



ROBERT THURMAN

an EAA interview



Editor's Introduction

Robert A. F. Thurman has become one of America's leading voices for the teachings of Buddhism, making these teachings more meaningful to Americans in a manner unequaled by any other Westerner.

Time magazine chose him as one of its 25 most influential Americans in 1997, and described him as a "larger than life scholar-activist destined to convey the *dharma*, the precious teaching of Siddhartha, from Asia to America." The *New York Times* recently said Thurman "is considered the leading American expert on Tibetan Buddhism." His unique take on the relevance of Buddhism to American culture and politics, as well as his wit and creativity in weaving ancient Buddhist wisdom and popular Western ideals, make his knowledge entertaining, useful and informative.

Thurman's most recent book, *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* (Riverhead Books, 1999), was chosen by *Publisher's Weekly* as one of the best books of 1998. Thurman has often been placed front and center with the news media, and is regularly interviewed by newspapers and magazines throughout the world.

Thurman's work and insights are grounded in more than 35 years of serious academic scholarship. He has B.A., A.M. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard and studied in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India and the United States. In 1962, he was the first American to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk, but gave up his robes after several years feeling he could be most effective in the American university system. He is a popular professor in the Religion Department of Columbia University where he holds the Jey Tsong Khapa chair in Indo-Tibetan Studies.

Eleven years ago, Thurman co-founded Tibet House New York, a serious nonprofit dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan culture on behalf of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who calls Thurman "an old friend." Thurman serves as president of Tibet House, which attracts visitors from around the world.

We are pleased to publish this EAA interview with America's most distinguished popularizer of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. We would like to thank Tom Yarnell for his assistance in the procurement of this interview.

Lucien: *Would you please inform our readers a bit about your early life and how you became interested in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism?*

Robert Thurman: I was raised at a Presbyterian Church, the Brick Church in New York, but never had faith in a creator god—disagreeing with parents and pastors. I did like Jesus and his teachings. I loved philosophy and romantic novels, read a lot in school, and wanted to be a novelist, poet, and playwright. I learned languages easily and at age fifteen ran away to travel. I married early and had a child. At twenty years of age, I lost an eye in a garage accident, and immediately decided to renounce my ordinary life and go to India and seek enlightenment from the yoga or Buddhist traditions, and Sufism. I encountered His Holiness the Dalai Lama and an elder Mongolian lama, Venerable Geshe Wangyal, and began to study Buddhism. I liked it for philosophical more than religious reasons, the practicality of the four noble truths and the logical compellingness of the critical insight into selflessness and voidness and compassion. I have been studying it ever since, with ever-increasing pleasure and appreciation.

Lucien: *Since you have both academic and practitioner-oriented training, how do you think your background impacts the way you approach Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and the way practitioners, academics, and students approach you?*

Western Europe, a relatively backward area until the past 500 years or so, began its renaissance when it discovered the ancient humanism and natural sciences of the Greeks. This renaissance may perhaps reach completion when our current discovery of the “inner sciences” of the Indians helps us overcome the philosophical and scientific materialism that now holds us back.

Robert Thurman: Fortunately, the way I understand Buddhism, it requires clear thinking and critical scrutiny, not dogmatic adherence or blind faith. Therefore, it is an educational tradition more than a religious one. So there is very little conflict for me in teaching about Buddhism as an academic subject. I do so in a religion department, due to the categories of American academia, but would just as soon do so in a department of philosophy, or psychology. Students read Plato in core curriculum courses, and no one thinks they are practicing Greek religion, worshipping Apollo or consulting the Delphic oracle. So the great thinkers of the Buddhist tradition contribute to our understanding of reality, the human condition, ethics, psychology, whatever. They, along with Hindu, Confucian, Muslim, and Taoist writers, should be part of our general liberal arts and sciences curriculum, just like the Greeks, Hebrews, Romans, and other European thinkers.

Lucien: *What, in your opinion, is significant about the fact that Buddhism’s origins were in India?*

Robert Thurman: India was said by Bertrand Russell to have been the supreme culture for philosophizing about the human being, reality and psyche; the Greeks were good on nature, and the Chinese on social thought. Due to the greater population, wealth, and tolerance of the Indian subcontinent’s societies and rulers, Toynbee considers that Shakyamuni Buddha was the most successful of the “Axial Age” (ca. sixth through fifth centuries B.C.E.) teachers of the whole Eurasian *oikumene*, meaning the inhabited world as known to those in Europe and Asia. Western Europe, a relatively backward area until the past 500 years or so, began its renaissance when it

discovered the ancient humanism and natural sciences of the Greeks. This renaissance may perhaps reach completion when our current discovery of the “inner sciences” of the Indians helps us overcome the philosophical and scientific materialism that now holds us back.

Lucien: *In what ways do you think Buddhism influences contemporary India?*

Robert Thurman: Buddhism’s current influence in India is mainly through its embeddedness in Hinduism. One thousand years ago the Iranian and Turkish invasions of India began to obliterate the network of Buddhist monastic universities that served as institutional anchor of Buddhism within the culture. However, after 1,500 years of being closely integrated with the Vedic Hindu traditions, Buddhism had imparted its metaphysics of non-dualism, its psychology of liberative contemplation, its educational epistemology that privileges experience over dogmatic theory, and its ethical nonviolence related to the emphasis on vegetarianism. Today, Indians are ambivalent about Buddhism, respecting Buddha as an incar-

nation of God, and such foreign Buddhists as the Dalai Lama as holy persons, while feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the Buddhist critique of the caste system, insistence on nonviolence and anti-militarism, focus on asceticism, non-acceptance of a creator god, and so forth.

Lucien: *Probably the two most well-known Buddhist sects in the West are now Zen and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. What major similarities and differences in these two sects do you think it is particularly important for high school and university instructors to understand?*

Robert Thurman: I don’t think “sect” accurately describes almost any Buddhist movement, since the word implies that its adherents think that other Buddhists outside their group are not followers of the same religion or philosophy. All Buddhist schools, orders, or movements follow Shakyamuni Buddha in his central teaching of selflessness and compassion, take refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and seek liberation from suffering in Nirvana by following the eight-fold noble path. Their differences lie in some details of their philosophical theories, ritual practices, and favorite scriptures. Zen Buddhism of Japan and its parent, Ch’an Buddhism of China, have many points of similarity with some aspects of Tibetan Buddhism; mainly, (1) a strong emphasis on critical wisdom as the vehicle of liberation from ignorance and suffering; (2) a focus on asceticism in practice of long contemplative retreats; and (3) a tradition of compassionate social service on the part of those considered to have attained high realization. Both have a language about sudden breakthroughs on the path, and both teach arduous, lifelong practices which involve systematic, gradual development.

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Lucien: *The current Dalai Lama is, in my opinion, one of the important reasons that Indo-Tibetan Buddhism has such a high profile in the West. I know that the two of you have a long-time friendship. Would you inform our readers about aspects of that relationship?*

Robert Thurman: The Dalai Lama is, of course, a great exemplar of the benefits of practicing Tibetan Buddhism. He is a humble Buddhist monk of great erudition, ethical rigor, and philosophical depth and creativity. He is also a leader of a people under genocidal pressure whose land is occupied by a vastly superior force, unchallenged by world governments, eager for commercial and strategic relationships with the occupier—yet he has steadfastly refused to adopt violent means of redress, persevering tirelessly with the path of patience and dialogue. I began with His Holiness as a friend and fellow student (he is six years older than I), and gradually became his disciple in the context of spiritual teachings, as he advanced significantly beyond me over the years, in knowledge, accomplishment, and teaching ability. I also remain his friend—we occasionally have time to share a good laugh—as well as colleague in the difficult work of preserving Tibetan culture and making Tibet’s remarkable traditions better known to the world.

Lucien: *Of course, the whole question of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism is influenced by the policies of the People’s Republic of China toward Tibet. What aspects of that geopolitical issue do you think are important for readers to consider?*

Robert Thurman: I think all peoples and cultures are precious and should be preserved, just as should all species of animals and the environment itself, the heritage to be passed along to the future. Among endangered peoples and cultures, the Tibetans have many unique qualities and perform a special function in their preservation of the living traditions of Indian Buddhism into modern times. They are not simply a “primitive,” “backward,” unfortunate people; they had a well-orga-

nized, literate nation and civilization, had developed an alternative form of modern society which is non-industrial and non-militaristic, and therefore much more environment friendly and neighbor friendly than most of us. Therefore, there is a special urgency about preventing “modern development,” coming from China or anywhere else, completing the destruction of Tibet and its civilization. Unfortunately, our own industrial and militaristic hubris and our commercial and strategic interest in China has so far kept us from giving the saving of Tibet a sufficient priority, leaving the communist Chinese government in its sunset desperation to continue to pursue its genocidal program for Tibet.

Lucien: *I found your writing on Indo-Tibetan Buddhism to be illuminating and educational. Please inform readers a bit about your own books and any other works on Indo-Tibetan Buddhism that are appropriate for educators with little or no prior background on the subject.*

Robert Thurman: I recommend of my own works, *The Central Philosophy of Tibet*, *Inner Revolution*, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, and so on. I recommend even more highly any of the works of His Holi-

ness the Dalai Lama, especially *The Art of Happiness*, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, and his personal autobiography.

Lucien: *By most accounts Buddhism has significantly increased in popularity in the U.S. over the past decade or so. Why do you think that many Americans are choosing to embrace this belief system at one level or the other?*

Robert Thurman: I perhaps go against a media trend in that I don’t think Americans are embracing Buddhism that much as a “belief system.” A key Buddhist belief is karma, the evolutionary cause and effect of ethical and unethical actions in determining one’s biological structure and destiny over a continuum of lives—and very few Americans subscribe to that belief. Another Buddhist cardinal tenet is the value of the monastic calling, and Protestant—“no free lunch”—America has a hard time understanding monasticism. However, the contemplative psychology, philosophical profundity, and ethical ideals of Buddhism are gaining a wider hearing and are satisfying peoples’ need for greater self-understanding, understanding of the world, and critical evaluation of our leadership and institutions.

Especially in this time of intensified soul-searching in the wake of the devastating terrorist attack on New York and Washington, the Buddhist view of reality can provide a helpful perspective from which to try to make sense of the deepening crisis of industrial modernity, essentially arising from excessive technological power in the hands of people with very little control over themselves and their ideologies and emotions. Buddhism can reinforce our vague sense that violence is not the answer; while there should be short-term law enforcement measures to restrain criminal destructiveness, large-scale retributive violence will only increase future terrorist activity. It can encourage us to root out the causes of despair and hatred, in poverty, ideological confusion, and prejudice.

Lucien: *On behalf of our readers, thanks so much for the interview. ■*