

Listening in With ...

In 1964, **ROBERT THURMAN, PH.D.**, became the first Westerner to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. These days, Thurman is no longer a monk; instead, he's a Buddhist scholar and professor at Columbia University—not to mention an author, a speaker, a retreat center spiritual director, and cofounder of an organization dedicated to preserving Tibetan culture. Here, the self-professed WASB (white Anglo-Saxon Buddhist) talks to *Unity Magazine* editor **Katy Koontz** about Jesus' bodhisattva status and what it's like to be buddies with one of the most popular spiritual leaders on the planet.



Robert Thurman

CLOSE FRIENDS

IN FARAWAY PLACES

Katy Koontz: How did you first become interested in Buddhism?

Robert Thurman: I was very interested in philosophy in high school and read works written by many important philosophers. I felt something was missing, though, so I began to read spiritual works, but I didn't like conventional theism. I was not into the picture of the old guy with the white beard up there bossing people around.

KK: I can relate!

RT: I also never quite took to the idea of the crucified Jesus. I liked what Jesus had to say, but I didn't really like this idea of the sacrifice. So I became very intrigued with Eastern thought, and my real interest was in India.

When I was an undergrad at Harvard, I had an accident and lost an eye, which I considered a kind of wake-up call. I decided I wanted to figure out how the world works and what the purpose of life is. I wasn't finding satisfactory answers in Western culture, and I felt somehow that India had the answer I wanted. So I left the university, although unfortunately, my wife at the time didn't want to go with me.

KK: It sounds like you were really driven.

RT: Yes, I was very driven to find meaning. On my way to India, I visited some Christian monasteries in Greece and some Sufi communities in Turkey. I also traveled to Syria, Iran (which was under the shah at the time), Afghanistan, and Pakistan. I then met a bunch of Hindus in India. I didn't find anyone in India who

knew much about Buddhism until I met the Tibetans. And the minute I met them, I felt something. I was home. I later felt strongly that I'd had a previous life as a Tibetan because I learned the language unusually quickly, even for someone who is good at languages in general.

I just loved the Buddhist philosophical works about emptiness and selflessness (which are actually scientific theories) as well as compassion (which has scientifically established benefits for all concerned). It gave me a purpose to aim for and a path to the answers I was seeking. It really kindled me, and so I wanted to be a monk. I went whole hog into it.

KK: How did you befriend His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

RT: I met him when he was 29 and I was 23. I'd returned to the U.S. for my father's funeral, and I met a Mongolian who had a tiny monastery in New Jersey. He became my root teacher, but he didn't want to make me a monk. "It's good to be a devotee," he told me, "but you were born in New York, and maybe you have another mission that's not being a Tibetan monk because, actually, you're not a Tibetan." Finally, in 1964, after I'd been bothering him for two years, he took me back to India and introduced me to His Holiness, who was amazed I was speaking Tibetan fluently.

He'd been hungering for a conversation partner who could speak Tibetan and English; someone who knew something about Western studies that he hadn't had a chance to study in Tibet, although he was already very learned. He recommended me to his senior teachers for studies, and we were like fellow students in that

sense. I did ask him a lot of questions about Buddhism, but he would usually deflect them to the old teachers, and then he and I would start talking about Sigmund Freud, or Albert Einstein, or quantum physics, or how to make an A-bomb.

We met twice a week for more than a year. Finally, because we became such great friends, he forgot about the advice of the old lama, and he did ordain me as a full monk.

At the time, I didn't necessarily admire him as an enlightened high teacher but as a friend and a sincere, wonderful person. I was not that much into the Dalai Lama bit. Even he wasn't taking himself that seriously. He was of course very kind to everybody, but he wasn't acting like, "I'm the cat's meow." He was acting like, "I still have a lot to learn."

KK: That's a wonderful hallmark of a master, of course.

RT: Exactly.

KK: So what was it like being friends with the most powerful and exalted figure in Tibetan Buddhism?

RT: One great thing about His Holiness is that he's not stuck in his 24-hour "holiness" identity. You don't have to kowtow every time you see him. He believes that you can be enlightened without being a Buddhist. He had a great influence on making me a better Christian in the same way that Laurance Rockefeller once said the Dalai Lama was the best Christian he knew, meaning he was trying to live those virtues.

I might've been a little too dogmatic about Buddhism in my 20s and 30s. His Holiness pressed me, saying,

“Don’t be like that. Jesus was a great bodhisattva or maybe even a Buddha. You never know. He was just teaching people Christianity because that’s what they could use. Don’t get all sectarian and freak out about it. That’s very bad.”

KK: So why did you decide to hang up your monk’s robes?

RT: After a year and a half, I was sent on a mission to Argentina where they hoped to make a Tibetan settlement, which didn’t work out. I then returned to the monastery in New Jersey in the mid-1960s, when both the civil rights

KK: Busted!

RT: I began to realize the wisdom of what he was saying because although I liked being with the Dalai Lama, I realized they didn’t really need another mouth to feed in Dharamsala. The Tibetans in exile were in dire circumstances. I wasn’t able to really give them the help they needed, although they were helping me, and it didn’t seem fair in the long run. And the monastery in New Jersey was really in the Mongolian community; it wasn’t serving Americans. There was no American Tibetan monastery.

figure in the Tibetan stream of things. So I returned to India and saw the Dalai Lama again.

He was upset with me because he hadn’t had a personal explanation of why I ceased being a monk. But by then, I had married my current wife, and he liked her so much, and he thought our children were very extraordinary. At that time, we had only two—my older son, Ganden, and my daughter, Uma—and he said they must’ve had their own destiny to want to have me as a father, so therefore, I *had* to be an ex-monk, and he forgave me.

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movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement were getting under way. All my peers and my old friends were deeply engaged in something meritorious of that kind, and I got involved in some protest marches.

Then some of my friends were also into the psychedelic movement. While psychedelics can open the door, by themselves, they’ll just be bad for your health in the long run. You really have to do a spiritual discipline and train in meditation. So I was into helping reform my friends. I was becoming a bit of a sensation—the monk who was trying to help the American idealistic youth straighten themselves out.

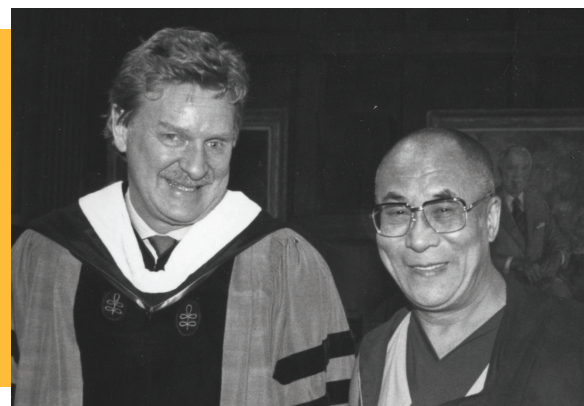
Then my original teacher said, “Look, you can’t really do that. You either just stay at the monastery here, or go back to India and stay there, but you can’t go out and be an activist. I told you that you might have this kind of an instinct to help the world in this more active way, and you’re not supposed to do that as a monk.”

I wanted to be helpful but wasn’t helping anybody as a white Buddhist monk. None of my family members or friends thought it made sense. Years later, my daughter said that I looked like [author] Henry Miller in drag with my red robe and shaved head.

So I resigned my robes. I decided the Western equivalent of a monk was a professor. I went back to Harvard and finished my English major and then I got into the graduate school for my master’s, and in record time I got a Ph.D. in both East Asian and South Asian studies, and also in Buddhology.

KK: Buddhology?

RT: The study of enlightenment, the study of Buddhas. When I started my Ph.D. research, I was translating an important Tibetan book and studying the life of its author in the 15th century—a kind of Leonardo da Vinci



At one point, Ganden (who was 3) took a running leap into His Holiness’s lap to give him a hug, and he knocked his glasses across the room by accident. The secretary looked worried and rushed to pick up the glasses, but His Holiness was delighted, laughing and hugging my son. It was a wonderful moment.

KK: That’s incredibly sweet!

RT: By that time, he’d become a top-of-the-line Buddhist philosopher. The book I was translating is very difficult to even read in Tibetan, let alone translate. His Holiness began to help me with the subtleties. I had a whole year with him, and we had a lot of fun. After I returned to finish my degree and get a job, I didn’t see him again for nine years until his first trip to America in 1979. By then, he had become the grand master of not only Buddhist philosophy, but also

meditation. He'd come into kind of full power at the age of 44. He was just huge. He taught me a lot of new things, and we've been working closely together ever since, in that I took up the torch of trying to help preserve the Tibetan culture.

KK: Are you talking about founding Tibet House in New York?

RT: Yes. On that trip, he asked me and a few others to start Tibet House.

I wanted to help the Tibetans, but I didn't feel that political activism was that helpful. I thought the real way to help was to start the center and wait for the time when the Chinese would realize the error of crushing the Tibetan spirituality. That time now is almost upon us. It's taken a long while, but spirituality has been flourishing in the new China. Individually, many communists are Buddhists, or Christians, or *something*.

KK: That's interesting. I didn't know that.

RT: They realized that you can't live without spirituality, and worshipping Mao is not very good spirituality.

KK: Do you think that the Chinese will ever free Tibet?

RT: Absolutely. They will, and more to the point, they'll free China because the Chinese people don't really want to

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THE DALAI LAMA AND I: FRIENDSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY

BY ROBERT THURMAN, PH.D.

I first met His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, Buddhist monk Tenzin Gyatso for short, in November, 1964, in Sarnath, India. His Holiness, 29 at that time, accepted this 23-year-old American boy who was seeking to continue his Buddhist studies and practice, and if possible to become a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition, as his student and protégé.

Recently, we met in Delhi and he laughed, remembering those days, and said, "You and I have had a long time chatting in my broken English and your broken Tibetan—but we still communicate! Friendship can make it work!" His Holiness knows perhaps thousands of people all over the world, but I do feel blessed to have been an American friend of his now for these past 51 years.

One of his sayings, recently published this past year in his *Little Book* (for which I wrote the foreword) is: "Cultivating closeness and warmth for others automatically puts the mind at ease. It is the ultimate source of success in life." He also said, which may sometimes represent his frustration with my imperfections, perhaps with my failure

to remain a monk for life, "Sometimes your dear friend, though still the same person, feels more like an enemy. Instead of love, you feel hostility. But with genuine love and compassion, another person's appearance or behavior has no effect on your attitude."

Finally, in the Buddhist Universalist (*Mahayana*) tradition, the main model of a teacher is, literally, the "good friend" (*kalyana-mitra*). By presenting the teacher role as that of a friend rather than a guru, a heavy authority, the emphasis is on the learner, pointing out that one has to take responsibility for understanding and acting appropriately oneself, rather than just follow authority. The point is that good friends accept each other unconditionally on a basic level, but on a developmental level, they should challenge each other to do better, feel better, and be better, happier day by day.

So friendship becomes a spiritual art—and a great blessing! As His Holiness has also said, "A good friend who points out mistakes and imperfections and rebukes evil is to be respected as if he reveals the secret of some hidden treasure."

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be bossed around and told they should dress this way, work 17 hours a day with no holidays, and be politically correct. They are human beings. They're wonderful human beings, and they just want to have fun like everybody else. I'm certain, as His Holiness is, that Tibet will be free. You can be free and be part of another free country.

KK: Buddhism values nonattachment to outcomes and material objects, but what does Buddhism say about attachment to people and relationships?

RT: Love is defined as the wish for the happiness of the beloved, not possessing the beloved. That's considered attachment. In the perfect love relationship, each party is not concerned with their own happiness but with the other's happiness. It's a complete and perfect exchange.

When you hear sarcastic comments like, "The honeymoon is over," that means each one began to think, *I am more concerned with her happiness than she is with mine*. What's left of the relationship will not be your love and

affection, but your demanding that the other reciprocate, which is really what the nature of attachment is. So if you're focused on how much you get out of whatever it is, it will never be enough. That's human nature, and so that's where any kind of work freeing oneself from attachment is beneficial.

Sometimes it's pushing the envelope too far to act like everybody's supposed to be completely selfless. The Buddhist teacher would say, "Let's acknowledge the degree of attachment and try to work with it so it doesn't ruin the relationship by becoming too demanding. Let's balance it with true love (wishing only for the beloved's happiness) and true compassion (wishing only that they not suffer)."

KK: I like that there's room for compromise there.

RT: Then at a deeper level of Buddhist psychology, you learn that to really wish the happiness of the beloved, you have to be happy yourself so you know what you're wishing them. So then developing your own joy and bliss becomes something you do for

the other because you can't really wish them joy and bliss if you're miserable. It won't be sincere. You'll be martyring. So it becomes our duty to be joyful to make the relationship healthy.

That's a little paradoxical, but actually, that's the same thing Jesus meant when he said to love your neighbor as yourself. Buddha saw that people were most happy when they were making someone *else* happy, and the Dalai Lama agrees. He says, "If you want others to be happy, be compassionate toward them; and if you want to be happy yourself, be compassionate toward others."

We have to be practical in not getting too demanding of ourselves or others, but instead go step-by-step. We can learn to be altruistic gradually, and to be less self-serving and less self-occupied, and then cultivate a higher degree of altruism and a higher degree of happiness. It isn't like it's inborn. You endlessly develop it.

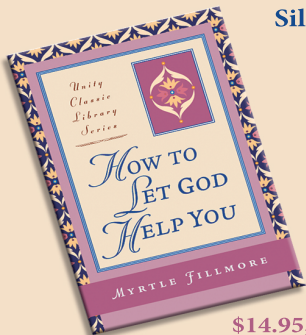
KK: So there's hope for everybody in this?

RT: Yes, exactly. 🌍

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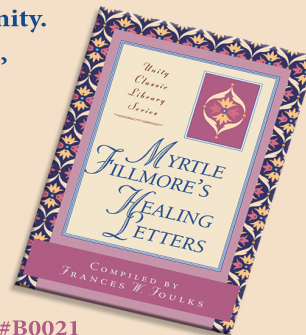
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