



# ESL MiniConference

## Being Here Now on Broadway and 66th Seeing The "Core of Happiness" in Every Learner

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On April 8, 1998, ESL MiniConference Editor Robb Scott attended a book-signing by Robert Thurman, the Buddhist scholar. The following report seems to be even more relevant in today's global and American context.

Former Tibetan monk Robert Thurman, currently a professor of religion at Columbia University, spoke about lifelong learning today at the Barnes and Noble across the street from Lincoln Center in New York City. Thurman's lecture was part of a book-signing event to promote his new text, "Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness" (Riverhead Books, NY, NY).

Thurman delivered a spirited argument for the triumph of human awareness over negative, war-making approaches to life. He gave as an example the Tibetan nation that thrived from the seventh to the seventeenth century by concentrating its collective energy on free-will, spiritual growth and learning, eventually demilitarizing itself completely. Thurman said that Tibet served as a haven from marauding and fighting all over Asia, and was protected because of its special status as an nation dedicated to peace and a nation whose example made a significant impact on the global consciousness.

But greater human awareness has its costs, warned Thurman. "It makes you vulnerable, bullies beat on you," he said, and scathingly criticized China for practicing genocide in Tibet in the second half of the 20th century. The Clinton administration also came in for criticism from Thurman, for its tacit agreement to ignore China's atrocities in Tibet. Nevertheless, Thurman suggested, if you have achieved awareness it doesn't bother you so much to be attacked--"You're sort of like a ball bouncing from side to side."

There was no lack of political references in Thurman's speech, including an appraisal of America's leaders today as "idiots ... Democrats as well as Republicans." He described America as a force for war in the world but said that since this is a democracy this is the best place for the kind of shift that would generate peace and "really change the world." He said that the reason war-making is so prevalent in the world is that, while every country makes it a top priority to build up its army, there is no

correlate in the realm of peacemaking. "All the peacemakers are amateurs," he continued, "[old hippies] making peace signs and holding up a flower ... protesting on weekends," but returning to their regular jobs during the work week. What's needed, Thurman said, are "professional peacemakers" and for peace, happiness, learning and awareness to become the purpose of American society.

Thurman said that there need to be institutions that promote peace and maintain those who dedicate their lives to learning, like monasteries. He said that India, the origin of Buddhism, invented monasteries 800 years before Christianity started any of them. Thurman blamed Protestants for having destroyed and outlawed monasteries in Western Europe 400 years ago, "unleashing," said Thurman, non-conformists who were incapable of living at ease in society and instead spread to all ends of the Earth tearing things up and raising havoc.

Buddha took on the human form, said Thurman, because humans have the most advanced state of awareness on the planet. Thurman expressed his own belief in reincarnation, but said "belief" was too strong a word. "I know Broadway is outside," he explained, "and that it is a street that will take me up to 114th or wherever. But I don't believe in Broadway." In the same way, he said, reincarnation is a road that leads through many lifetimes. If you waste away your life, said Thurman, "being a jerk, then you're stuck in 100,000 lives of jerkiness," as a reptile or something. And if it turns out that there's nothing after death, he mused, who's been hurt by you striving towards a higher level of awareness in your next life?

"Buddhism is not a religion," stressed Thurman. It is a form of lifelong education. "We shouldn't just teach people for a short time so they can make widgets the rest of their lives," he said. Learning and growth should be the point of everything people do their whole lives. He stressed throughout his talk that the key to enlightenment is becoming less egocentric and more attuned to your relationships with others. Thurman suggested that a really enlightened person can see the "core of happiness" within anyone, even the most "cragged, twisted" person, and then emanate towards that person the kind of energy that will help their happiness express itself. Teachers are ideally involved in this kind of activity all the time, said Thurman, and for that reason, he concluded, teaching is such a satisfying endeavor.

By Robb Scott

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