well I think, Tom - as you want me to call you - if you come to India to study with lamas, I think you'd be making a mistake not to meet the Dalai Lama. And furthermore, Tom, the Dalai Lama has heard all about you from the Canadian High Commissioner, James George, and he's taken the trouble of having a film shown to him of Cistercian monks and

abbeys in France. He's done his homework and I think you should go up there and meet him." So he said "Okay, we'll see."

**Tricycle:** Was his meeting with the Dalai Lama the high point of his visit to Dharamsala?

**Talbott:** Two or three very significant things happened there. He was taken to meet Rato Rinpoche, who was the head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This was his first official appointment with the exiled government, a momentous event for all of Dharamsala. They knew perfectly well who he was and that Merton would be a great advantage for them, spiritually and politically. They knew that Merton would write about them with an absolute outpouring of love and appreciation and it would advance their cause enormously.

**Tricycle:** But the significance of this meeting was not political, was it?

**Talbott:** No. In their meeting, Rato Rinpoche told Merton that one way to get into meditation is to recognise that there is always an aspect of the mind that is watching the watcher - that is watching the meditative mind. There are two basic practices common to all Buddhist meditation: first you learn to calm the mind, and when the mind is sufficiently calm, you use it as an instrument for insight. This is how I was being trained at the time. Merton came back from his first meeting with a lama and said, "This guy says that there's a meditative mind and then there's a part of the mind watching you meditate. We know that already, and we don't want the watcher to watch it, so that's of no use to us. So let's see what *is* useful around here."

**Tricycle:** From his Gethsemani experience, he's dismissing the fundamentals of Buddhist meditation?

**Talbott:** Yes. I was very shocked because I considered all Westerners infants spiritually. I thought the Renaissance had destroyed all the good work of the contemplative Middle Ages; and that we were hopelessly deficient and that we should go hat in hand to masters in Asia. And here is Merton saying, "We know that already and we don't need it."

**Tricycle:** How did Merton go about finding what was useful?

**Talbott:** He went out to take photographs and met Sonam Kazi. I knew this from his eyes before he told me. And that was the birth of the blues, the beginning of the dzogchen\* teachings for Thomas Merton. Sonam Kazi was the official interpreter assigned to the Dalai Lama by the government of India, the interpreter, for example, in the talks between Nehru, Chou En Lai, and the Dalai Lama. Sonam ran into Merton on the road, invited him to a tea house and zapped him.

**Tricycle:** How did you know from looking into Merton's eyes that he had encountered Sonam Kazi?

**Talbott:** Because Merton was in a state of shock of utmost amusement, joy, and conviction that the best was yet to come: "We've got it; we've had this non-event so far and now we're going to get it; I knew there was something among these Tibetans." Sonam Kazi had zapped me a year before and I had gone out carefully holding on to the furniture. I hate to use these words but I'm too lazy not to: Sonam can put a person in an "altered state of consciousness" and believe me, I was not used to altered states of consciousness. But Merton was a ripened and ready object of a visit from Sonam Kazi and he got it. He said to me occasionally after that, "I came to Asia to study Zen in Japan and now I have changed my itinerary and I'm going to study dzogchen in India with the Tibetans."

**Tricycle:** Were there other significant encounters independent of the Dalai Lama?

**Talbott:** Yes. His visit with Chogling Rinpoche - a way-out yogi, a very wild man who was an incredible kick-over-the-traces, irresponsible-type person, a tremendous troublemaker, and extremely rollicking in an unpredictable way, a top-flight, wonderful Nyingmapa yogi. He said to Merton, "When Sonam Kazi brings someone, I know I'll be able to talk to them and that it'll be okay." He asked Merton "Do you believe in karma and rebirth?" Merton said, "Well, I think it's a very fascinating, persuasive proposition, but I wouldn't say I believe it, no." So Chogling said, "Okay, well then I can't teach you because the whole thing is predicated on your having faith in karma and rebirth. So let's say that you have faith in karma and rebirth, and this is what I have to tell you. A human being has a *srog* - a life force. He has a consciousness and when he dies, in order to ensure the proper destination of the consciousness, it's very useful to be able to practice *phowa*."

**Tricycle:** All these encounters took place prior to Merton's visit with the Dalai Lama?

**Talbott:** Yes. The days were going by with Sonam Kazi taking us to see Nyingmapa lamas, drinking scotch in taverns, and talking, talking. Merton is now saying "Dzogchen is where it's at and that's what I'm going to do." I became very officious. We were about to go up the hill to meet the Dalai Lama. It seemed to me that it would be impolitic for Merton to refer to the dzogchen school because it's a different school from that of His Holiness. In the Jeep, as we are going up the hill to McLeod Ganj - the Dalai Lama's residence - I explained all this to Merton. He was wearing his white robe with black scapular to meet His Holiness. We arrived and after a flurry of exchanged courtesies, the Dalai Lama looked at Merton and said, "What do you want?" And Merton said, "I want to study dzogchen." And the Dalai Lama said, "It's true that dzogchen is the highest yana (vehicle for Buddhist study), but if you want to study dzogchen, I propose a

series of meetings in which I will teach you the preliminary practices at the end of which I should hope that you will be ready to go on to dzogchen."

**Tricycle:** How many times did they meet?

**Talbott:** Three times. The first meeting was used to get to know each other. They devoted much of the third meeting to conversations about Catholicism, the Western tradition, and the situation in the world. But the second time, to my astonishment, the Dalai Lama - who of course had sat on an extraordinary elevated throne in Tibet - now, with us still sitting on the sofas, got down on the floor and showed Merton the lotus meditation posture and the hand position and the posture of the back, and taught him meditation. He remained on a level lower than ourselves - for practical purposes - for the rest of the teaching. And he gave us very, very clear sound meditation instructions that would be completely familiar to vipassana practitioners. He was leading up to teachings on emptiness and compassion and then went on to a gentle explanation of tantra as a field of Mahayana Buddhism that is a very very strong practice throughout history. And then at some point he gave a summation of the schema of Nyingmapa Buddhism starting with some Theravada teachings.

**Tricycle:** How did the meditation instruction that Merton received from the Dalai Lama differ from that given to him by Rato Rinpoche, which, as you describe it, did not interest him?

**Talbott:** The Dalai Lama didn't get into technical, methodological questions. He showed us posture and how to dispose the mind and how to get yourself into basic meditation practice by calming the mind and there was nothing technical. Of course, it was masterfully taught and there is an inexpressible gravity about the person of the Dalai Lama. He was - and still is - the supreme man holding the tradition together, the man who has been giving the Tibetan nation an identity and engaging in endless manoeuvres for his people amidst the destruction and the torment. And here he was showing us posture and breathing!

**Tricycle:** Was the atmosphere very formal?

**Talbott:** The Dalai Lama's robe and Thomas Merton's white Cistercian habit with the black scapular looked Giottoesque. It was an image of two figures encountering each other who deserved to wear those robes, who were part and parcel of the world represented by those very robes. So that one really had a surfeit of visual inspiration. Both men were very solid. Unornamental, compact, strong, hard beings. Now the Dalai Lama has an external joviality and graciousness which is appropriate to a sovereign. To put you at your ease, to make it possible for beings to be in relation to him, he plays down the radiance, the dignity, the charisma, the persona that the West had developed a romantic myth about, but who in himself has his own distinct presence and radiance. There

is no presumption about him. He's a person who draws a heart-breaking reverence from the people who are devoted to him, and to see him in this room with a man to whom we don't need to apply adjectives, but if we were, it would be things like mensch, authentic .....

**Tricycle:** Merton?

**Talbott:** Yes. Mensch - manly, authentic. No gestures. No artifice. No manner. No program, no come on - just, "Here I am folks" - and folks happened to be the Dalai Lama. And they encountered each other and, appropriately enough, there was utter silence. And then the Dalai Lama challenged him or greeted him by saying, "What do you want?" and he said, "I want to study dzogchen." I was about to clobber Merton. I couldn't take it. But I was very glad to be aboard. It was the generosity of Merton that made it possible for me to attend those meetings. He said, "You're here studying with the Dalai Lama. I want you present." Whereas it might have been delightful to be alone with just the Dalai Lama and the interpreter. It's my good karma that I was there. There was so much good humour and so much laughter and so much camaraderie and so much confidence of understanding and so much no need for explanation and build-up and equipping themselves on their parts, you see. They had done their homework.

**Tricycle:** One of the persistent myths among American Buddhists has been that Merton was just about to leave the Church to pursue Buddhist studies. But Merton seemed to have said yes to everyone. He had people around the world expecting him on their doorsteps all on the same day.

**Talbott:** He told Ernesto Cardenal and his brother, "I'm coming down to Nicaragua to make revolutions with you." And he planned to retire in Alaska as well as California and do a three-year retreat in Bhutan, and someone had given him land in Santa Fe where he'd proposed to set up a Catholic-Tibetan meditation centre.

**Tricycle:** What did you think he might do?

**Talbott:** Having encountered Chatral Rinpoche he might have curtailed his trip to Japan but he was certainly going to go there and talk to Zen roshis. My distinct impression was that this was a man who had found what he wanted in India and was going to round out his experience in Asia as he planned but he was going to modify it in order to go back and study with Chatral Rinpoche. How were Nicaragua, Alaska, and Canada, California, and New Mexico going to fit into that, and how could he be an active member of the Civil Rights movements, of the Peace movement, a poet and a writer and all the rest of it? I don't know. To my distinct certainty he was going to study dzogchen and do his preliminary practice with Chatral Rinpoche. I'm convinced of it, but he would never have left the Church.

**Tricycle:** Why do you say that?

**Talbott:** He had reached a point - unrecognisable to me and perhaps to you - where the Judeo-Christian theistic tradition of the Mother Church of Christendom and dzogchen of Nyingmapa Tibetan Buddhism were not in contradiction. Furthermore he had grown up in a Catholic village in France that had so deeply affected him that it had planted a seed which had caused him to enter the Church. He was a man who had spent thirty years in a Cistercian abbey. His training came from the Church. He was a generous man and he was a just man and he acknowledged what he owed to the Church. It was his formation. It was not his cocoon. It was not his prison. It was himself and it was a very good self and he needed to uphold it.

**Tricycle:** Everybody wants to claim Merton. The Zen Buddhists emphasise the Zen connection, and the Gelugpas\*\* want to claim him for their camp, and you want to claim him for dzogchen. So it becomes somewhat political.

**Talbott:** The fact is that he told the Dalai Lama that he wanted to study dzogchen so the Dalai Lama spent hours preparing him to find a dzogchen guru. And he found him in Chatral Rinpoche. He went down to Sri Lanka where he convinced himself that he had the experience of the dharmakaya (emptiness), seeing the statues of the Shakyamuni Buddha and Ananada. Then he was electrocuted and died and we are left to sit here and talk about how dzogchen was the final bestowal on Merton by a divinely compassionate saviour.

**Tricycle:** In retrospect what was Merton's effect on your life?

**Talbott:** He seduced me into leaving the Gelugpa schools of Tibetan Buddhism and spending the rest of my life studying with dzogchen yogis. Also, I told him I was in a lot of confusion at that moment in my life. Merton helped me by telling me that when he was at an English university he had an affair with the girl who made the beds in his dormitory, and she had a baby, and he said to me, "You know my son would be such and such an age right now and I don't know whether he survived the blitz or not." And he carried that with him. That was on his mind. And he let me know that this was the key to his life.

**Tricycle:** I thought he had been shuttled out of England by his guardian while the young woman was still pregnant.

**Talbott:** He said, "My son," and I don't know why he said it. The impact was like that of St. Augustine who had been a sinner before his conversion. Merton saw himself as a man who had to purify himself of something that was a very heavy load to carry. But by the time he came to India, whether or not finding dzogchen was central - that's my organisation of significance in his life - it turns out that he had lived his life and this was the Mozart finale and he was in a state

of utmost exuberance, engaged, and absorbing, and eating with delectation every moment of every experience and every person that passed. He tipped Sikh drivers like a Proustian millionaire. He was on a roll, on a toot, on a holiday from school. He was a *grand seigneur*, a great lord of the spiritual life. He radiated a sense of "This is an adventure, here I am folks," and he woke people up and illuminated them and enchanted them and gave them a tremendous happiness and a good laugh. But also there was always a communication from him that he was a representative of the religious life whether he was wearing a windbreaker or a habit. The Indian people greeted him as a pilgrim, a seeker, and that was the basis on which he was met by everybody and congratulated valiantly whether they recognised his public identity or not. People knew his spiritual quality. People in planes knew it. There was no question about it. Merton was not an object of scrutiny, he was an event.

**\*Dzogchen:** The philosophical standpoint, meditation, and ethic of the Nyingmapa, the Old School of Tibetan Buddhism founded by Padmasambhava in the ninth century CE. The teachings start with the assertion that our true nature is already enlightened.

**\*\* Gelugpa:** The newest of four surviving schools of Tibetan Buddhism, founded in the fourteenth century. It emphasises study of the sutras and tantras, as well as the development of logical rigour and dialectical skills to aid the attainment of enlightenment. The Dalai Lama belongs to this lineage.

This is an edited extract from 'The Jesus Lama' which appeared in Tricycle Magazine Issue Summer 1992. Tricycle is available in the UK from Buddhist Publishing Group, Sharpham Coach Yard, Ashpington, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 7UT and in the USA from Tricycle, The Buddhist Review Subscription Dept., Tri Box 3000, Denville 3000, NJ 07834, USA.