

TRANSCRIPT

The Spirituality & Health Podcast

ROBERT THURMAN

[music]

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami. And this is the Spirituality & Health Podcast. Our guest today, Robert Thurman is professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, as well as co-founder and president of Tibet House US. A close friend of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama for over half a century, Bob is the first ordained American Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition.

He's a passionate activist for the plight of the Tibetan people, a skilled translator of Buddhist texts, and an inspiring writer of popular books on Buddhism. His newest book is *Wisdom Is Bliss: Four Friendly Fun Facts That Can Change Your Life*. Bob Thurman, welcome to the Spirituality & Health Podcast.

Bob Thurman: Thank you, Rabbi. It's wonderful to be here with you after too long a time.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, we do know each other, it's been a very long time since we've been together. As we were talking before we started the recording, we have a lot of friends in common. Let's start with one of your closest friends, I think you would call him that. In addition to reading *Wisdom Is Bliss* to get ready for this conversation, I also picked up your previous book, *Man of Peace: The Illustrated Life Story of the Dalai Lama of Tibet*.

I'm in the bookstore and I couldn't help but notice that the selection of books on Buddhism, because I live in middle Tennessee, the religion section is big, but it's all Protestant Christianity. There's a small little half a shelf for Judaism and half a shelf for Islam. There are a number of Buddhist books but they're dominated by two authors. One is the Vietnamese Zen master, Thích Nhát Hạnh, and the other is His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.

I'm just wondering since they're so popular, and I imagine they're popular with the same demographic of Americans, I wonder if you see any parallels between the two teachers, not so much parallels between Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, that's going to take us away into the weeds but just the way they present Buddhism to an American audience. I don't know if that's too much to ask or not?

Bob Thurman: Well, no but it could be a long answer or short answer. I think both of them, their hearts are in the right place, I think is the only thing to say. They present the teachings of Buddha in a very friendly and easygoing way and in different styles though, rather different styles. Thích Nhát Hạnh particularly has a really lovely way of trying to bring it into every moment, everyday life sort of thing and a little bit more be here now-- a little easier actually for the general public and with very charming and creative things like when you stop at a red light, say thanks to the red light for giving

you a moment of peace where you don't have to worry about running into anything [chuckles] instead of being frustrated. Little things like that did a really wonderful.

Dalai Lama doesn't so much get into that but Dalai Lama has a more rigorous thing about educating yourself and developing critical insight and wisdom, but then his baseline is compassion, kindness. Also, he's unique even, a little bit different from Thích Nhất Hạnh in that he insists that the world is getting better, and the surface, terrible turbulence, and all the catastrophes and disasters are part of it, but they've been going on for a long time and they are somehow en masse, with the largest possible vision, they are getting better.

He does that, of course, from a base where his people are being under genocide by Chinese Communist occupation and oppression of Tibet, and the attempt to assimilate Tibetans to make them into Chinese, which is impossible so therefore, it's destructive. From that base, he says, "Well, sure, we'll get tired of it. It doesn't work, that kind of violence and that stupidity, and they will eventually realize Tibetans can be their friends, and we'll all be friends." He calls for dialogue. He won't call for any sort of violence. He discouraged any Tibetan-armed patriots from doing that.

He couldn't stop them during a certain phase in the '50s, but he tried to, and it didn't work as he predicted. For whatever the situation, whatever the terrible thing is, dialogue must replace violence in the 21st century, and to the World Wars in the 20th century and the peeling off of colonialism in the world was enough. Now, we have to turn to nature and peacefulness, and our human nature he even teaches like a secular thing.

The second thing, I think, that more than Thích Nhất Hạnh, he's into not converting anybody to Buddhism. He's into sharing anything from the Buddhist technique, repertoire of techniques, huge literature of the psyche, and of spiritual development and so on, willing to share that but not with the aim of people becoming Buddhists, not nominal changes against it.

He says everyone should keep their grandmother's religion, and they should-- but they can learn from other religions, and he has things he learns from Christianity. He's very interested in Judaism because he believes that Judaism can teach how to preserve Jewish culture for 1,700 year, 1,800, 1,900 years without having a country any longer. That's an amazing feat and he wants to try to figure out in case Tibet gets stuck in exile for long. [chuckles]

Anyway, they're both really great but they come down to a common thing, being here and appreciating things now, that would be Thích Nhất Hạnh. The Dalai Lama is there's a lot to learn and educate yourself in a lot of ways but stick with your own people, and be kind, and get along with things, and be altruistic and things will work out. Never mind, you can stay secular, even, they doesn't want to convert you away from secularism even. He considers that kind of a world religion.

Rabbi Rami: I want to come back to that idea in a moment in a biographical way. I want to ask you a question about how you came to Tibetan Buddhism but you raised another issue that I guess I want to touch on. I remember there's a book called *The Jew in the Lotus*, which is, Rodger Kamenetz's account of the Dalai Lama inviting all these rabbis to Dharamsala to talk about just what you said, how do you keep a

culture thriving in exile for millennia? You're an activist for Tibetans, is Tibetan culture being preserved among young people? Are they--

Bob Thurman: It's very difficult now. We're like the fourth or 70 years or however you count generations. It's been 70 years since the Chinese invasion in the '50s and it's very difficult. In exile, I think it's being well-preserved.

In China under the Chinese, Tibet itself, where the vast majority of Tibetans do live, it's been sort of preserved in fits and spurts. The Chinese keep changing their policy. At first, they tried to-- they acted like they were going to support the culture or they had a Leninist minority policy thing that they tried to keep to, but then they would break down and they would attack religion in particular, hugely. They would try to create a Tibetan culture without religion which is impossible.

Then they were pressured completely, and arrested people who were having a rosary for a while, then again, then they let it flourish so they could rebuild a few of their cultural sites so they could attract tourism. The Chinese then again, they cracked down, and at the moment, they're doubling down like everyone has noticed the publicity of this activity in Tibet is not so well ever transmitted to the world, but everybody has seen them in action in the Uyghur people lately, they're trying to cure them of Islam as if being a Muslim was a disease, and treating absolute brutally, and invasively, and awful. That has absolutely-- what they've been doing to Tibet on and off for 70 years, but in the last 10 or 15, really doubling down in the worst way.

The Tibet House, which I co-founded with other people, our job is to see to trying to-- A, make it known to other people around the world and B, to help Tibetans keep it going. That's a tough job. Some people would say impossible, but we think it's doable and there are Tibet Houses, we've helped seed some of them around the world that have the same role. They're not religious, they're cultural preservation and promotion organizations, but not religious, educational. That's the plan.

The one good thing is that the Dalai Lama himself, he's a kind of anchor, huge anchor, and the Chinese of course are desperately hoping he'll die soon.

He's 86, but he has promised his people he'll live to 110 minimally, The point is even he does that, he'll come back because he reincarnates at least as an institution, and the Tibetans will still have him. To them, he's the Messiah, you understand?

Rabbi Rami: Sure. Sure. The Chinese are going to claim their own 15th Dalai Lama.

Bob Thurman: Of course they will, but that will be completely ignored by the Tibetans like they ignored the [unintelligible 00:10:03] one. Unless forced under a gun point to say [unintelligible 00:10:08] or something. They call him the fake Lama. That's what he's known as in Tibet.

If they try that with Dalai Lama, which they tend to, I'm sure, then that will fail as far as Tibetans go. Maybe they can pretend outside they did something, but it will fail. I believe by the time he goes, they themselves will have gone like Russia and they'll be in a multi-party system. There'll still be a power clique, of course, probably in China like you have the KGB still there as the oligarchs in Russia, but it won't be like

it is now. They will be happy to have a little more diversity. By the time the Dalai Lama does make the transition.

Rabbi Rami: That's a very optimistic view and I hope you're right.

Bob Thurman: It is. That's his view and that's mine. I see it as a reasonable thing. Remember whoever would've predicted, very few people predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were going to be there forever, they were super strong, blah blah blah, and now it's just Putin and his cronies, that's it.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. We could have a whole discussion about why the Soviet Union-- why I think it might have collapsed, and why that may or may not have any connection to what's going on in China, but that really is not our topic. When His Holiness says that you should stick with your grandmother's religion, I have to ask you, you didn't do that.

Bob Thurman: No, but I was not really into my grandmother's religion. I didn't actually know my grandmother. I keep reassuring His Holiness, although His Holiness put a lot of pressure on me over the decades because in my first decade or so of being a convert to Buddhism, my notion of Buddhism was very much like a philosophy, a yoga, more than some sort of dogmatic belief system, because I was against all dogmatic belief system.

That's why I like Buddhism, because of emptiness, Nagarjuna, a critical philosophy component of Buddhism and Buddhist science, what I consider the psychological science. In a way I'm not a really super card-carrying Buddhist, but I was thinking he was really the best and great. He put a lot of pressure on me about the Western religions. Monotheism can enable someone to become enlightened, don't worry, Thomas Merton straightened me out on that one, I got to see it myself as I traveled the world.

I visited the Wailing Wall and I felt the power of Jewish piety and so on. He likes the Muslims. They get along with him. He doesn't think the Muslims are any worse than anybody else. Even our own Buddhists can be horrible, like in Sri Lanka and Burma at the moment. He's very pragmatic about it and he doesn't mean that there wouldn't be maybe some change in the theologies of some religions. If someone learns from other religions some better ideas and some way of getting along with science and some more wisdom-oriented stuff, they would be more relaxed.

Actually that's one of the reason he really liked Buddhism. I was there when Roger wrote that book, I was there with all those rabbis and actually Blue Greenberg made me an honorary rabbi. Zalman Schacter was there and the very Orthodox Yitz Greenberg, her husband was there. One thing that they impressed on His Holiness was that different rabbis in different brands rarely have a lot of disagreement amongst.

In fact, one of them made the dictum at some point that they didn't really agree about almost anything. They all agreed with that, that they didn't agree and then somebody pointed out, " Well, you all just agreed now that you don't agree." Then everybody laughed. It was a great moment. That was a wonderful series of meetings over a week or so, four or five days, really [unintelligible 00:13:59] I was honored and

privileged to be the mediator, Tibetan, I don't know Hebrew, but Tibetan English, and conceptually also a mediator. It was a lot of fun.

Rabbi Rami: I was very disappointed that I wasn't invited to go on that trip.

Bob Thurman: It's terrible. That's Charlie Halpern's fault, don't look at me.

Rabbi Rami: No, I'm not going to blame you for that. Let me ask you this about, just to follow up a little bit more on- First of all, what was your grandmother's religion? I'm assuming--

Bob Thurman: She must have been a Presbyterian like my mother nominally was. Although when I became a Buddhist monk, my mother said to me, " I should have known from the beginning this was you. " I said, " What do you mean? " She said, "When you were baptized, you made such a fuss, and you kicked and thrashed, and you kicked over the baptismal dish, and drenched the priest's cassock, and he was all offended, and maybe he wrung a few drops out of his dripping white thing they wear over your flailing toes, but you were barely baptized," she said. But I consider myself baptized because it's an honor. I like Jesus, I consider him a Buddha of a sort or a Buddha, Bodhisattva.

There are some Bodhisattvas, who have already been Buddhas and then they come back as Bodhisattvas. I'm honored to have done that. I don't like any form of any one of the religions, excluding Buddhism. It tries to use the religion to prop up some sort of authoritarian social structure. We are the big balls, you have to believe, you have to have blind faith also, you don't have reasonable faith and just march in and attack the neighboring country in case we tell you that God is on your side. That I don't like, or Buddha is on your side. I really don't like that in any religion.

Rabbi Rami: Yes, you're right. Wisdom is bliss. You define Buddhism as, you call it realism rather than a religion.

Bob Thurman: Exactly.

Rabbi Rami: That's what you're really talking about.

Bob Thurman: Then on the other hand, I had a big argument with His Holiness recently, which we never really settled, but I think he follows it maybe. At one point, he was invited to Kuwait, although he ended up not going because of some Chinese interference, but he was invited for dialogue there.

I said, "Your Holiness, please, when you go there, don't do what you do in India." Then repeating it from here because he does this so often in India, where in India, they have the idea that Hinduism and the Abrahamic religions are theistic because they believe in a creator and Buddhism is non-theistic because they don't believe in a creator. He goes, he says that.

I said, "Please don't say that there, because they don't have the attitude of the Indians, and then they'll think you're an atheist, and then they'll subconsciously even, they'll cut off their sense of wishing to dialogue with you and actually, you are theistic. Mahayana Buddhism is theistic. It's just not creator-theistic or monotheistic.

He had to agree with that. Although he resisted a little bit because he likes to tend to the secular, being practical.

I had to even say, "Your Holiness, what's the name of the town which is your capital when you're in Tibet? Lhasa, Asa means God, you know, place of God, Lhasa." The point is, they just don't have the idea that the creator that the Indians-- from Buddha's own time, not just Tibet, but from Buddha's own time, that Brahma, who some Indians had at the time thought was the creator, they had Brahma talking in a Buddhist text saying actually I'm not the creator, I'm just the most powerful person here and I do my best.

He tells Buddha, "Tell people I didn't create everything because I'm not responsible when horrible things happen to them and they shouldn't be mad at me. I try to do my best for everybody. I'm very kind, and I'm a loving god, but I'm not an omnipotent god." That's in the Buddhist literature from the very beginning, but it doesn't deny the existence of Brahma in other words. It just denies a degree of power to that god. It says that He's very helpful, but not omnipotent. Including Buddha is not omnipotent either. They're very clear about that.

Rabbi Rami: I never think of Buddhism in those terms. My understanding of Tibetan Buddhism is admittedly weak.

Bob Thurman: It's not just Tibetan. It's Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism and by hint also Theravada, but overtly Theravada is what they call dualistic. In Theravada, when you get to Nirvana, you leave the world, but in Mahayana the world is Nirvana. The reality of the world is an infinite, loving energy, it's just not a person and therefore any god-- and they are many, who channels that infinite loving energy, or even a buddha or a Bodhisattva is Divine in their ability to bless other beings and to transmit that energy.

But the basic energy is available to everyone and everyone's failure to know that that, that their actual reality is loving, they're floating on an ocean of loving bliss that sustains them through the night, so to speak and through the day and through life and past death. That is theism.

His Holiness said to me, "What kind of theism should I say, then?" Not agreeing to say it to the people in Kuwait when we had this argument. I said, "One term I use is Infinitheism, but he didn't like the polysyllabic nature of that. I said, Infinitheism. If you say it quickly, it's not too bad. There's only three syllables Infinitheism. In the sense that you're saying there's a Divine energy. What people think of is the positive side of a Divine energy, not the one sending the flood, turning people to pillars of salt who are partying too much, this kind of thing. The Job type, playing tricks on the devil. Or showing off to the devil. The positive side of God, that element of theism is there, but the personality that's associated with the particular nation is not there. Is there for every being, in other words.

It's not behind the Divine Right of Kings. It's not behind the Divine Right of some high priest, it's there for everyone who knows that it's there. The people who don't feel that it's there is because they don't know it. It's not because they did anything wrong. It's because they haven't learned it. They haven't figured it out. Blind faith doesn't get you, but reasonable faith helps.

Rabbi Rami: When you posit this infinite, I guess you could to even say loving energy--

Bob Thurman: Right, Clear Light of the Void, they call it.

Rabbi Rami: Okay. Where does evil come from in that sense? Is it simply the ignorance, human ignorance?

Bob Thurman: It comes from ignorance and it comes from a being because of the ignorant thinking that they are alienated from the full, blessed, loving energy of the universe. Therefore they're facing-- they, as a single small individual are facing potentially infinite-- Although they create different myths that it's not really infinite, so they don't feel completely overwhelmed, but they're facing a huge number of other people, other beings, germs and mythically vast deities and so forth and culturally-- They want to get more for themselves so they get greedy and then they harm people by taking away their stuff or consuming them or using them.

Or they think to get more stuff, they have to drive other people away and kill them and harm them. Then they do evil. They do it because of not knowing that actually they're interconnected with all the other beings. That there's no ultimate enemy of theirs and they are not going to be more happy. The more they fight and the more they do evil out of hatred or greed, then the worse they get. The more alienated they feel, the more strong they've made the division themselves and others by being harmful to others. Therefore then their evil seems to know no bounds.

Actually it does know a bound because the good guys-- that good loving energy is there even for those bad guys. Eventually they realize they're creating hell for themselves by being harmful to others. Which is how evil is defined based on the ignorance of alienation from the real energy of the universe.

Rabbi Rami: It sounds in a sense like Vedanta.

Bob Thurman: It's very close to Vedanta. Actually radical Vedanta like Shankaracharya, the supreme, what do you call unqualified, non-duality form of Vedanta was rejected by later Vedantists for being too Buddhistic. They have their qualified types of Vedantas. The reason they did it is that the radical non-dualism relativizes the caste system, relativizes the idea of the absoluteness of the deity and relativizes everything, because actually the non-duality of everything means all this relative stuff is itself all holy stuff. It's all Nirvana. If we knew what it was. [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: The distinctions between high caste and low are eliminated in this.

Bob Thurman: That's right in that radical form. The most of Vedantists are not, although they honor Shankaracharya, they call their leaders the Shankarancharyans nowadays, but they later from the 9th, 10th, 11th, and century, the later Vedantists, they rejected him as too extreme. They called him a [foreign language], a crypto Buddhist.

Rabbi Rami: Oh, that's interesting. I didn't know that. I've read a lot of the--

Bob Thurman: The Buddhist were always critical of the rigidity of the caste system. They were practical and they knew there was a caste system, but Buddha accepted

disciples from all levels of society and women on top of it, which was even more harder for the Brahmins to swallow.

Rabbi Rami: Even more difficult. Let me ask you this. Hopefully this is not too esoteric. I'm wondering, and you make a big deal about this in *Wisdom is Bliss*, the notion you talk about the realistic worldview.

Bob Thurman: Yes.

Rabbi Rami: Which is rooted in the idea of Shunya or emptiness.

Bob Thurman: Yes.

Rabbi Rami: It seems like that's what you're talking about even now, when you're talking about the radical non-duality.

Bob Thurman: Right.

Rabbi Rami: One of the things that always troubles me about emptiness is the fact that in English, and I think this is true in Sanskrit, that Shunya and emptiness are nouns when I would rather have them be gerunds. When the Heart Sutra says form is emptiness, emptiness is form, if I were translating it, I would write, "Forming is emptying and emptying is forming," that everything is--

Bob Thurman: You can do that. The thing is that there is a gerund [foreign language] is from the verb shri, which means to swell actually, which is ancient Indo-European, because when a seed swells, when it moistens, an empty space forms inside the seed. Where I guess the DNA of the tree or the flower or whatever it is then can expand into whatever it is going to grow from that seed.

Emptiness is very distinguished from nothingness. Emptiness guarantees the relativity of everything, actually. The discovery of emptiness, which I consider a scientific discovery, and I think the best Buddhist philosophers would agree in the sense that it's an observation of nature, in that sense scientific, it's not just a dogma.

What it is is that everything in nature dissolves under analysis, if fully analyzed. Which our wonderful materialist scientists have ratified for us in the Uncertainty Principle and in the quantum analysis of the subatomic components of atoms that there is no final core component that does not dissolve under analysis. That is what emptiness means.

Rabbi Rami: There's nothing there, only this process.

Bob Thurman: Well there's actually, nothing is-- even nothing isn't there. [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Right, right, right.

Bob Thurman: You don't find anything in it. When we say there's nothing there. We think we found nothing.

Rabbi Rami: Right. Exactly.

Bob Thurman: Actually, it's just that we don't find anything. The key thing is, and that not finding anything is the finding of emptiness. What [unintelligible 00:26:59] then guarantees is that the human tendency to take our notions and project absoluteness into them, most importantly, the notion of ourselves, our own subjectivity, that we are the absolute and everything else is other than us, that's a wired-in thing from our animal background, evolutionary background.

That is the most harmful thing because that's the root of us making a completely inescapable fact of our being separate from everything else. Which then puts us in a losing position of losing out to everything else, space and time, being endless and infinite. Empty is the self of any non-relative self so that the self becomes a relational matrix. A thing that guides our relations, but it's itself relative. It's not absolute. Therefore others have equality to us.

Therefore we are relatively different and responsible, but that difference is a arbitrary. It is transcend-able. We can identify and empathize with others.

Then the Buddha awareness is where we identify with all others, actually. We have this amazing paradoxical Oneness where we feel one with everyone, but also they're still themselves. We just start feel-- that feeling that we feel that we're one doesn't necessarily make them feel that we're one. They still remain themselves. It becomes paradoxical at that point.

That's why he says it's inexpressible and why it's not a dogma. What emptiness is, is the opening the door into the full-blown nature of relativity, which then is why they say wisdom becomes compassion and love.

As you remember Paul Tillich with his absolute concern and relative concern, worldly concern, but your absolute concern becomes the amelioration of the relative.

That's all, because there is no absolute outside the relative for you to try to go to, to obey, to devalue anything about the relative. Then within the relative, there are more and less valuable things and a being that's suffering, that's less valuable than that being being happy. You want to make everybody happy. Then you become a loving person is the idea. That's the idea anyway.

Rabbi Rami: Well and I know we're running out time, but let me just throw this at you.

Bob Thurman: It's terrible. [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: Yes. I know.

Bob Thurman: I want to have you on my podcast. Would you ever go on somebody else's?

Rabbi Rami: Oh, absolutely. I would be honored to be on your podcast.

Bob Thurman: Okay, Listen, I'm going to set that up. I'm going to hold you to that.

Rabbi Rami: Okay. I'd be happy to do that.

Bob Thurman: I don't have a time limit. [laughs]

Rabbi Rami: Let me just ask you this, and then I've got a final question to bring conversation to close. It seems to me that, this notion of shunya, of emptiness, which leads us to this connection of Prajna wisdom with Karuna compassion. All the things you've just been talking about. That's the genius of Buddhism. Like you said, it's I guess ineffable. It's hard to articulate it but it is experienceable. That's the difference.

This is not just an idea that you can knock around over coffee. You can actually experience it as an existential-- I hate to use the word reality, but it's an existential reality. That's what makes Buddhism so important is that it gives you not only this idea set but a way to test it in a sense.

Bob Thurman: Yes, exactly. That brings it back to Thích Nhát Hạnh's sort of style, why he's so great because, for example, you can describe an apple and the process of eating it and the chemistry of its taste and its ripeness and juiciness and blah, blah, blah. You can label it with concept after concept and when you munch down on a really delicious apple and you eat it, it's beyond all description. The poet Emily Dickinson might make give you a good angle but even she cannot capture in words the experience.

When we've learnt to experience beyond our-- What our concepts lead us to expect to experience then we find much more richness and we observe much more richness in the world around us than we have labels for. That's why they say that we experience in a way that Nirvana eating an apple. That's the whole process. The apple's growing and presenting itself and being there for us and whatever. Then some scientists will say well, apples just doing that, hopefully, you're a baboon and you're going to go and spit the seeds somewhere so more trees will grow. It's a self-centered apple seed that is doing it. Fine. That's good, too. That's a perspective but all verbal expressions are perspectives. They can be valid, invalid in a context but there's no final dogma.

Actually, I used to have a dialogue with Peter Berger for many years. We became really good friends. When we were first dialoguing, he challenged me and he said that the Abrahamic traditions could never really meet with Buddhism. That there was always this gulf between them and so forth and so on. He challenged me to disprove that as a thesis.

I gave the credit to the Jews. I said that their notion of a God that you couldn't pronounce the name because it was beyond human conception and He answered Moses I Am what I Am or whatever, if you want to translate it. You know, the original, I don't. This is a critique of all those Middle Eastern city cults with the goddesses and the pharaohs and the temples, the whole thing. They had a deity that was everywhere. It was all in all and I said, that connects to emptiness.

In other words, they emptied all the idols and the anti-idolatry thing that they have in the Abrahamic traditions, although they-- Everything is imperfect that humans do. That idea, that connects to the emptiness idea. He got it. He was so intelligent. I'm sure you read Peter Berger's work and wonderful work, *Sociology of Religion*. He got that. I sincerely believe that. It's why I really like Judaism a lot.

Rabbi Rami: I think it's true, but I think it's true for all religions when they get to their mystic core. They all go to that same place.

Bob Thurman: The only reason it's mystic is because the authorities in the different cultures are always trying to create a version that makes them the absolute authority over the masses, the people. Then the mystic has to hide.

Rabbi Rami: That, sadly, is the case. Let me ask you one last question. Then I'll bring this to a close. I want to go back to something personal for you. You've been in the Tibetan Buddhism world for decades.

Bob Thurman: 60 years.

Rabbi Rami: 60 years. I'm curious how your relationship to Buddhism has changed over the 60 years?

Bob Thurman: Well, it's become more and more fervent in one way. Although again, like I say in my *Wisdom is Bliss* book, it's not Buddhism that I'm into promoting although there are many Buddhists and people are free to be Buddhists and there are a lot more than people think because the Chinese Communist, that's a huge-- There's 400 or 500 million just there if they were able to be counted.

I'm not much into-- The Dalai Lama finally converted me about 30 years ago, I think about halfway through my progression in Buddhism, to not thinking that it's best for everybody to be Buddhist. I do not think that but I do think it'll be better for everyone to be enlightened. I want to see enlightened Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Darwinists, secularists, whatever it is enlightened because that means really realistic about the life. It means intelligent about believing in their own ability to understand it. It means compassionate and friendly, and wanting everything and optimistic, thinking that everything can succeed.

For example, you know, my whole purpose in the *Wisdom is Bliss* book, is to try to cheer people up. That's why I changed noble truth into friendly effect, to make it simple and easy for people, which it's just a curriculum, basically. It's not anything you have to believe in. It's something you might try out without becoming a Buddhist. Dalai Lama is one who really has taught me that and I really give him the credit for that. He was doing it long before we had the Moral Majority and the uprising of religions politically when all social science people felt all religions were all melting away, they were all Marxist practically and the religions are fading away, they'll vanish before the march of triumph of materialist science which is another wrong religion, I think scientism.

Dalai Lama even converted me to seeing the value in materialism, secularism as long as it's humanistic. I just wanted everybody to cheer up because, for example, I'm a great grandfather now. I'm very much on Greta Thunberg's wagon. I wish I could be more. I don't have the power to really push it as much as I wish but I try. I went to Al Gore, I studied, I got all the slides. I studied on the [unintelligible] **00:36:58]** Climate Reality Project. I really feel the biggest obstacle to us meeting the climate challenge is I believe that everybody has a little bit given up.

They think human beings just are-- Some of these because religions have told them that, that human beings are basically bad and they'll be okay in the afterlife if they do a little good but they basically are sinners or they're evil or something or the materialists tell them, they will just be nothing. It doesn't matter even if everything is all blown up.

I've addressed large audiences during the last 10 years or more than that and I sometimes will get to the topic of who here in this room thinks really we're going to survive this climate catastrophe and this crisis? At first, a bunch of hands go up. Then I say come on now, really. Do you really think we'll meet the challenge? We'll rise above ExxonMobil and whatever it is. Then very few stay up. That's the danger I think.

For various reasons. People don't really get up like Greta Thunberg and [unintelligible 00:38:11] schools strike for climate, she says. You're stealing your future, she says. It's so wonderful, that poor child and she's like the oracle of the planet. I really am into it. I'm hoping, by helping people decide maybe reality is happiness, maybe it is goodness, maybe God is good if they think of it as God, maybe clear light of the void. Maybe Nirvana is the real thing here if they think of it as some form of emancipation, moksha, liberation and then they'll decide well, in that case, let's really work on the planet now. We can do it. Remember Obama? Yes, we can. Then the minute he was in power, oh, no, we can't quite get to it.

Rabbi Rami: I hope you're right. That's a good optimistic place to end. Our guest today Robert--

Bob Thurman: Thank you, Rabbi.

Rabbi Rami: My pleasure. Our guest today Robert Thurman is the author of *Wisdom is Bliss: Four Friendly Fun Facts that Can Change Your Life*. You can learn more about his work on his website, bobthurman.com. Bob, thank you so much for talking with us on the Spirituality and Health podcast.

Bob Thurman: Thank you so much, Rabbi.

[music]

Rabbi Rami: You've been listening to the Spirituality and Health podcast. If you liked this episode, please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us @spirithealthmag.

You can also follow me on the Spirituality and Health website, where I write a regular column called *Roadside Musings*. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. The Spirituality and Health podcast is produced by Ezra Baker [unintelligible 00:40:07] and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening.

[00:40:31] [END OF AUDIO]

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