

A Link between Beings

Review of

Tendrel: A Memoir of New York and the Buddhist Himalayas

By Harold Talbott

Marion, MA: Buddhayana Foundation, 2019

(mahasiddha.org/Tendrel.html)

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Reviewed by **Bonnie Thurston**

The phrase from St. Paul's second letter to Timothy, "come before winter" (4:21), came to mind when in the winter of 2018-2019 two important companions of Thomas Merton made their *transitus* and entered what *The Book of Occasional Services* of the Episcopal Church so beautifully describes as being "upon another shore and in a greater light." Patrick Hart, OCSO, monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky, did more than anyone of the first generation of Merton scholars (along with William H. Shannon) to preserve and disseminate Merton's work. As his new memoir indicates, Harold Talbott had a *very* different life. But he was also a religious practitioner, first a convert to and devotedly observant practitioner of Roman Catholicism, then a student of Dzogchen, a form of Tibetan Buddhism that he made more widely known through texts in translation (particularly the teachings of Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, disciple of Dodrup Chen Rinpoche) and his founding work with the Buddhayana Foundation.

As Br. Pat made Merton's work available, Talbott almost single-handedly made Merton's visits to the Tibetan lamas possible. Merton had written to Dom Aelred Graham, OSB to ask how he could meet lamas in India, and Dom Aelred put him in touch with Talbott who was at the time a student of H. H. the Dalai Lama in India (see Merton's August 3, 1968 letter to Graham [*School of Charity* 392-93]). Talbott met Merton in New Delhi in October, 1968 and arranged his encounters with the Dalai Lama (whom he had to *persuade* Merton to meet) and other lamas in Dharamsala and Darjeeling.

Alongside Merton's *Asian Journal* Talbott's memoir is perhaps the most important and reliable source for parts of Merton's pilgrimage to India. Some might suggest his recollections are more reliable than Merton's journal, since even Thomas Merton was capable of self-deception. In a letter to me of September 25, 2000, before we met and made the video *The (Almost) Final Days of Thomas Merton: A Conversation with Harold Talbott* (recorded December 7, 2000 at the Clifton Center of The Thomas Merton Center Foundation in Louisville, KY), Talbott wrote, "In terms of Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism Merton was to the manner born. *Nullum impedimentum*. He took

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to it as a swan to water.” But this gets ahead of Talbott’s story.

Harold Talbott was born in 1939. His memoir, a charming and addictive book to read, was published just before he died on February 7, 2019. As the subtitle suggests, it is divided into two parts. The ten chapters of Part 1, “Swanning About,” introduce Talbott’s very distinguished family, his education at St. Paul’s School and Harvard University, and the death of his mother and its effect on him. He mentions *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas* in connection with his conversion to Catholicism, as well as his visit to Gethsemani in 1957, an unsuccessful attempt to see Merton (66). In the Thanksgiving vacation of his first year at Harvard, where he was studying Sanskrit and Buddhism, he returned to Gethsemani for his first communion and met Merton, who advised him: “the church is a very big place. Always remember to go your own way in it” (72, 235). Harold did.

The eight chapters of Part 2, “In Search of the Nature of the Mind,” detail Talbott’s work and Asian travel with Dom Aelred Graham, his becoming a private student of the Dalai Lama (see also Merton’s October 29, 1968 journal entry [*Asian Journal* 60]), whom he insisted the resistant Merton must meet. Merton had said, “I’ve seen enough pontiffs” (170). Chapter thirteen gives details of Merton’s three audiences with the Dalai Lama and provides important insights for anyone interested in Merton’s experiences in India or his attraction to Tibetan Buddhism. The final chapters of the book treat Talbott’s subsequent study with extraordinary and important lamas. Buddhists, especially students of Tibetan masters and practitioners of Dzogchen, will be astounded by the teachers and lamas who appear in the second half of the book and with whom Talbott had close association. Although his descriptions are allusive and self-effacing, the reader quickly perceives the seriousness of Talbott’s practice and devotion to his teachers. Scattered throughout the book are little gems (Harold’s *termas*?) like “Devotion doesn’t really depend on how perfectly a prayer is uttered” (178).

The first half of the book with its descriptions of the prominence of Talbott’s lineage, its jaw-dropping recital of the names of socially and politically prominent people of wealth and resources in whose circles he moved, and its vignettes of glittering New York life, may either enthrall or repel. (I read with prurient interest.) It may be hard for some to see the connection between the “poor little rich boy” of Part 1 and the inquirer into the mind via Dzogchen in Part 2. But through the autobiography runs a golden thread of spiritual searching. Baptized as an Episcopalian (his twin brother, John, is an Episcopal priest), Talbott frequently praises the (largely religious) influence of his Scots Presbyterian nanny who was present at his baptism as a Catholic and whom he visited frequently throughout his adult life. His conversion to Catholicism while at Harvard led to more than ten years of serious devotion, especially to the Mass, and to his friendship with Dom Aelred whose spirituality also encompassed Catholicism and Buddhism. Having seen pictures of Tibetan Buddhists as a child, a seed was sown that germinated and flowered when Talbott found his lama, thus exemplifying the Buddhist adage, “When the student is ready, the teacher will come.”

The autobiography provides both a glossary of Buddhist terms and a full index. Four of the book’s eight appendices record teachings by Dzogchen masters, and one a conversation among Aelred Graham, Masao Abe, Shojun Bando and T. R. V. Murti. Also included are a bibliography of works edited or translated by Talbott, and the 1992 *Tricycle* interview about his time with Merton, “The Jesus Lama,” reproduced in its entirety. I found it deeply moving that the final Appendix is

the *Salve Regina* in Latin and English. Talbott records a dramatic incident on a perilous Indian mountain road in which “I had been reciting the mantra of the Buddha of compassion . . . and suddenly I realized that I had reverted to Hail Mary Full of Grace” (149).

Although readers of his book will recognize his brilliance, erudition and devotion to serious study, Talbott’s final chapter, “Christianity and Buddhism,” opens with the disclaimer, “Not being a scholar . . .” The chapter is a gentle “talk about my own very simple contact with these two religions and the impact they’ve had on my life” (230), a life which exhibits no disjuncture or tension between the two. When Talbott mentioned his leaving the church to Tulku Thondup, Rinpoche responded, “You never left the church.” And the Sixteenth Karmapa called him “a Yesu Lama” – a Jesus Lama (230). Of his spiritual pilgrimage Talbott says, “I remain a person who owes a deep debt to Christianity, both the Protestantism of my childhood and the Catholicism of my teens and twenties” (232). His explanation should be heard in his own voice:

I’m not someone who feels something lacking in Christianity and who feels impelled to look elsewhere for what’s missing. The older I get, the more I see the transcendent value of Christianity, and I hope that Christians won’t lose the power of their own deep skillful means. . . . I became a Buddhist in the way one leaves one’s parents and makes a new life for Oneself, although they still remain one’s parents. (231)

In light of all this, *Tendrel* seems exactly the right title for his memoir. The Buddhist term means “interdependent causation,” or, as defined in the glossary at the end of the book, “the link between beings and phenomena through the process of cause and effect” (292). Talbott’s is the record of an extraordinary and interdependent life, one with fascinating “links” to all sorts of people, places and ideas. Readers of this journal will find Talbott’s autobiography a fresh source of information about Merton (as well as Aelred Graham) and a wealth of detail about Dharamsala, the home in exile of H. H. the Dalai Lama. These experiences occur against the backdrop of the political tensions among the Tibetans in exile, India and China. On this, larger stage, Talbott’s life incarnated Christian-Buddhist dialogue at a profound level.

Talbott reflected, “When in my late twenties I began to ask lamas for Buddhist teachings, I found a sort of vocation. The dharma [teachings] transcends words; yet our feelings when we come in contact with its embodiments do not” (196). In his interview with *Tricycle* Talbott said, “if you encounter a true spiritual master and you recognize it, the recognition disposes your mind to a state which hints every now and then at what good practice will do for you” (271). Although he would laugh and deflect attention from himself with some glittering anecdote about someone else (he did, after all, “study the religion that teaches how to penetrate through the illusoriness of the ego” [182]), this is exactly what his memoir does for us.