

FILM REVIEWS

Robert A. F. Thurman On Buddhism

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A THREE-PART VIDEO SERIES TOTALING FOUR HOURS



Robert A. F. Thurman, a professor of Indo-Tibetan studies at Columbia University, is best known for his translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as well as for authoring *Inner Revolution*, *Circling the Sacred Mountain*, and *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*. The videos are broken into seventy-minute lectures delivered from the podium of the scholar with wit and humor to match the lofty and complex elements of the Three

Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The lectures are not intended as an introduction to the elements of Buddhism; rather, they are an extended discussion of the three tenets.

The first video focuses on *The Buddha*, the teacher of enlightenment. The discussion begins with the proposition that the appearance of a buddha is an event both rare and precious, as it assumes the evolution of a spirit, the universe that it exists in, and the readiness of disciples. Thurman speaks of what a buddha is, noting the manifestation of the most recent Buddha and his impact on humanity during his age of enlightenment and in the present. Thurman anchors his discussion in examples from the contemporary world and audience experiences, bringing the listener to a closer understanding of the universal extension that is the reality of a buddha.

The second video deals with *The Dharma*, the teachings of the Buddha, and the concepts of enlightenment and nirvana. Here, Thurman addresses the Four Noble Truths at length, reviews the Three Wheels of Dharma, and briefly notes the Three Vehicles. Again, Thurman's range and depth of knowledge take listeners on a voyage through a complex discussion of Buddhism. While his lecture offers a means of clarifying mysteries of the religion, expect to come away with new and deeper questions about the Dharma.

The final video in the series, *The Sangha*, reveals the unique qualities of the monastic community of Buddhism. This is both a historical journey through the Sangha, a study of the means of

implementing the Dharma, and a look at the attempt to become a buddha. Thurman illuminates why the Western world has difficulty in understanding and embracing the ways of the Sangha, and the teachings of Buddhism, from a traditionally materialistic perspective.

Thurman is a talented speaker, drawing in his audience with casual charming and witty contemporary parallels. His depth of knowledge is matched by an ability to interpret precepts clearly, offering a lecture style that is informal and nonthreatening, despite the ambitious scale of this undertaking.

The series is appropriate for excerpted use at the high school level, for professional development of educators, and for postsecondary classes that have studied basic teachings of Buddhism. Strategies for use might include the following activities.

- The videos provide an excellent opportunity for jigsaw presentations: small groups of students viewing and summarizing the highlights of one lecture to be presented to the class at large.
- The segment *The Buddha* begins with the great mystery and wonder of a buddha appearing among us; the period of time in which the Sakyamuni Buddha lived was a period of exceptional growth for mankind. In watching the video, students should note the development of Buddhism as guided by the enlightened one, as well as his exceptional qualities.
- Compare and contrast these personal elements and his methodology with other founders of world religions, as they come to us through history. Consider how this is reflected in the central beliefs of Buddhism, and the organization of the Sangha.
- For deeper reflection on *The Dharma*, students might begin by writing their understanding of what the Dharma is and listing a short series of questions to focus their viewing and note taking. After the lecture, students should return to their original summary, extending and clarifying their positions. A second list of questions, based on a deeper understanding of the Dharma, might also be included at this time, and used as the basis for future research.
- Particularly in the video, *The Sangha*, Thurman speculates on the difficulties that Western traditions bring in supporting a solid foundation of Buddhism. Have students generate an essay outlining these challenges and the potential impact this will have on the spread of Buddhism as a tradition undergoing a period of Diaspora. ■

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