Philosophy as a Path: A Memoir and Tribute to Robert Thurman

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Instead of writing an academic paper for this *Festschrift*, I've chosen to write the personal tribute that appears below. In this way, I want to express my appreciation for the important influence that Robert Thurman has had on my life and work as a philosopher. The best way to show my thankfulness is to tell the story of the role he has played in my education and how that education has shaped my ongoing work at the interface of cognitive science, philosophy of mind, phenomenology, and Indian and Tibetan philosophy.

I belong to what Bob Thurman calls the "Grasshopper Generation" —kids who grew up in the 1970s watching the TV show *Kung Fu*. I would have been about 12 years old when my father told me, during one of the show's flashback scenes to the Shaolin Temple, "What Master Po just said comes from the *Tao Te Ching*; I'll show you later." After I'd gone to bed, he brought me the R.B. Blakney translation, open to Chapter 11. I stayed up late reading the book, and from that point on considered myself a Daoist.

A few years later, in August 1976, I first met Bob at a conference at the Lindisfarne Association, a contemplative educational community founded by my father, William Irwin Thompson. The conference took place at the Lindisfarne "Fishcove Lodge" in Southampton, New York, and featured a variety of scientists, artists, poets, ecologists, and spiritual teachers. Bob came to translate for Nechung Rinpoche, who gave a talk in Tibetan about compassion and its political implications. I was captivated by Nechung Rinpoche's radiant presence, while Bob's occasional embellishments had the audience in stitches. Among my other memories of that conference are Bob translating for Nechung Rinpoche and Gomang Khen Rinpoche as they exchanged prophecies with the Native American leaders, Thomas Banyacya and Janet McCloud, and Bob's booming voice adding to a dharma-combat-style debate about what constitutes death, with the rinpoches and Bob advancing the Tibetan view that death occurs when all heat has left the area of the heart center and subtle consciousness has left the body, while the Zen teachers Eido Roshi

and Richard Baker-Roshi argued for the modern clinical view that death occurs with the cessation of brain function.

I got to see Bob in action again a year later when he gave a lecture on "Mahāyāna Perspectives on Health and Illness" at Lindisfarne in Manhattan (located at Sixth Avenue and 20th Street in the Episcopal Church building that subsequently became the Limelight nightclub and now houses the Limelight Marketplace). In the lecture, Bob told the story of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, a text he had recently translated. I remember especially Bob's acting out the part of the goddess who berates Śāriputra for his misguided silence, which the sutra contrasts with the profound and authentic silence of Vimalakīrti.

Right after the lecture, someone from the back of the room—clearly not intending to be silent—put up his hand.

"Do you sit?," he asked.

"I'm sitting right now," Bob thundered back with a glint in his one eye.

"No, I mean do you *meditate*?"

"What makes you think I'm not meditating now?"

"Come on, I mean do you sit on a cushion and meditate in a sangha?"

"This is a sangha and this is meditating!" Bob refused to give the guy an inch.

I had been home-schooled at Lindisfarne, and when I was only 15, my father thought I was ready to go away to college. He suggested I talk to Bob about Amherst College, where Bob was a professor in the Religion Department. I told Bob I wanted to study Asian philosophy, especially Daoism, and Classical Chinese. After quizzing me to see whether I knew anything about Daoism, he said, "Daoism is great, but if you really want to study philosophy, then you should study Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. I predict you'll find much more for your philosophical interests there."

I applied to Amherst that year and was offered a spot on the wait list, but in the end wasn't admitted. Amherst encouraged me, however, to apply again next fall, through the early decision program, and this time I was admitted. So, in September 1979, at age 16, I arrived at Amherst. Bob was on sabbatical that year, so I saw him only briefly when the Dalai Lama spoke at Amherst that fall on his first trip to the United States. Since I was interested mainly in Asian intellectual history and

philosophy, I declared my major in Asian Studies and started studying Chinese.

My studies with Bob began the following year, when I took his Buddhist Scriptures course in the fall semester. But it was his Topics in Indian Philosophy course, which I took in the spring semester of 1981, that really grabbed me. That course, along with the Philosophy courses I took from W.E. Kennick the following year, are what hooked me on philosophy.

Bob's Indian philosophy class was a demanding three-hour seminar where we moved through dense and rich material. Besides selections from Radhakrishnan and Moore's *Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, we read from Karl Potter's *Presuppositions of Indian Philosophies*, Bimal K. Matilal's *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*, Hattori Masaaki's *Dignāga, On Perception,* Stcherbatsky's two volume *Buddhist Logic*, Eliot Deutsch's *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, and Bob's own translations of Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and Dharmakīrti, along with his soon-to-be-published translation of *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence*. By making these Indian and Tibetan philosophers interlocutors with Western philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, Bob presented philosophy as a project of critical reason and human transformation beyond the geographies of East and West. That vision of philosophy—as a transformative path of rational liberation with a global heritage—is how I've thought about philosophy ever since. It is how I teach philosophy to my own students; and in all my philosophy of mind classes I always include material from Indian philosophy.

With Bob as my advisor, I wrote my senior thesis on the twentieth-century Japanese philosopher, Nishitani Keiji, whom I had discovered the year before in a comparative religion seminar with Bob and a visiting Buddhist scholar from India, Lal Mani Joshi. Nishitani had studied with Heidegger and had used Madhyamaka and Zen to develop his own critical Buddhist response to philosophical problems found in Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger. Although my senior year turned out to be more about social life than thesis writing, I managed to make do in the end with a modest essay on Nishitani and Madhyamaka.

After graduating from Amherst, I lived in Paris for six months, learning French and going to philosophy lectures by the likes of Derrida and Lyotard. I also spent those months applying to graduate school in

philosophy, which my father had convinced me was the best academic path for me to follow, given my interests. I used my senior thesis as my writing sample and the Philosophy Department at the University of Toronto asked Richard Hayes from the Departments of Religion and Sanskrit and Indian Studies to evaluate it, since no one in the Philosophy Department knew anything about Buddhist philosophy. Hayes wrote a two-page assessment, beyond the call of duty, criticizing the thesis on a number of historical and philosophical points, but in the end concluding that I had a talent for philosophy and should be encouraged to develop my philosophical skills at the graduate-school level.

While in Paris, and then in Toronto during my first year of graduate school, I rewrote parts of the thesis and developed them into a paper on Nishitani and Heidegger, which I submitted to the journal *Philosophy East and West*. Eliot Deutsch—whose book on Advaita Vedānta had been one of my favorite texts from the Indian philosophy course with Bob—was the editor of the journal, and I got the chance to meet him at the University of Hawaii when I visited my father, who was a visiting professor there in 1985. *Philosophy East and West* accepted my paper, and it appeared in 1986. My first published article, it owes its origin and inspiration to my studies with Bob at Amherst.

That article also helped me win a fellowship from a German foundation, the Stiftung zur Föderung der Philosophie. The fellowship supported me the summer after my first year of graduate school when Francisco Varela, a neuroscientist with a strong philosophical orientation and a Buddhist practitioner, invited me to the École Polytechnique in Paris to work with him on a text he was writing about Buddhism and cognitive science. I had met Varela at Lindisfarne, where he was a scholar in residence in 1978–79. Varela knew I had studied Buddhist philosophy with Bob; and when he learned that I had decided to focus on cognitive science and philosophy of mind for my Ph.D., he asked me to help him write what eventually became our book, also co-authored with the psychologist Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. That book, published by the MIT Press in 1991 and now translated into seven languages, was the first academic work to explore the relevance of Buddhist philosophy and meditative mental training for cognitive science, as well as to advance what are known in cognitive science as the "embodied" and "enactive" approaches to cognition. My contribution to our articulation in *The Embodied Mind* of a

new embodied mind science that incorporates critical phenomenological analysis in tandem with meditative mental training is also indebted to my studies of Indo-Tibetan philosophy with Bob.

As I write these words, a new book of essays called *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*, which I co-edited with philosophers Mark Siderits and Dan Zahavi, is being published by Oxford University Press. This book embodies the philosophical spirit Bob showed us in his Indian philosophy course, for it brings together philosophers writing from multiple Western, Indian, and Tibetan philosophical perspectives in order to advance our understanding of the self in contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science. The essay I contributed to this volume also bears the stamp of my studies with Bob. My essay concerns the so-called "memory argument" in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy for the idea that consciousness or awareness is reflexive. The memory argument concludes that all cognitions are reflexively aware, on the grounds that one does not remember what one did not experience, and that one could not remember a past experience (seeing yesterday's blue sky) unless at the time one was aware not only of the *object* of the experience (the *blue sky*) but also of the *experiencing* of the object (the *seeing* of the blue sky). I first discovered the memory argument in my Indian Philosophy course with Bob. I've been fascinated by the argument ever since, but only recently found my way back to working on it, first for a presentation at the Columbia University Society for Comparative Philosophy in 2008 and then for the *Self, No Self?* volume. In my essay for that volume, I use analyses of memory from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology to defend Śāntarakṣita's version of the memory argument against Jay Garfield's presentation of Tsong Khapa's criticisms of it. Bob, being a good Gelugpa and Tsong Khapa exponent, would no doubt not agree with the position I take, but as he taught us in his Indian philosophy course—and as all good philosophy teachers know—philosophy thrives on disagreement and debate.

Let me return to that conversation I had with Bob over 35 years ago at Lindisfarne in Manhattan. Bob was of course right to point me toward the profound riches of the Indian and Tibetan philosophical traditions. Although I cannot claim to be a scholar of these traditions, all my work in cognitive science, the philosophy of mind, and phenomenology continues to be deeply influenced by my study of Indian and Tibetan philosophies, not only in their classical forms but also in their contempo-

rary articulations. Bob opened that door for me and I would not be able to do the kind of philosophy I strive to do were it not for him.

At the same time, I would not want to leave the reader with the impression that I did not also keep my original love for Daoism. So let me end this tribute with one of Zhuang Zi's sayings, which we might juxtapose to Śāriputra's hasty abandonment of speech and Vimalakīrti's profound silence. The saying can also serve as a Daoist reminder to philosophers everywhere: "A fish trap is there for the fish. When you have got hold of the fish, you forget the trap. A snare is there for the rabbits. When you have got hold of the rabbits, you forget the snare. Words are there for the intent. When you have got hold of the intent, you forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I can have a few words with him?"