

The Challenge of Chatral

Review of

Compassionate Action

By Chatral Rinpoche

Edited by Zach Larson

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Reviewed by **Timothy Fullerton**

This collection of material by and about Chatral Rinpoche is a very challenging book, just as Rinpoche is a very challenging individual. Thomas Merton met Chatral Rinpoche in Darjeeling in 1968. They had a long talk which left Merton very enthused, so much so that he said that “If I were going to settle down with a Tibetan guru, I think Chatral would be the one I’d choose” (*Asian Journal* 144). This presentation of some of Rinpoche’s core teachings shows exactly what he teaches and the challenges which he presents to anyone wishing to walk the path of compassionate action.

It is important to realize that Merton was interested in meditative praxis, and where there might be points of intersection between the Dzogchen meditative praxis and Christian contemplation. There is a deep and apparent similarity between the highest mystical states of Christian contemplation and the state of *shunyata* (emptiness), which is the goal of both Zen and Dzogchen. It is important to remember at this point – and this is something often glossed over in Christian/Buddhist dialogue – that Christianity is a theistic religion, with a non-negotiable given: God IS, and Jesus Christ is the wholly divine Son of God, and in fact God *in se*, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Buddhism is non-theistic, and at the *terminus ad quem* of the Buddhist praxis there is the no-thing-ness of Ultimate Emptiness where there is no self, no “Other,” divine or otherwise, not even “going beyond” any of the three *kayas*, particularly the *Dharmakaya*, the “body” of the Buddha as embodied in the teachings; “beyond God” as Merton wrote. To “go beyond” implies something to be gone beyond. There can be no entity that exists outside the paradigm of meditative praxis, a non-negotiable given which cannot be transcended. If there is anything left, an object of contemplation, a “beatific vision,” God, Jesus, or the Buddha, then *shunyata* cannot exist, and it becomes an unattainable goal. The final line of the *Heart Sutra* makes this quite plain: “*Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi, Svaha!*”: “Gone, Gone, Gone Over, Completely Gone Over, Wisdom! So Be It!” – in other words, emptiness. Having said that, the praxis of meditation can be applied to Christian contemplation, and this was what interested Merton.

Timothy Fullerton is currently an educational coordinator/special education teacher at Holy Cross Children’s Services in Michigan, where he lives with his wife Mary. He was ordained a Buddhist priest of the Pure Land School in 1974, holds initiations in both the Gelugpa and Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism and also holds initiation in two Sufi orders. He prepared the glossary for *The Other Side of the Mountain*, volume 7 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. He will give a presentation on Merton and the *Bhagavad Gita* at the ITMS Eleventh General Meeting in Rochester, NY in June 2009.

The challenge of Chatral Rinpoche is in his call to a life of “Compassionate Action.” This goes far beyond extending oneself for others, or seeing their viewpoints. Rinpoche teaches that a vegetarian diet is the only thing consistent with serious Buddhist practice. He calls us to a life of non-violence to all sentient beings and quotes the Sutra which says, “Meat eating . . . is a sword that severs the potential for liberation. It is a fire that burns the seed of Buddhahood” (34). Rinpoche said: “If you take meat, it goes against the vows one takes in seeking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Because when you take meat, you have to take a being’s life. So, I gave it up” (24). He goes on to say about lamas who eat meat, that they have developed great *siddhas* or supernatural powers, so they can eat meat, and even drink alcohol, but only if they possess the supernatural powers.

The idea of giving up meat is a very difficult thing for most westerners. Many people who proudly claim to be “pro-life” are very markedly carnivorous. Our basic definitions around the sanctity of life appertain to human life, and as such this is both moral and ethical. It rarely is opened up to include all sentient life. Rinpoche releases hundreds of fish back into the wild each year as an act of compassion. It calls us to a thorough-going congruence of non-violence and “harmlessness.” In Rinpoche’s teachings, to be “pro-life” means pro ALL sentient life, to be against war as a way of making policy, and to be against capital punishment. It means to be active in one’s struggle against the more subtle forms of a culture of death: poverty, discrimination, gender and sexual orientation bias, and ecological irresponsibility.

It is important when reading this book to hear the voice of the Nyingma tradition, of which Chatral is a lineage holder in the Longchen Nyingthig line, which includes Guru Padmasambhava, the bringer of Buddhism to Tibet, Longchen Rabjam, the delineator of Dzogchen, back to the Buddha Samantabhadra, who is listed as the progenitor of the lineage. Chatral Rinpoche is 95 years old, and his deep wisdom and uncompromising moral and ethical vigor make for a wonderful introduction to the Rinpoche that Merton had said could be his teacher.