

ROBERT THURMAN

IN DHARAMSALA, INDIA, in the mid-1960s, two 20-some-things sat together for frequent discussions in the hillside Namgyal Monastery. One of them was Robert Thurman, who was in the process of becoming the first Westerner ordained a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition. The other was the Dalai Lama. The sessions were an opportunity for the Tibetan refugee to check on the American's progress—and also work towards a better understanding of the West. Thurman, a Harvard graduate, did his best to answer the Dalai Lama's questions on everything from the U.S. Constitution to nuclear physics.

Thurman's odyssey is remarkable and ongoing. By the time he met the Dalai Lama he had married and divorced, survived an accident that cost him an eye, and traveled through Turkey and Iran.

Thurman's time as a red-robed monk was brief: He struggled to find a secure footing back on the East Coast, isolated from a community of like-minded Buddhists and unable, during the tumultuous mid-1960s, to connect with his peers. He returned to academia, built a large family, thrived as a professor, and became a well-known champion for preserving Tibetan culture. In his 50s, he emerged as a bestselling author. His 1998 book *Inner Revolution* is an accessible guide to incorporating Buddhist wisdom into everyday life. It is both deeply informed and a breezy, even fun, read.

Thurman emphasizes that the tools and insights of Buddhism are available to all, regardless of their religion. "Analyzing critically one's own inner narrative—how one is conducting oneself through life—can be applied to people from all different religions without disturbing—in fact improving—their attempt to live up to the ideals of that religion."

In his new book, *Wisdom Is Bliss*, Thurman writes: "The historical Buddha was a rigorous scientist, in the modern sense—that is, an explorer of reality."

Buddha-as-scientist might seem strange, but it's in keeping with the tradition Thurman holds dear. He points out that most religions and ethical teachings more or less agree on how to live. But Indo-Tibetan Buddhism has "the best methods," according to

Thurman, "the best mental or what they call inner sciences, and also it considers the inner sciences—how to manage the mind and the emotions and confusions—to be the most important sciences."

In conversation, it's easy to see why Thurman was a popular classroom lecturer. He is charmingly digressive, neatly connecting what appear to be tangents back to his main argument. In a 30-minute video chat he mentions that the early translations of Herman Hesse were inaccurate, compares the British and Muslim occupations of India, and riffs on Western medical schools. But it's all with a purpose, elaborating on a simple idea: People don't need to be trapped in their own unhappiness.

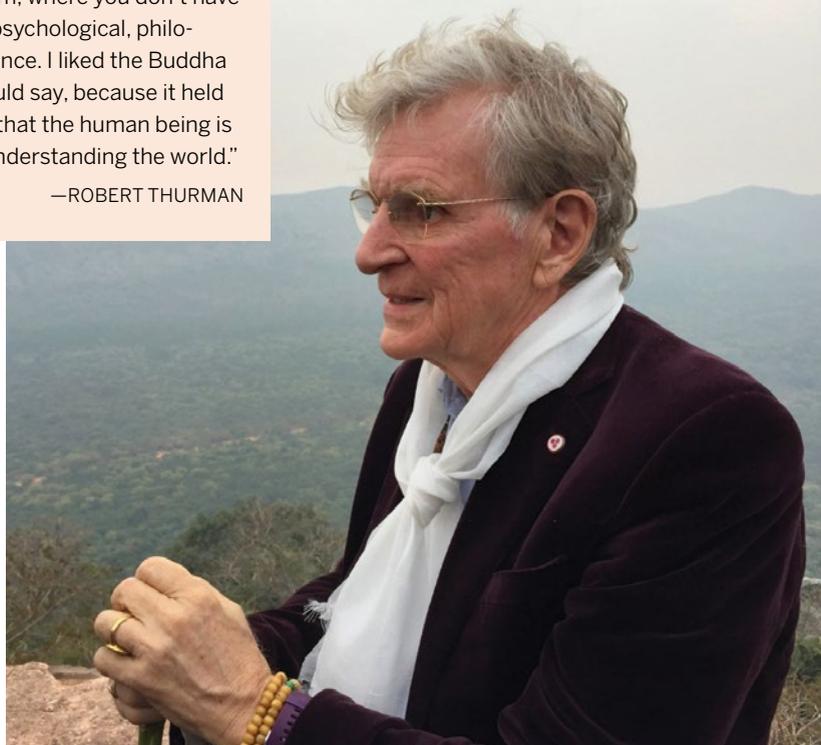
"I don't know how to get away from people thinking that I'm just talking about Buddhism," he says. "I want to persuade them to consider looking at the world in another way, a more open-minded way, and feel more encouraged about things."

—BEN NUSSBAUM

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When I sought Buddhism, I wasn't really seeking *Buddhism*. I didn't like religion and ceremonies, rituals, sitting with people and holding hands or whatever. I was into science. Not science constrained by the dogma of materialism, where you don't have a mind, but psychological, philosophical science. I liked the Buddha science, I could say, because it held out the idea that the human being is capable of understanding the world."

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