

# Finding a Place for Skilful Distortions: Locating the Work and Contribution of Robert A. F. Thurman

Scott Abbott<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Technology Sydney

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## Abstract

A leading political advocate for the Tibetan freedom struggle, a successful populariser of Tibetan Buddhism, a polariser of opinion and significant influence in the field of American and Western Buddhist studies, Robert A. F. Thurman was once named as one of the 25 Most Influential Americans by Time Magazine. He has for over 30 years both divided opinions and inspired ‘right action’ for positive social change. Some argue that Thurman’s voice for Tibet, through his body of written work, has been at times misleading in that he idealizes Tibetan culture and history as “highly-spiritual” and without fault, despite evidence to the contrary. It is claimed that Thurman glosses over certain realities, continuing a tradition of not only the “Shangri-la-izing” of Tibet but also the idealization of India and China by the European Romantics and Enlightenment philosophes respectively. Seen as the possessing the cure for our Western ills of rampant materialism and excessive rationalism, the Eastern “Other” has maintained a fascination since at least the time of Alexander the Great. In this thesis we aim to critically examine the work of Robert Thurman and to find a place for his contribution to Buddhist studies and what Michael Valpy calls Buddhism’s “third wave” in America. Central to this endeavour is the attempt to seek out and examine the source of the criticisms directed toward aspects of Thurman’s work. In doing so we will separate Thurman’s work into positivist Buddhist studies and comparative philosophy, Buddhist theology, traditional Buddhist scholasticism, popular Buddhist literature and political activism. In doing so we will also examine the validity of descriptions of Thurman’s work as “tantric eschatology” and explore the idea that Thurman’s “distortions” could in fact be examples of the use of the traditional Buddhist upāya or “skilful means” employed to liberate sentient beings from the “burning house” of saṣāra.

[HISTORY](#)

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[SCOTT ABBOTT](#)<sup>1</sup>

1. *University of Technology Sydney*

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CORRESPONDENCE:  
[scottwabbott@gmail.com](mailto:scottwabbott@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION: WHO IS ROBERT THURMAN AND WHY IS HE CONTROVERSIAL?

Robert A. F. Thurman (b. 1941) is a figure who has tended to polarize opinions both within and outside the field of Buddhist studies. At a popular level he has been described as one of the twenty-five most influential Americans<sup>[i]</sup> and a "dharma-thumping evangelist"<sup>[ii]</sup> while within the field, Donald S. Lopez in particular has questioned the way in which Thurman represents Tibetan Buddhism as science<sup>[iii]</sup> while at the same time romanticising pre-1951 Tibet as a 'spiritual' civilization.<sup>[iv]</sup> Thurman has also polarized opinion due to a certain level of self-promotion which has tended to go hand in hand with his promotion of Tibet and its Buddhism.<sup>[v]</sup> as well for his endorsement of what has been derided by one internet blogger as 'Anything goes' Buddhism.<sup>[vi]</sup> Whether Thurman's contribution has been beneficial or detrimental, it is certainly unique. He provides a significant and useful object of study insofar as his work encapsulates and raises significant questions for the key issues of authority and legitimacy, authenticity and distortion, that surface in considering the transmission of Buddhist traditions to the West and the development of Western Buddhism.

Robert Alexander Farrar Thurman was born in New York City in 1941.<sup>[vii]</sup> The son of a stage actress

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and an Associated Press editor and U.N translator, he graduated from Harvard with a B.A in 1962. In 1959, he married Christophe de Menil, an heiress to the Schlumberger Limited oil-equipment fortune. After losing his left eye in an accident in 1961, Thurman decided to re-focus his life. He divorced his wife and spent 1961-1966 travelling in Turkey, Iran and India. In 1964 he became the first Westerner to become a Tibetan Buddhist monk where he became friends with, and was also sometimes personally taught by, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. He later quipped that as well as being the first Westerner to become a monk in this tradition he was also the first to disrobe, which he did when back in America in 1967 before marrying his second and current wife Nena von Schlebrügge (who had also been briefly married to Timothy Leary). Thurman and Schlebrügge have four children, the oldest of whom is the actress Uma Thurman.

In 1969, Thurman obtained an M.A and in 1972 a Ph.D in Sanskrit from Harvard under Daniel H. H. Ingalls and Masatoshi Nagatomi. From 1973 to 1988 he was professor of religion at Amherst College and in 1988 he accepted a position as professor of religion and Sanskrit at Columbia University where he still holds the Jey Tsong Kha pa chair for Indo-Tibetan studies. In 1987, at the request of the Dalai Lama, Thurman created Tibet House with Richard Gere and Philip Glass as a non-profit foundation and centre for the preservation of Tibetan culture in exile.

Thurman's introduction to Buddhism was through the Tibetan (Lhasa-Gelukpa) trained Mongolian Lama, Geshé Ngawang Wangyal (c. 1901-1983), the first Tibetan monk to open a Tibetan Buddhist centre in the U.S. Called home only months into his Asian travels by the unexpected death of his father, Thurman met Geshé Wangyal who introduced him and his life-long colleague, Jeffrey Hopkins to Tibetan language and Tibetan Buddhism. It was Geshé Wangyal who agreed to take Thurman back to Dharamsala to seek ordination from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It was also Geshé Wangyal who inspired and encouraged Thurman to translate and study Tsong Khapa's *Legs bShad sNying po* (*Essence of True Eloquence*) and, Wangyal, already perceiving Thurman as someone who would not last as a monk, but whose skills lay elsewhere, encouraged him to disrobe, on returning to America, and enter academia. In fact, Wangyal famously asked Thurman to leave his suit with him just before he left for India, assuring Thurman that he would leave it neatly pressed and hanging in a wardrobe in anticipation of his imminent return!<sup>[viii]</sup> Geshé Wangyal's influence on Tibetan Buddhism's introduction to America cannot be underestimated. It has been through Thurman, Hopkins, their contemporaries and their subsequent students that Geshé Wangyal has and continues to shape Tibetan Buddhism's style of influence in America.<sup>[ix]</sup>

Since entering academia, including over twenty years at Columbia University, and teaching Indo-Tibetan studies for over 35 years, Thurman has become the leading populariser of Tibetan Buddhism in the U.S and, arguably, the leading non-Tibetan political advocate for the Tibetan cause. This thesis will critically re-examine Thurman's contribution and will do so in the light of his place within the academy. Chapter 1 will examine his more scholarly work by analyzing his study and translation of Tsong Khapa's *Essence of True Eloquence*, Chapter 2 will examine his populist work including his study and translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*, Chapter 3 will examine his work related to his political advocacy for the Tibetan cause focusing on his work *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*.

The work of Robert Thurman has to be seen within the larger context of Western interpretations of Buddhism. In relation to the American experience of Buddhism, Thurman's type of Buddhism has been described as central to the "third wave" of Buddhism in America. In the *Shambhala Sun*, Michael Valpy writes,

Above all, what engages Thurman and draws public and media attention to him (apart from his Hollywood hobnobbing and romantic life story) is his position at the epicenter of America's Buddhist Third Wave: [that is, the] first wave, the nineteenth-century transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller weaving their metaphysics out of Buddhism and Hinduism; second, the 1960s counterculture trek to Himalayan gurus;

and now, third, the growing appeal of Buddhism to Americans alienated from theistic religions and in search of a moral and ethical compass, the fertile society for Bob Thurman's hoped-for Cool Revolution.[\[x\]](#)

Thurman, can be seen as part of all three waves. He is an heir to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Transcendentalists in much of his philosophical outlook in that he continues the Transcendentalists' "reaction against Lockean materialism [and] utilitarianism" as well as maintaining "a reformist and innovatory outlook" toward the broader American society by accessing ancient Eastern spiritual traditions.[\[xi\]](#) However, the intellectual heritage of the New England Transcendentalists had its roots even further back in the European Romantic movement beginning around the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and developing fully in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and centered on such influential figures as Johann Gottfried Herder (1774-1803), F. W. J. Schelling (1775-1854), Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), William Blake (1757-1827) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). The historian A. L. Willson could be describing Thurman today when he describes the general feeling of a 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic toward European culture and the Romantic's optimistic view toward the traditions of the East (especially India) when he writes, "To the Romanticist, who had become painfully aware of himself in the icy breath of the rationalist, European-Christian atmosphere of sobering disengagement from his own roots, India appeared like the promised land."[\[xii\]](#) In fact, the similarities between the work of Thurman and the Romantics are many. Describing the similarities between the German Indophilia of the Romantic period and the French Sinophilia of the Enlightenment, J. J. Clarke in *Oriental Enlightenment* writes,

[I]n both cases the Orient was approached, not primarily in a spirit of objective scholarship, even less through a desire to understand contemporary India, but rather as an instrument for the subversion and reconstruction of European civilization, and though much was undoubtedly learned of Indian traditional culture, it was deployed primarily as a means of treating what were seen as deep-seated ills at the heart of contemporary European culture. Inevitably, therefore, the obsessional concern with Europe's own problems led, for the German Romantics as much as for the French *philosophes*, to a *measure of idealization and distortion, and the construction of an idyllic paradise.*[\[xiii\]](#)

These same charges of 'idealization and distortion' have been directed to some of Thurman's work[\[xiv\]](#) and indeed his view toward Tibet can sometimes mirror the Romantics' view of India described above. For Thurman, the social ills of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe continue in the excessive 21<sup>st</sup> century materialism and militarism of America specifically, and the Western world generally. And, like the Romantics, Thurman believes these ills can be countered and corrected by the philosophies and practices of the East – in this case, Buddhist Tibet.

This European Romantic heritage running through the American Transcendentalists emerged again in the Beat movement of 1950's America. This influential era was shaped by people living in the same epoch as Thurman including, Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) and Gary Snyder (b. 1930). As Harry Oldmeadow notes in *Journey East*, in the New England Transcendentalists and the 1950s Beats we find "a sovereign concern with the nature of consciousness ... a repudiation of the "Enlightenment Project," and a turn to the East for more authentic modes of experience, thought and expression."[\[xv\]](#) However it is the mass appeal of the Beats to sections of American society and the world, rather than the Transcendentalists' more limited appeal, that is echoed in an intriguing way in Thurman's work. Here Carol Tonkinson describes the effect of the Beats:

Not only did the Beats adapt the wisdom teachings of the East to a new, peculiarly American terrain, they also articulated this teaching in the vernacular, jazzy rhythms of the street, opening up what had been the domain of stuffy academics and stiff translators to a mainstream audience ... the voices of American poets recounted the teaching of the Buddha to the general public for the first time.[\[xvi\]](#)

In Thurman's work we can see someone who, while a part of the academic establishment and a translator of Buddhist texts, appears to be, like the Beats, forever breaking free of the 'domain of stuffy

academics and stiff translators' and using the contemporary 'jazzy rhythms of the streets' to bring Buddhism to a 'peculiarly American terrain'. Thurman, who, significantly, began university studying poetry during the 'Beat 50s', is unique in the way that he has a foot in two worlds – part Beat-inspired populariser, and part academic/translator. One could almost imagine that Thurman remains inspired by the Beat era of his generation and seeks, through his work, to continue this revolutionary, or at least counter-cultural, approach the Beats so famously began.

And finally, Thurman's heritage obviously very much includes the '1960's countercultural trek to the Himalayan guru', described by Valpy earlier. And Thurman is also now a central player in the mass popularization of Buddhism in America. What is key to Thurman's career is his early strategic and conscious choice, encouraged by Geshé Wangyal, to enter the Western academy – the Western version, in Thurman's opinion, of the monastery - as a launching pad from which to educate America about Buddhism.<sup>[xvii]</sup> It was from this base that he has launched and sustains his personal Buddhist adventure into the American and Western psyche by drawing on another lineage of which he is a part – the lineage of positivist Buddhology - which we will identify below.<sup>[xviii]</sup>

Here, our aim is to critically explore Thurman's career in light of the various fields of scholarship within Buddhist studies. What field or fields is he a part of? In this introduction I will set the scene by exploring methodological issues relevant to this thesis and provide an overview of the various fields within the discipline as well as some of the larger contexts in which Thurman operates. To begin, I will set out the different types of Buddhist study within the Western academy and by defining these identify what various authors may be doing both within the academy or when engaging with a popular or non-academic audience. To identify the fields that can loosely be described as Buddhist studies and Buddhist literature, I will follow the division made by José Ignacio Cabezón who highlights the four fields of: 1. Positivistic Buddhist studies within the Western academy. 2. Buddhist theology within the Western academy, 3. Traditional Buddhist scholarship (historically, predominantly carried out by monastics), and 4. Populist Buddhist literature. This division is significant to the work of Thurman, who has arguably operated in all four categories. However, I will argue that his importance in Buddhist studies has come from working at the intersection between academic study and popular works for a non-academic audience. In addition, I will argue that he draws authority in his writing from both his Western academic credentials, as his time as a Tibetan Buddhist monk, and, importantly, his close proximity to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

To further explore the academic and non-academic field I will use as a starting point the contributions contained within *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* for an overview and analysis of the field of contemporary Buddhist scholarship. This exploration will help to provide a lens through which to analyze the work of Thurman. Firstly, I will look at the dominant paradigm of Buddhist studies in the academy – Buddhology or the positivistic study of Buddhism; secondly, the emerging field in the Western academy of Buddhist theology; thirdly, traditional Buddhist scholasticism; and, finally, popular Buddhist literature aimed at a non-academic Western audience.

### **1. BUDDHOLOGY – THE POSITIVIST OR “OBJECTIVE” STUDY OF BUDDHISM WITHIN THE WESTERN ACADEMY.**

Following the lead of the scientific revolution in which the scientific method became the prevailing means of gaining knowledge of the natural world, humanist scholars within the Western academy adopted (and adapted) that same scientific method in which their observable phenomena – texts, practices, histories and artifacts - became objects of study to be pinned down, dissected and objectively examined. From this method, it was argued, a descriptive account of cultural phenomena, including religion, could be produced and “objectively” assessed. This method became the basis of what John Makransky calls “the scientific study of religions”<sup>[xix]</sup>. A major assumption of this method was that truth about these phenomena could be ascertained by the dispassionate, objective observer whose findings would not be tainted by cultural or religious subjectivity and, in theory therefore, would be observable to any other dispassionate observer. The goal of this type of research was descriptive, not prescriptive. That is, the scholar would dispassionately describe what they found when examining

the object of study. Their role was to “objectively” describe what was in front of them in a way that produced “neutral” observable cultural phenomena simply for knowledge’s sake. We will examine how Thurman operates in this academic mode, moving closest to this model, in our analysis of his study of Jey Tsong Khapa’s *Legs bShad sNying po* published as *Speech of Gold* (1984) and later reissued as *The Central Philosophy of Tibet: A Study and Translation of Jey Tsong Khapa’s “Essence of True Eloquence”* (1991).

Buddhism’s 19<sup>th</sup> century incorporation into the Western academy takes various distinct forms. On the one hand, Western interest in Buddhism as part of a wider history of ideas began in the early nineteenth century where it was welcomed and criticized by such thinkers as Schopenhauer and Hegel respectively. Each of these philosophers, who were not Buddhologists, took what they knew of Buddhism to substantiate their own philosophical projects. On the other hand, the descriptive presentation of Buddhist texts, and Buddhology as such, began from the mid-nineteenth century onward with translations by Pali scholars such as T. W. and C. F. Rhys Davids, and pioneering work by Sanskrit scholars such as Eugene Burnouf, F. Max Müller and others.<sup>[xx]</sup> In the twentieth century, the West and Asia came much closer together. From the mid-twentieth century, the first Western-born Buddhist converts, some of whom had been to Asia and studied under traditional Buddhist teachers, came home to increase their understanding of their new tradition by studying and researching “Buddhism” in the academy. Many of them, disillusioned with their own Western traditions, were involved in the continuing Romantic tradition of looking to the East to critique the West.<sup>[xxi]</sup> As already mentioned, this approach to the East first articulated in the Romantic tradition is also found in the American transcendentalist movement, the beat generation and 1960s counter culture.<sup>[xxii]</sup> Aspects of Thurman’s work can be understood in the light of all of these traditions, as noted above.

Critical to the evolution of Buddhist Studies in the academy was that in order to progress within this institution the new Buddhist scholars had to follow the methods of empirical scholarship. That is, their scholarship had to be descriptive and critical and not assume the authority of Buddhist teachings as assumed within a traditional setting. Buddhist Buddhologists had to keep their personal, in this case Buddhist, beliefs separate from the rigors of their academic work. In fact, as Roger Jackson has argued,<sup>[xxiii]</sup> to be seen as a Buddhist Buddhologist could seriously undermine one’s perceived ability to undertake impartial critical academic research. As Roger Corless has put it, the result was that many Buddhist Buddhologists actually had to take an “unholier than thou”<sup>[xxiv]</sup> approach to their work. They became overly critical of Buddhism, in order to counteract a predominant belief that non-Buddhists were better positioned from a “scientific” point of view to describe and present Buddhism “impartially” to the academy. The result of this intense aspiration toward academic rigor was that the fields of philology, philosophy, archeology, sociology and religious studies produced a wealth of academic material – though not necessarily as value free as some proponents of the positivist method in the humanities would claim.<sup>[xxv]</sup>

As Jackson points out, it was not until some of the Buddhist Buddhologists attained tenure that their efforts could be directed toward the practice of Buddhist theology or Buddhist theorizing.<sup>[xxvi]</sup> In this new role, critically trained academics who assumed the authority of Buddhist truths could now normatively, prescriptively and constructively apply Buddhist theories to a range of issues facing the world. Among the pioneers in this field of Western academic Buddhist theology was Robert Thurman whose work Roger Jackson has described as operating in the mode of “tantric eschatology”<sup>[xxvii]</sup> – a colourful description, which, as I will show throughout the course of this study, I believe to be quite apt.

## 2. BUDDHIST THEOLOGY

Recently, this need to accommodate a normative Buddhist framework within the critical requirements within the academy has led to the self-conscious development of “Buddhist theology”. As pioneered by John Makransky, Roger Jackson and José Ignacio Cabezon especially, Buddhist Theology aims to “prepare the ground” for the development of a rigorous arena for Buddhist scholars, who adhere to the authority of the Buddhist tradition as well as the critical requirements of the academy, to apply traditional Buddhist theories to the issues of the modern world.<sup>[xxviii]</sup> This could retrospectively

describe much of Thurman's work, however Thurman does not set out such an explicit methodological paradigm, which has left him open to criticism. Makransky and Jackson, who could also be described as Buddhist theorists, describe in their introduction what they believe Buddhist theology would seek to do:

It [Buddhist theology] includes critical reflection upon Buddhist experience in light of contemporary understanding and critical reflection upon contemporary understanding in light of Buddhist experience. Like that of Christian theologians, it is the work of scholars who stand normatively within their tradition, who look to traditional sources of authority (in sacred text and previous forms of social practice and experience), who re-evaluate prior Buddhist understandings in light of contemporary findings and who seek thereby to contribute to the continuing development of their tradition in its relevance to new times and places.[\[xxix\]](#)

In order to soundly establish the foundations for such a discipline, one that had already somewhat begun through the work of some writers,[\[xxx\]](#) the authors of *Buddhist Theology* seek to identify and then hopefully clear the ground of interdisciplinary disputes which have made the establishment of a tradition of Buddhist theology within the Western academy problematic.[\[xxxii\]](#)

Such disputes, as noted above, include the belief that Buddhist scholarship within the academy must always remain descriptive and never normative, constructive or prescriptive. On the other side are those Buddhist practitioners who engage in Buddhist studies who argue that it is possible to maintain the methods of non-prejudiced, rigorous, critical scholarship while at the same time adapting the views and theories of Buddhism to contemporary issues facing our world. They argue that just as "scientific-method" Buddhist scholars can maintain the requirements of scholarship, so too can Buddhist theologians. In the same way that the scientific-method humanities scholar can work within a set of valid assumptions and remain self-aware of those assumptions, so too can a Buddhist theologian work within the assumptions of Buddhist tradition to interpret and engage with the world as long as she remains critically self-aware of those assumptions.

This point of debate is important when analyzing the work of Robert Thurman. Where does he fit in? We could definitely say that he is a Buddhist theorist or theologian based on the fact that he obviously subscribes to the truths of Buddhist doctrine or authority and that he then applies these truths to contemporary Western social issues, as evidenced especially in his works aimed at a popular audience. A repeated theme of Thurman is to draw attention to the Western (specifically American) need to reduce its high degree of militarism in order to civilize by following Tibet's social historical example. To do this the Western individual must turn inward and conquer the mind to find inner happiness and peace as a necessary prerequisite of creating wider social well-being and civilization which would include a great degree of demilitarization. However, Thurman may create a conundrum for these categories of populariser and academic. As an academic Buddhist theorist/theologian, does he maintain non-prejudiced, rigorous, critical scholarship when writing for a non-academic audience or does he enter the domain of traditional Buddhist scholasticism where the authority of the sacred text or teacher/guru is assumed and accepted as ultimate truth? In his popular literature does he merge this scholastic attitude with an academic one and then create a new category of Buddhist literature by applying these truths *uncritically* to the wider world around him? Before we answer these questions we must first explore the world of traditional Buddhist scholasticism.

### 3. TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST SCHOLASTICISM

To describe traditional Buddhist scholarship we need to look to the monastic institutions of Asia. As Jackson points out, although not exclusively the domain of elite, learned male monks, traditional Buddhist scholarship or scholasticism was, by and large, dominated by them.[\[xxxiii\]](#) Most significant for a study of Thurman is the institutionalized scholastic activity of the Gelukpa (dGelugs pa) school of Tibetan Buddhism. To illustrate the aims, role and practice of Gelukpa scholasticism, I will look to Georges Dreyfus's informed presentation of this tradition in his *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*:

*The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk.* Dreyfus was the first Westerner to attain the Tibetan Buddhist title of *geshé*, the highest scholastic achievement within that tradition. To do this, he spent fifteen years living and studying as a scholar-monk within the Tibetan Gelukpa monastery of Sera-je in southern India, and subsequently the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala.

As Dreyfus points out, “scholasticism intends to create a universe of religious meaning, and hence is based on the possibility of closure”.<sup>[xxxiii]</sup> He describes scholasticism in Europe as a mode of thinking concerned with the relation between faith and understanding that is bounded by authoritative texts. For Tibetan Buddhism he argues that faith is secondary to wisdom and it would be more accurate to describe its scholasticism as concerned with the relation between authority and interpretation.<sup>[xxxiv]</sup> However, just as for European scholasticism, Tibetan scholasticism, while also allowing for a degree of critical thinking, is also ultimately bound by the authoritative texts of its tradition.

The tools of scholastic inquiry within the Tibetan tradition or, “intellectual technologies”<sup>[xxxv]</sup> according to Dreyfus, have been handed down within the tradition. They include memory, commentary and dialectical debate. Memory is used in the memorization of core texts which is seen as a form of transmission from master to student. Commentary constitutes explanations and interpretations of the core texts while dialectical debate functions as a method for either: (a) internalizing the normative authority claims of the tradition by proving through logic what is accepted as authoritative by the tradition and rejecting, also through logic, what is considered by authority of the tradition to be false and misleading; or (b) providing the practitioner with the means to powerfully and critically investigate all aspects of views within the tradition leading to “an exhilarating sense of openness”.<sup>[xxxvi]</sup>

Dreyfus concludes that both modes are appropriate depending on the capacity of the practitioner, especially in the formalized process of debate. He argues that a hermeneutic of suspicion is encouraged when debaters examine each other’s interpretations and look for weak points in their opponents’ views which are then to be undermined. Dreyfus concludes however that this hermeneutic of suspicion is ultimately subordinated to a “strategy of retrieval”<sup>[xxxvii]</sup> of meaning from the core texts. This is because the aim of Tibetan scholasticism is to create a “religiously meaningful universe”<sup>[xxxviii]</sup> which is shaped and completely circumscribed by these core texts. And this is the principal point of departure from the Western scientific model. The Western scientific model, as most clearly described in the work of such thinkers as Thomas Kuhn, for example, is also the basis for the positivist approach to Buddhist studies described earlier in this chapter. Kuhn describes the process of rational scientific research as made up of paradigms of normal and revolutionary science where the arrival of new facts leads to the casting aside of previous theories shown to be incomplete or flawed.<sup>[xxxix]</sup> This does not happen within traditional scholasticism, East or West, where core texts are the centre of the tradition which, while critically interpreted to an extent, are perpetually appropriated by the next generation of scholars who choose to be part of that meaningful universe. As Dreyfus points out, scholasticism within Tibetan Buddhism is a form of religious practice which takes one along “the path”<sup>[xl]</sup> toward the goal of Buddhism and where the practitioner is provided with “comprehensive ways to shape their life and character”<sup>[xli]</sup> based on the appropriation of those texts.

So does Robert Thurman fall into this category of traditional Buddhist scholastic? I would argue that to a certain extent he can be regarded as doing so given his close proximity to, and personal recognition of, the Dalai Lama’s traditional authority and also given his having undertaken, however briefly, training as a scholar monk in the Gelukpa tradition under the tutelage of senior Tibetan scholar-monks. To this extent, Thurman has accepted the authority of a tradition-bound “meaningful universe”, and moreover he has done so through the process of formal ordination. In this way, he has been part of, and in many ways continues to be part of, the scholastic tradition described above even though he disrobed many years ago. His translation of, and commentary upon, texts such as *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*<sup>[xlii]</sup> and *Legs bShad rNying po*<sup>[xliii]</sup> shows an appropriation by him of these texts in the tradition of Tibetan scholasticism. These are not unbiased “objective” translations but expanded teachings based on a belief in and acceptance of the core text being translated. In this way, although not purely traditional, Thurman does take part in the broader Buddhist scholastic endeavour as described by Dreyfus.

However, beyond his scholastic commentaries Thurman then moves into populist Buddhist literature by applying these accepted Buddhist scholastic truths to Western society in a way that has not been done within traditional Buddhist scholasticism itself. Thurman also seeks to validate traditional authority claims in extremely untraditional ways such as in his appeals to Western science and Western liberalism. Thurman rigorously critiques Western (especially American) society and then holds up historical Tibet as model for Western (spiritual) development. He uses traditional scholasticism as his basis but in his critique of Western society and subsequent prescription of a path for the West combines this with the field of popular Buddhism. In the process, I would argue, he creates his own unique genre of scholastic-populist Buddhist literature.

#### 4. POPULIST BUDDHIST LITERATURE

Populist Buddhist literature is an increasingly important domain of Robert Thurman who, after His Holiness the Dalai Lama, is perhaps the current leading populariser of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. Populist Buddhist literature could be defined as the wide range of books about Buddhism written by lay academics, lay non-academics or Buddhist monastics for a general readership. Given the low numbers of traditional Buddhist monastics in the West, populist Buddhist literature is arguably the dominant medium through which most Westerners initially come into contact with Buddhism. Important writers for a populist audience include traditional ethnic Buddhists such as His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Sogyal Rinpoche, Chögyam Trungpa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sayadaw U Pandita and D. T. Suzuki. There are also Western-born monastics such as Pema Chödrön who has written several books on Buddhism for a Western audience and Western Theravadins including Nyanaponika Mahathera who, like the current Dalai Lama, has authored both scholastic and populist books. There are also many lay-academic authors who have merged Western science/medicine/psychology with Buddhist thought for a popular audience including Mark Epstein, Daniel Goleman and Jack Kornfield. Non-academic Western Dharma-teachers with popular works include the insight meditation teachers Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg. There are also works that merge Buddhism with the Twelve Step programs for recovery from addiction by authors such as Kevin Griffin. The ever-growing list continues. However what is clear is the vast array and volume of populist Buddhist literature available to a non-academic or populist audience. And who exactly is this audience? From the range of titles, we can deduce that the audience is multi-faceted. It could include those interested or attracted to what they have learnt about Buddhism seeking more information, the readership Lopez characterizes as a “New Age” self-help audience, those dealing with addictions or those who, like Thurman himself, are dissatisfied with their own Western traditions and are seeking personal and/or social transformation. Thurman’s growing list of titles for a populist audience include his translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, his *Inner Revolution: Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* and *Why the Dalai Lama Matters: His Act of Truth as the Solution for China, Tibet and the World*. All show an author very much involved in bringing his thoughts on Buddhism and Tibet to the widest possible audience.

In summary, how does Thurman’s work relate to our four categories constituting Buddhism in the West? As a recognized Western tenured professor of Buddhist studies Thurman has successfully produced works of critical academic scholarship and he can therefore be described as a Buddhologist and comparative philosopher in the Western academic sense. As a practising Buddhist accepting the authority of Buddhist doctrine and applying these “truths” in an academic context to wider social issues Thurman can be seen as a Buddhist theorist or theologian. As a practicing Buddhist and former Buddhist monk trained in traditional (Tibetan) Buddhist scholasticism and continuing to subscribe to Buddhism’s “universe of religious meaning”<sup>[xlv]</sup>, Thurman also qualifies as a traditional Buddhist scholastic. And finally, by virtue of his increasing production of populist work based on his Western academic and traditional Buddhist scholastic heritage, Thurman qualifies as an author of populist Buddhist literature as he writes in a strongly prescriptive manner for a non-academic audience. However, by qualifying in some degree for inclusion in all four categories (and probably more) Thurman fails to be reducible to any single category exclusively and his varied work creates a conundrum for final classification. To this point, we have not yet considered Thurman’s work as a Dharma-teacher and political activist. His work has increasingly come to exist at the intersection of

academic Buddhist studies, predominantly theological/scholastic, and populist Buddhist literature. However, his particular style of writing, especially his works for a general audience, presents an author who, some have implied, has given up his critical awareness and therefore, any claim to unbiased scholarship. It is some of these criticisms which we will look to in the following chapter in order to gain a clearer perspective of the nature, direction and impact of Thurman's work and his place in the domain of Buddhist studies. We will then seek to better understand his work by examining it as a unique genre of 'Tantric eschatology' that works at the intersection of academic study and popular works for a non-academic audience which draws authority from Thurman's academic and traditional scholastic credentials, as evidenced most clearly through his time as a monk and his proximity to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. I will argue that Thurman's importance in Buddhist studies has come from working at the intersection between academic study and popular works for a non-academic audience.

## CHAPTER 1: THURMAN AS BUDDHOLOGIST AND COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHER

In this chapter, I will explore Thurman's more scholarly work by comparing his translation and study of Tsong kha pa's *Legs bShad sNying po* with the scholarly work of two other prominent Buddhologists who were also Tibetan Buddhist monks in the Gelukpa school – namely, José Ignacio Cabezón and Georges Dreyfus. I will also examine the style of Thurman's comparative philosophy by looking to Andrew Tuck's *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna*.

Thurman's study and translation of Tsong kha pa's *Legs bShad sNying po* first occurs under the title *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence: Reason and Enlightenment in the Central Philosophy of Tibet* (1984). It is then reissued as *The Central Philosophy of Tibet: A Study and Translation of Jey Tsong Khapa's Essence of True Eloquence* (1991). This change in title is noteworthy. The earlier title with the more literal 'Speech of Gold' assumes a more specialized audience familiar with Tibetan idioms. The later title suggests an expanded audience, foregrounding the broader claim to encapsulating the "Central Philosophy of Tibet" (i.e., Madhyamaka), thus implicitly taking Tsong kha pa, in a more sweeping gesture, as an exemplar not just of the Gelukpa school, but of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole. In any case, the work itself is certainly written for a more academically sophisticated audience who are more conversant with Buddhist Studies, Religious Studies and Philosophy. It represents in the translation of Tsong kha pa's work a form closer to the ideals of Buddhology. On the other hand, in his lengthy introduction, Thurman shows his academic role as a comparative philosopher by providing a Wittgensteinian reading of the thought of the Madhyamaka school. To begin this chapter, we will explore Thurman's study and translation of *Essence of True Eloquence* to better understand his role as a recognized Buddhist scholar in the Western academy and hopefully illuminate the connections between his scholarly work and his other work as a Buddhist author and speaker. As we are studying here Thurman's work as a Buddhologist and comparative philosopher it is important to look to exactly what these roles might entail in the history of ideas, the greater academic context of Buddhist Studies and the wider implications for society as a whole.

Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852) is often acknowledged as the first to study Buddhism philologically in a rigorously scientific way. And it is the fact that he is widely regarded as such a balanced, thorough and 'scrupulously honest' scholar of Buddhism that it is interesting to note the powerful social effect a scholar's ideas can have outside the academy. In *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*, Roger-Pol Droit clearly outlines the intriguing trends of the West's 19<sup>th</sup> century contact with Buddhism including the role of Burnouf. Droit shows that Burnouf's rigorous scholarship, "in a hushed scientific and level-headed manner"<sup>[xlv]</sup>, described Buddhist doctrine as annihilationist - a religion of nihilism in which the Buddha "saw the supreme good in the destruction of the thinking principle."<sup>[xlvi]</sup> Such ideas, so reasonably presented, were fervently appropriated as ammunition by those who, for religious or other reasons, vehemently opposed Buddhism. An example, cited by Droit, is the Catholic preacher Frederic Ozanam (1813-1853) who, after Bournouf's work, wrote that Buddhism is the

religion that “through terror and torture defends itself” and murderously exceeds “all the madness of Nero”<sup>[xlviij]</sup> because of its supreme doctrine of ‘nothingness’.

Although Thurman has an avowed social agenda, the fact that even the work of such an ‘honest’ and ‘level-headed’ scientific scholar of Buddhism such as Burnouf could be appropriated in such a way underscores the fact that even strict Buddhology can have a significant wider impact. While Thurman continues partially in this tradition, his translation of *Essence of True Eloquence* represents an important difference between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhology. On the one hand, Thurman greatly reduces the possibility of misinterpreting *śūnyatā* as a ‘supreme doctrine of nothingness’ by studying it under the auspices of senior Tibetan teachers. While this new Western tradition of ‘studying at the Lama’s feet’<sup>[xlviij]</sup> has a range of complications, it does nonetheless reduce the chance of misaligning Western academic understanding of Buddhist doctrine with a traditional Buddhist one. However we should be aware that his study at the Lama’s feet can lead to an uncritical essentialising of tradition itself, such as Thurman’s tendency to uncritically accept a Tibetan reading of early Indian Madhyamaka rather than undertake a close reading of the Indian materials themselves. Thurman’s reading captures the Gelukpa view but does not appreciate fully enough the greater Indian context in which *śūnyatā* was embedded.

In his preface of *Essence of True Eloquence* Thurman writes that Nāgārjuna warned that if one mistakes the doctrine of *śūnyatā* or absolute emptiness it was like a wrongly held snake when one takes the medicine of relativism as the poison of nihilism.<sup>[xlix]</sup> Because of this the teachings on *śūnyatā* are said to have been traditionally (according to Thurman), before the time of Tsong kha pa, kept for the benefit of a scholastic elite. Today, however, Thurman argues teachings on the absolute must be taught and that it would be dangerous not to do so. By such a democratization of Madhyamaka and invocation of Tsong kha pa as his precedent in doing so Thurman implicitly seeks to legitimize his own project. The tendency toward such a democratization of *śūnyatā* seems to draw upon very American ideas of egalitarianism rather than traditional Tibetan practice. Thurman writes:

Perhaps the evolution of civilizations has brought us to a brink where confrontation with the absolute is no longer a responsibility or privilege of an elite, *but a vital necessity for all*. Our power over matter has become rather godlike, indeed. If our understanding of reality and ourselves does not correspond, we will surely make this world a hell.<sup>[l]</sup>

Here, in 1981, we can see Thurman describing his vision of an overly materialistic world in peril that requires the teachings of Buddhism to remedy a dangerous imbalance. The term ‘godlike’ would refer to the arsenal of atomic weapons that were central to cold war world politics from the beginning of Thurman’s scholarly career. This theme, coupled with critiques of excessive materialism, can therefore be shown to have emerged early in his career and to continue to the present day. These themes not only run through his popular works, described in detail in the following chapter as a form of ‘tantric eschatology’, but can, in fact, also be detected in his more scholarly work. We could therefore describe them as central themes of Thurman’s work both popular and scholarly.

Thurman’s presentation of Tsong kha pa’s view of emptiness is uncritical and heavily partisan. He presents Tsong kha pa’s *Essence* as the “Everest peak of Tibetan thought on the absolute”<sup>[li]</sup> and presents the Svātantrikas, the proponents of an alternative description of emptiness critiqued by Tsong kha pa, as ‘Dogmaticists’. Translating Svātantrika as ‘Dogmaticist’ is part of Thurman’s endeavour, modeled on that of the original methodology of translation used from the earlier 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century transmission of Buddhism to Tibet, to translate Sanskrit terms into the new target language – in this case, English rather than Tibetan. Whether or not the Tibetan traditional translators used such loaded terms to describe an opponents’ view is not being considered here, however Thurman’s choice of the term ‘Dogmaticist’ undermines any claim of non-biased representation of Madhyamaka teachings. More neutral translations of Svātantrika are ‘Autonomous Reasoners’ which describes the logical method by which they analyzed and described the absolute. My argument here is not whether the Prāsaṅgika or Svātantrika hold the most profound view of emptiness - this debate seems to be settled

at least within Tibetan doxography in favour of the Prāsaṅgikas - but to instead examine Thurman's method of presenting Tibetan Buddhism to the West.

In his Introduction to *Essence*, Thurman argues for his choice of the loaded term 'Dogmaticist'. He notes Stcherbatski's earlier choice of 'independence' and Hopkins' choice of the more common 'autonomy', for *Svatantrya*, but considers them too vague and to "not connect to the philosophical issues of extreme subtlety involved here."<sup>[iii]</sup> Even on Thurman's own translation of Tsong kha pa's critique and rejection of Bhavya's<sup>[iii]</sup> position of the most subtle level of intrinsic identity at the conventional level does not warrant the translation of *Svatantrya* as 'Dogmaticist'.<sup>[iv]</sup> Stcherbatski's 'independence' or Hopkin's 'autonomy' adequately and in a less biased manner represents the Svātantrika's (refuted) position without playing into the hands of scholastic partiality. These scholars' more neutral translations leave the reader with a greater degree of autonomy to make their own decisions on the value of the Tibetan and Indian views presented. In addition to this, the Prāsangika-Svātantrika distinction emerges in Tibet, not in India, in the works of Pa tshab Nyi ma Grags (11<sup>th</sup> century). Thurman tends to assume that the distinction can straightforwardly and unproblematically be read into Indian materials, again overly following Tsong kha pa.

Having said this, it must be acknowledged that Thurman does not claim to be an unbiased presenter of Buddhist teachings to the West. Just as in his popular works, he also displays a confidence and an unapologetic enthusiasm for his subject matter in his academic work – whether or not it might rightly belong here. Significantly, this enthusiasm and reverence reflects the central style of traditional Buddhist scholasticism. In this way, even in his academic work, Thurman appears to merge what have traditionally been seen as separate modes of inquiry. In his invocations to Manjuśrī, for example, we can see Thurman continuing in the tradition of the Indian and Tibetan Buddhist scholastics who revere the authors who have gone before them as well as, in the case of Tsong kha pa, the divine inspiration that has guided them.<sup>[v]</sup> In the same work, as a translator of Tibetan Buddhist texts into English, Thurman draws heavily on the concepts of Western philosophy from thinkers such as Wittgenstein, which therefore constitutes an act of translation *and* Western comparative philosophy. This fact places Thurman, therefore, soundly in the modern Western academy while his seemingly uncritical acceptance of, and strong reverence for Tsong kha pa's position, places him also in the field of traditional (Gelukpa) Buddhist scholasticism. Thurman has not merely presented the traditional Tibetan scholarly debate between different Indian and Tibetan philosophical views. He has committed fully to one Tibetan school's side – the Gelukpa's – and then presented this traditional Gelukpa position in an effective and refined translation to the West. So while scholarly in its high degree of rigour it is prescriptive rather than purely descriptive in a scientific-philological sense.<sup>[vi]</sup>

Regarding Thurman's comparative philosophical approach we can find an intriguing description of Thurman's view of his project of translation which marks him as a truly original translator of traditional Indo-Tibetan Buddhist doctrine to the West, one who creatively straddles two separate scholarly traditions. Thurman describes the iconography of a traditional Tibetan Buddhist refuge field with Śakyamuni Buddha in the centre, Manjuśrī to his left and Maitreya to his right. Manjuśrī is representing wisdom and Maitreya, compassion. Under these two figures are the human representatives of the lineages of wisdom and compassion which are united in the Buddha. Under Manjuśrī sit Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva and under Maitreya sit Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. Thurman suggests that in the future we, in a global lineage that unites East and West, may come to see Berkeley, Hegel and Heidegger as representatives of Maitreya's "lineage of magnificence" and Hume, Kant, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein as representatives of Manjuśrī's "lineage of the profound". Thurman writes,

I do myself so perceive them, especially since this *Essence of Eloquence* would not be intelligible and could not even have been translated in our far-western culture, were it not for their extraordinary works and profound teachings. They should be included in the refuge-field icon we are constructing under which to read this essence.<sup>[vii]</sup>

In this, we can see Thurman's view of not only how he approaches the task of translation but also how

he sees the place of great Western thinkers in relation to the movement of Buddhism to the West, as well as his approach to comparative philosophy more generally. These iconographic representations of Western thinkers who have very much emerged from a Western tradition of thought, even if aware of Eastern ideas, are being casually appropriated by Thurman into a traditional Buddhist lineage represented by Tibetan iconography. Thurman goes as far as to call Wittgenstein “that modern incarnation of Manjushri.”<sup>[lviii]</sup>

Thurman’s respect and admiration for Wittgenstein as a thinker is mentioned repeatedly. As shown above, Thurman sees Wittgenstein’s philosophical insights as central to our ability to understand Tsong kha pa’s view set out in the *Essence*. As an exercise of comparative philosophy, Thurman uses Wittgenstein’s description of language-games to bring to the surface Tsong kha pa’s critique of the Svātantrika position. Specifically, Thurman draws on Western Wittgensteinian philosophers’ Saunders and Henze’s terms ‘philosophical egocentrist’ and ‘philosophical non-egocentrist’ to understand the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika distinction and the disputes in India between Buddhists and their opponents. He argues that such a formulation

is particularly striking since although it aims to describe the modern private language debate, it could equally well be applied to the ancient Brahmin- Buddhist debate, or to the much more subtle intra-Buddhist debate between the Dialecticists [Prāsaṅgikas] and all the other schools, from Dogmaticists [Svātantrikas] on down ... “philosophical egocentrist” and “philosophical non-egocentrist,” are precisely adequate to translate the Sanskrit *ātmavādin* (lit. “self-advocate”) and *anātmavādin* (lit. “selflessness-advocate”). This most central Indian philosophical dichotomy persists at the subtlest levels in a running debate among non-egocentrists over presence or absence of “intrinsic reality” (*svabhāva*), “intrinsic identity” (*svalakṣaṇa*), and finally “dogmaticist privacy” (*svatantrya*). Once stuck by this parallel between ancient Indian and modern western “egocentrists” and “non ego-centrists,” we naturally become interested in the arguments used by both sides in the ancient period, considering the longevity of the issue in India and Tibet, and its relative newness in the West.<sup>[lix]</sup>

Thurman’s choice of “self-advocate” and “selflessness-advocate” of the Sanskrit *ātmavādin* and *anātmavādin* is quite pejorative. *Ātmavādin* would more accurately be translated as advocate of doctrine of self and *anātmavādin* as advocate of doctrine of non-self. Also interesting here is Thurman’s connection of India and Tibet to the past and the West to modernity and the future. This runs into American ideas of manifest destiny appropriating the best of the Old World and planting it in America for the future – a theme to which we will return when we address his popular writings.

By making the comparison between two geographically and culturally separate philosophical traditions, Thurman counters the argument that Indian philosophy “is not true philosophy, because it is so concerned with religious concerns, and hence too dogmatic.”<sup>[lx]</sup> It is telling that Thurman refers to the “Buddhist critical, *anti-authoritarian*, *individualistic*, and *rationalistic* approach” [as being] exactly what is meant by “philosophy,” that is, an unprejudiced quest of truth.<sup>[lxi]</sup> He draws Western and Indian philosophy together by arguing that these Western-like “Buddhist thinkers [Śakyamuni, Śāriputra, Nāgasena, Nāgārjuna and Maitreya-Asaṅga], far from being peripheral to the mainstream, were the main figures of Indian philosophy from approximately 500 B.C.E to 1000 C.E.”<sup>[lxii]</sup> In fact Thurman goes further in his comparison between the philosophical traditions of India and the West. He argues that Buddhist philosophy is true philosophy in the ancient traditional Western sense (and by implication more truly philosophical than much post Enlightenment Western philosophy) in that its goal is to access liberating ultimate truth through rigorous critical analysis.<sup>[lxiii]</sup> He urges the reader of the *Essence* to strive for the “Everest peak of Tibetan thought”<sup>[lxiv]</sup> and writes that for him philosophy is “no mere word game, but is the ground of life, transformation, sheer joy; tolerance in little things and selfless effort in the bigger ones.” Through Tsong kha pa’s philosophy our minds can attain “relief at last”<sup>[lxv]</sup> by accessing the truth of the ultimate in the tradition of the Western ancients going back to Plato who, like Tsong kha pa, also endeavoured to free his students from the darkness and shadows

of their respective caves of ignorance.

To highlight Thurman's style of Buddhist scholarship it will be useful to compare his work with another Western Buddhist scholar who was also a Tibetan Buddhist monk in the Gelukpa school. José Ignacio Cabezón, currently a tenured professor of Religious Studies, represents a somewhat more orthodox style of Western scholarship. Although a professing Buddhist, Cabezón's academic work in Buddhist Studies follows a more balanced and clearly identifiable academic approach than Thurman. For example, Cabezón has shown through his work that it is important to identify what type of scholarship/writing one is undertaking. As addressed in the introduction to this thesis, Cabezón has suggested that the straitjacketing of Buddhist Studies into either, 1. Positivist analysis, 2. Traditional scholasticism or 3. Popular literature, means that a vacuum has been created that needs to be filled by Buddhist theology. It is to this newer discipline in the Western Academy that Cabezón is an important contributor. What is important for us is the way in which Cabezón, in contrast to Thurman, maintains academic rigour and self-awareness when engaging traditional Buddhist ideas with the modern world and the way he does not mix the methods of traditional Buddhist scholasticism with Western positivist Buddhist Studies in the way Thurman does in *Essence of True Eloquence*. While strongly devoted to the Buddhist tradition, Cabezón manages to maintain a more detached, less devotional aspect than Thurman when approaching Buddhist doctrine. He writes that while he accepts traditional Buddhist notions of karma and rebirth only provisionally, he nonetheless remains "profoundly convinced of the validity of the Buddhist tradition as a whole."<sup>[xvii]</sup> This allows the reader to more clearly separate the scholar's assumptions and beliefs from traditional Buddhist doctrine, thus providing a more transparent reading of the material. As an example, let us look at his contributory chapter "Truth in Buddhist Theology" in *Buddhist Theology*.

In "Truth in Buddhist Theology", Cabezón writes that as a Buddhist Theologian in the Western academy, his aim is to place himself normatively within the Buddhist tradition, accepting the tradition as the "chief source of intellectual and spiritual nourishment" and then, "abiding by accepted [Western] scholarly norms" critically plumb "the tradition with a view to making relevant in a public and open fashion the meaning and truth of Buddhist doctrine and practice."<sup>[xvii]</sup> Having identified his method and assumptions he goes on to explore that nature of truth in Buddhist doctrine from a Western academic perspective. He examines the three dominant Western theories of truth and concludes that the most effective Western theory of truth for understanding Buddhism is the pragmatic model which better shows internally how Buddhists approach truth thus allowing us to better understand Buddhist doctrine. He does not chose the correspondence model which states something is true if it has direct metaphysical correspondence in the external world. By identifying his position and his method Cabezón presents a more open examination of Buddhist doctrine. Cabezón openly acknowledges feeling "metaphysically alienated"<sup>[xviii]</sup> when considering traditional Buddhist doctrines on karma and rebirth if applying a correspondence theory of truth. However, he can also see the value of applying the pragmatic theory of truth to these doctrines. That is, belief in karma and rebirth efficaciously lead the believer toward the higher Buddhist ideals of wisdom and compassion which positively transform individuals and are therefore pragmatically efficacious – the definition of pragmatic theory of truth which, Cabezón argues, corresponds to the traditional Buddhist notion of *upaya*. However Cabezón also identifies higher aspects of Buddhist doctrine which he sees as universally and unconditionally true – the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, for example. He sees this type of unconditional universal truth, not subject to time and place, as a prerequisite for a tradition to call itself universal. By separating and analyzing different types of Buddhist truth Cabezón openly acknowledges his type of Buddhist belief. It is this type of open 'public' critical examination that characterizes Cabezón's method of Buddhist scholarship, which allows the reader to examine the author's assumptions. In a more transparent manner the reader is presented with the Buddhist doctrinal content allowing him to make his own informed decision concerning what to adopt or reject or adopt conditionally. This method of scholarship stands in contrast to the style of Thurman's work such as in *Essence* which is coloured by an often uncritical and partisan stance. The problem is not that a position has been taken by Thurman but that it is not acknowledged as partisan but instead presented as unchallenged in the Tibetan tradition. Such a

method may be acceptable within traditional Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism but it does not fit the accepted norms of the Western academy. This is the danger Thurman's work presents as he mixes the fields of traditional Buddhist scholasticism with Western academic Buddhist scholarship – two fields which Cabezón, in contrast, keeps clearly separate.

In relation to Thurman's work Cabezón makes two criticisms. In specific reference to Thurman's study and translation of *Essence* and his using a Wittgensteinian lens to interpret Tsong kha pa, Cabezón questions whether Thurman succeeds in "his reading of Buddhism through [his] Western hermeneutical lens"[\[lxix\]](#) or whether indeed making such parallels to other strands in Western philosophy is necessary for the task of Buddhist theology and making Buddhist ideas accessible and acceptable to a Western (academic) audience. Cabezón's second criticism and a continuing theme of his work is more general and relates to the role of popularist works on Buddhism of which Thurman is a significant contributor. In his up-coming work tentatively titled *Consuming Tibet*, Cabezón continues to explore the 'commodification of Tibet' that, he argues, much popularist Buddhist literature represents. And while acknowledging the positive side of popularist Buddhist literature which effectively identifies the socially relevant aspects of Buddhism he also argues against "the extent to which it succumbs to consumerist demands [and that] at its best simply lacks intellectual rigor, while at its worst goes beyond mere sloppiness to a kind of anti-intellectualism that makes careful, critical scholarship superfluous, anathema or both."[\[lxx\]](#)

Another Buddhist scholar with whom we can compare Thurman's more scholarly work is Georges Dreyfus. Like Thurman and Cabezón, Dreyfus was also a Tibetan Buddhist monk though for considerably longer than both. Dreyfus joined the Tibetans in Dharamsala, in 1970 and spent the next fifteen years fulfilling a traditional Gelukpa scholastic-monastic education. This culminated in his attainment of the title of *geshé* - the highest scholastic achievement in the Tibetan tradition and he was the first Westerner to do so. It is this fifteen year experience as a scholar-monk that Dreyfus describes in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* Acknowledging that the text is written for Buddhist scholars, Religious scholars, Buddhist practitioners and a wider audience, Dreyfus maintains an academically rigorous description and analysis of Tibetan scholasticism, which, is also autobiographical – and, as acknowledged by Dreyfus, therefore inevitably partially subjective.

What is interesting for us is the way in which Dreyfus, now a Western academic Buddhist scholar, presents his view of the Tibetan tradition and, like Cabezón but unlike Thurman, acknowledges his academic prejudices and assumptions.[\[lxxi\]](#) In addition, while acknowledging his profound debt to the kindness and generosity offered to him by the monks of this newly exiled tradition, he states:

I do not believe my indebtedness to the Tibetan people commits me to present a prettified account. Tibetan Buddhism is an extremely rich tradition that *needs no advocates*. Hence, this book offers a realistic assessment; I can only hope that my Tibetan readers will not take offence that I portray as accurately as possible the weaknesses as well as the strengths of their tradition.[\[lxxii\]](#)

This open method of presentation and exploration of Tibetan Buddhism appeals to the reader who values the presentation of 'all the facts'. While acknowledging his deep respect for the tradition Dreyfus believes it is strong enough to withstand direct and thorough examination. This 'warts and all' presentation of Tibetan Buddhism stands in contrast to Thurman's intense and emotive *advocacy* of the tradition which Dreyfus sees as unnecessary.

Dreyfus is also somewhat at odds with Thurman in his evaluation of Tibetan Buddhism and its scholastic apparatus. Whereas Thurman in *Essence* and his popular works presents Tibetan Buddhism uncritically and something to be reified and 'scientific', Dreyfus, who has a significantly deeper experience of the scholastic tradition, presents a tradition that seeks through scholasticism to create a "meaningful universe"[\[lxxiii\]](#) in which the student can meaningfully shape his life. In a more nuanced account of the role of rationality within Tibetan scholasticism, a central theme of the *The Sound of Two*

*Hands*, Dreyfus shows that rationality is used as a tool to critically examine authoritative doctrines that cannot, however, ultimately be rejected as they provide the boundaries of that ‘universe of meaning’. To equate Buddhist philosophy and analytical investigation as a precursor to Western science, he argues, would be misleading.<sup>[xxiv]</sup> This contrasts with Thurman’s proclamation of ‘Buddhism as science’<sup>[xxv]</sup> and also corresponds to Cabezón’s presentation of Buddhist systems of truth as pragmatic. However just as Cabezón maintains the universal validity of the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, Dreyfus supports and agrees with Thurman’s presentation of Madhyamaka philosophy as a profound truth. The difference lies in the lead up and background to the presentation of the tradition that produced this profound and liberating insight. Whereas Thurman enthusiastically and emotively encourages us all toward attaining this ‘highest view’, Dreyfus and Cabezón more soberly present the doctrine in a more balanced and rigorously academic way. While maintaining and acknowledging their deep respect for the tradition and its highest doctrine, their readers are more likely to gain a contextualized and more nuanced understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and its doctrines.

Another point where Dreyfus diverges from Thurman is in the way he acknowledges the important distinction between the Tibetan scholastic tradition and its views and the Indian Buddhist tradition from which it emerged.<sup>[xxvi]</sup> In doing this, we are presented with a more subtle account of the distinctiveness of the two traditions and therefore a more accurate view of both the way the Tibetans have refined and reorganized the philosophical doctrines of Buddhist India and the original state of Indian Buddhist doctrine as it existed in India. This contrasts with Thurman’s method of projecting back into the Indian tradition the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika debates, for example, referred to earlier. As well as this, while Thurman accepts and propounds Tsong kha pa’s interpretation of Madhyamaka uncritically, Dreyfus, while acknowledging Tsong kha pa’s profundity and “impressive clarity, which other interpretations often lack”<sup>[xxvii]</sup>, goes on in his more even-handed manner to also acknowledge the “internal tensions”<sup>[xxviii]</sup> of Tsong kha pa’s approach. Indeed, as a qualified Gelukpa *geshé* so fully immersed within the tradition, Dreyfus even presents his own reading of Madhyamaka that controversially challenges aspects of Tsong kha pa’s interpretation. By showing an alternative view, Dreyfus gives a more balanced account which more accurately presents the reality of the Tibetan tradition, which, while almost universally revering Tsong kha pa as a teacher and thinker especially within the Gelukpa school, does hold a variety of views, which includes some important challenges to aspects of Tsong kha pa’s interpretation. Therefore, not every Tibetan Buddhist would ascribe to Thurman’s view that Tsong kha pa’s interpretation of Madhyamaka is the undisputed ‘Everest peak’ of the entire Tibetan tradition. By showing this from within his experience as an accomplished Gelukpa scholar-monk, Dreyfus presents a more scholarly, nuanced account of the Tibetan tradition for the reader where the true vibrancy of alternative views within the broader tradition, as well as its strong conservatism (centred on Tsong kha pa within the Geluk), is shown. This account is in comparison to Thurman’s valuable translation and study but essentially uncritical *advocacy* of Tsong kha pa’s Madhyamaka in *Essence of True Eloquence*.

Finally, I would like to examine Andrew Tuck’s *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna*, to provide some context to Thurman’s method of comparative philosophy in *Essence*, which uses a Wittgensteinian lens to interpret Tsong kha pa’s text on Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka. Tuck introduces his work with the following preface:

It is a commonplace of contemporary scholarship that any theory or interpretation necessarily reflects the assumptions of its author and its readers. As the aims, conscious and unconscious, of scholars change, their readings of texts will change as well. To this extent their readings are – sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, always productively – isogetical: they reveal far more about the views of the scholars and their scholarly eras than exegesis is said to. This volume presents a case study of the effects of changing biases on the understanding of a single, highly interpretable text.<sup>[xxix]</sup>

In relation to Thurman, Tuck examines the way in which a trend developed in reading Nāgārjuna’s

Madhyamaka through a Wittgensteinian lens. This newer (post World War II) trend followed the earlier mid-20<sup>th</sup> century trend in using positivistic analytic philosophy to read Nāgārjuna, which itself was preceded by the 19<sup>th</sup> century idealist European and American readings of Nāgārjuna and other Indian philosophers by Schopenhauer on. Interestingly for us, Tuck writes,

As Murti had used the work of European transcendentalists to create an interpretation of Nāgārjuna that was intelligible to an earlier Western audience, these post-Wittgensteinian Asianists [including Thurman] discovered that *The Investigations* allowed for a reading of Madhyamika that felt *up-to-date*. [lxxx]

It is Tuck's description of the use of Wittgenstein to interpret Nāgārjuna as being "up-to-date" that appears to ring true for Thurman's method of translating and importing Buddhism to the West, whether it be for a general readership (explored in the following chapter) or here, for an academic audience. Whenever Thurman presents Buddhist thought to the West, he does so by employing the most popular and powerful Western tools and ideas available. [lxxx] For an academic readership, a Wittgensteinian interpretation showed that Thurman, even in his early days of Buddhist scholarship, did not stay within a merely descriptive framework. His translation and study of *Essence* appears to be aimed, not narrowly at only Buddhist scholars – by simply translating a traditional Buddhist text into English – but at the widest possible academic audience through his use of the hugely influential work of Wittgenstein. Thus, even in Thurman's more scholarly early work, we can see his enthusiasm for the dissemination and popularization of Buddhist ideas to the widest possible audience via his appropriation of influential Western ideas/thought. Indeed Thurman's method of transliterating Sanskrit terms - for example, using 'sh' in *Manjushri* and *Shakyamuni*, rather than the more traditional, specialist Buddhological method of an accented 'ś' in *Manjuśri* or *Śākyamuni* – shows Thurman's net being thrown wider than a purely Buddhological audience. This technique, coupled with his Wittgensteinian reading of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamika, could validly be seen as both a calculated academic technique to reach a wider academic audience and/or as a traditional Buddhist *upaya* employed to make available and understandable the Buddhadharma to that same (potentially influential) audience. In the following chapter we will explore Thurman's works on Buddhism aimed at a popular audience and see the use of his scholastic credentials and vast learning to tailor his interpretation of Buddhism for them as well.

## CHAPTER 2: THURMAN AS POPULARIZER OF BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

For Robert Thurman's work for a general audience I will consider *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Liberation Through Understanding in the Between and Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*. There is a strong sense of self-confidence and direction in Thurman's writing which advocates the importance and acceptance of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings and, as such, these books do not contain the critical self-awareness and extensive academic rigor that Thurman displays in his publications for an academic audience/community. Thurman is in no way merely reporting what he has discovered as an unbiased Western scholar of Buddhism. He unashamedly promotes the efficacy of the profound truths and myriad supporting practices of Tibetan Buddhism in their role to alleviate human suffering.

So how do we position Robert Thurman in the tradition of Buddhist studies both Western and Eastern? Is he an unbiased academic, a self-reflective Buddhist theologian, a traditional Buddhist scholastic or simply a Dharma teacher spreading the Buddhist doctrine of Tibet to the widest possible audience, or a political advocate? Based on the preceding analysis of his more scholarly work in the preceding chapter and an analysis of his popular works to follow, I will argue that Thurman is a Dharma teacher, theologian, populariser of Tibetan Buddhism and political advocate of the Tibetan cause who also happens to have deep roots in the Western academic tradition. He uses his extensive academic training to be more effective in his work in the above four roles as well as utilizing his proximity to the Dalai Lama to lend his message traditional legitimization and thereby broaden the audience he reaches. To explore these roles we can look more closely at some of Thurman's work and some of the

criticisms that have been leveled against him.

In 1994 Thurman himself, summarized his position:

I personally consider broad-scale individual development of contemplative insight to be necessary for survival. There are many ways to make our society more contemplative ... I have chosen the liberal arts and science university as the individually liberating institution left over from our Western extra-social contemplative communities, which has however been too much co-opted to empower and train the individuals who are destined to serve as the ruling elite of the materialist, modern unified society. I see the technological media as branching out, however clumsily, from this university complex to enfold the larger society within it. Therefore if our concern is to heal, enlighten and empower individuals to live better and create a better society by learning how to manage their own contemplative energies, the academic community is the very opposite of academic. It is the vital arena in which the future is being determined.<sup>[xxxii]</sup>

From this we can see how Thurman is consciously harnessing his academic heritage in an attempt to transform society in a way that he sees as necessary for our survival as a species – specifically to make our society more self-aware, wise, peaceful and less greedy.<sup>[xxxiii]</sup> And while admittedly a specialist in the field of Buddhist studies, he argues strongly for the contemplative technologies from all the major world religious traditions to be accessible to the universities' liberal arts and natural science faculties.<sup>[xxxiv]</sup> He does this while remaining well aware of the importance of not allowing any religious tradition to become normative within the university and he provides tempered support to the "canonization"<sup>[xxxv]</sup> of secularism within the university that has allowed the study of all the major religious traditions. Having established this proviso, Thurman goes further and argues for the inclusion of a traditional scholastic approach to study and internalization of learning in which the university student, in a remarkably similar way to Dreyfus's account of traditional scholasticism in religious traditions, would use memorization, debate and meditation "in order to integrate insight to transformative depth."<sup>[xxxvi]</sup> Such an argument signals Thurman's implicit criticism of the Western contemporary mode of secularism whereby the academy separates religion from philosophy and he calls for a return to scholasticism though within a truly modern, secular setting. In all, this quotation provides a good platform from which to view Thurman's often controversial work which we will now explore in more detail.

Lopez and *Prisoners of Shangri-la*: Does Thurman perpetuate a mythologised image of Tibet in his attempt to transform and guide Western society?

In *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* Donald S. Lopez Jr. argues that Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture and history have been misrepresented by a variety of people leading to a situation in which Tibetans and non-Tibetans have become prisoners of the myth of Tibet as Shangri-la. According to Lopez, an example of this is Robert Thurman's translation and commentary of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This criticism of Thurman occurs within Lopez's wider critique of presentations of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* for Western audiences. For Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a stimulating site for considering this wider 'Shangri-la-ization' of Tibet.

For Lopez, Thurman's translation and commentary of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* presents several problems. The first is Thurman's choice of language used to present Buddhism to the West. According to Thurman and acknowledged by Lopez, Thurman's aim in providing a translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was to give "people who are dying ... something more clear, usable and accessible" than the previous translations. In providing his translation and commentary for an acknowledged general readership, Thurman does use some evocative language rather than literal translations. However I would argue that Thurman is within his right as a translator for a general readership to use terms that may evoke a better understanding of what Buddhism ultimately is – a tradition, founded by Śākyamuni, aimed at guiding followers to a transcendence of suffering through developing insight or wisdom and compassion via the direct neutral observation of human experience and the development of ethical

living. The scientific language used by Thurman such as his translation of *abhidharma* as “clear science” is for me not a problem. Given the idiosyncratic and highly specialized nature of Abhidharma scholasticism, Thurman’s emphasis on quasi-scientific language for a non-specialised audience may, to a certain extent, be understandable. However rather than seeing Thurman as literally equating abhidharma with Western science, could his use of scientific language be merely an *upaya* used to introduce Buddhist thought to the widest possible Western audience? After all, as Thurman himself has written, he sees the “broad-scale individual development of contemplative insight to be necessary for survival.”<sup>[lxxxvii]</sup> Is not his translation and commentary of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* simply part of his acknowledged larger project of bringing a contemplative-liberation tradition – Tibetan Buddhism - to the West?

More controversial is Thurman’s coinage of the term “psychonaut” for *yogi*. Admittedly this is an evocative and imaginative term but again, how does one convey to a general Western readership, almost certainly unfamiliar with the intricacies of a tradition of deep meditative practice exactly what this lineage of Buddhist practitioners has been doing for the last two and a half millennia? While unconventional, I believe Thurman’s use of the word effectively and accurately describes, for his non-specialist audience, something that is central and centrally important to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and in this way succeeds in its task of communicating something of the cultural context and practical background of the text to the readership. What is questionable, however, is Thurman’s appeal to Tibet as a civilization of ‘inner sciences’ in opposition to the West as a civilization of ‘outer sciences’. This overly simplistic dichotomy, while effective in communicating an important idea to a non-specialist audience, plays squarely into the hands of Said’s and now Lopez’s critique of the disempowering effect this type of Orientalism can have on the ‘Other’, in this case Tibetan, culture.

Lopez’s criticism is also Thurman’s manner of appealing to peoples’ imaginations and maintaining their interest through his particular use of language. And this is part of Lopez’s wider criticism set out in *Prisoners* that Western translations and interpretations of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* do not accurately present the text as it existed in its Tibetan context. Lopez argues the translations have misappropriated the text in a form of Orientalism that merely serves to conveniently concoct an enticing image of Tibet that responds to the transient Western cultural tastes and fashions of the day.<sup>[lxxxviii]</sup> Lopez’s argument that this idealization of Tibet can marginalize and disempower its culture and political future is to some extent true. However as Dreyfus points out in his analysis and response to *Prisoners*, Lopez may be missing the way in which people such as the present Dalai Lama<sup>[lxxxix]</sup> and Thurman can also actually cut through cultural barriers and idealization of Tibet by presenting Tibet to the West in Western terms. The Dalai Lama uses notions (and practices) of democracy and human rights to present the Tibetan cause to the West while Thurman presents Tibetan Buddhist culture in Western scientific terms which also forges connections between Western and Tibetan culture by seeking out points of similarity. These particular practices work contrary to the oriental scholarship which has promoted the ‘difference of the other’ critiqued effectively by Said and now Lopez.

A more recent book of Thurman which is arguably an all-encompassing account of his view of and for the world is *Inner revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*. In it Thurman sets out:

- his own introduction to Buddhism and the profound effect it has had on his life
- his espoused universal human ideal of buddhahood as the pinnacle of human evolution
- the civilizing social impact of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha on Asia
- his goal of uniting Western “outer modernity/science” with Tibetan Buddhist “inner modernity/science”
- a concrete political strategy for implementing “enlightenment ideals” to bring balance to the West

In a more moderate voice than Thurman, the Dalai Lama in his foreword to *Inner Revolution*, describes Thurman’s ambition as correcting the misguided view of Buddhism as an uncaring religion and to

challenge the prevailing Western orthodoxy that material progress is “the ultimate good.”<sup>[xc]</sup> In doing so, according to the Dalai Lama, Thurman also gives insights into traditional Tibetan society and through an historical account of Indian and Tibetan rulers seeks to re-inspire his predominantly American audience to re-engage in the political process and work for the benefit of others – each individual – which he sees as the highest social good. To do this, Thurman advocates a process of ‘cool revolution’ in the individual to achieve true happiness through Buddhist practices which, once achieved, will inevitably lead to a positive transformation of Western (U.S) society.

This vast view and goal of Thurman is delivered in an entertaining though, at times, academically questionable way and it is perhaps here, blending his role as an academic with the role of a populariser of Buddhism that Thurman attracts criticism with his often highly generalized account of history and culture, his creative use of language and his grand ‘eschatological’ aims for our future. Let us look at how he presents his view.

The experience of selflessness as freedom from alienated ego addiction is a revolution in the deepest heart of the individual. It is a turn from pained and fearful self-centeredness to joyful, loving relatedness. This inner experience is the indispensable pivot of the cool revolution that Buddha started in order to gradually transform world-civilization over the past 2,500 years.<sup>[xci]</sup>

Here, we can see Thurman as dharma-teacher, philosopher, historian and populariser of Buddhism and a weaving of his broad knowledge with dramatic, entertaining language which includes “cool revolution” and “transform world-civilization” over vast chunks of human history – “the past 2500 years.” Not only are we taught how to positively transform our minds, an obviously noble and traditionally Buddhist goal, but in doing so, we also become part of something slightly larger - Buddha’s ‘cool’ revolution of world civilization!

Thurman’s central idea of a ‘cool revolution’ is intriguing in several respects. To begin we see can again see a creative use of language. The use of the word ‘cool’ has different implications. Firstly, and as it is explicitly stated by Thurman, his choice of the word ‘cool’ to describe a revolution, is chosen in contrast to warm or ‘hot revolution’. The ‘hot revolution’ being used to denote a violent social revolution while a cool revolution being used to denote a non-violent, peaceful revolution apparently inspired by the Buddha. ‘Cool’ is also importantly an iconic word of the 1960’s American counter culture of which Thurman was a part. By using this modern word, it could be argued, Thurman is reaching back to the popular, romantic counter-cultural image of this important epoch to lay claim to its populist, ‘cool’, credentials. The 1960’s were also a time of a degree of revolution which has led to significant social change both in the U.S and around the world as seen in the spread of popular culture. Then, importantly, there is the use of the term ‘revolution’ which could also serve to catch the interest and emotions of the younger readers who often seek change in their world. Put together, the term ‘cool revolution’ would well serve Thurman’s goal of gaining the attention and interest of the widest possible youth audience while simultaneously not disenfranchising the older, now probably somewhat more conservative, ‘child of the sixties’ by emphasizing the revolution’s, and Buddhism’s, ‘coolness’.

In traditional Buddhist terms, Thurman’s interpretation of Buddhism as a form of revolution is interesting and controversial. The very notion of Buddhism as ‘revolution’ is both very modern and very Western. ‘Revolution’ in the West represents the complete overthrowing of what went before – usually for the better, a sign of Western linear ‘progress’. In social-political terms we may think of the very violent ‘French Revolution’ or more significantly for Thurman’s audience, the also violent, but critically important, ‘American Revolution’, in which the status quo of British rule was fundamentally rejected in order to facilitate massive social and political change – the very birth of the United States of America. The idea of revolution, however, does not equate to traditional Buddhist methods of institutional change or indeed social change. ‘Buddhism’ itself has changed by always referring back to the authority of the Buddha and his teachings, definitely not by overthrowing him or them. This is exemplified in the ‘Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma’ which represents the evolutionary, not

revolutionary, style of change Buddhism itself has followed. In terms of mass social change by virtue of his teaching, the Buddha's own view appears to have been that change should be as gentle as possible. He significantly tempered the impact of his teachings on his society by making significant concessions to the social status quo of his day. An important example of this is his initial resistance to ordination of women in deference to important, established social norms. It could be argued that he took this position in order to not cause excessive social dislocation. In this way Thurman's evocation of a 'revolution' is controversial.

However, by invoking the term 'revolution' Thurman skillfully invokes the highest and most noble ideas in American culture that arose directly from the American Revolution – namely, the inalienable human rights of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". Not only are these words enshrined in the most esteemed document of the United States, the *Declaration of Independence*, but they are, with 'Revolution', the very words that appear in the title to Thurman's book. Perhaps in this book we are simply seeing what happens whenever Buddhism moves to a new place and culture. The Buddhadharma is appropriated by that culture in terms that the people understand and respect. Did not the Buddha himself teach that his teaching should be taught in the vernacular of each place that it travels to? However another question also arises: Does Thurman go too far, in his attempt to engage his popular audience with his appropriation of the vernacular, and actually end-up misrepresenting Buddhism, or is his work an *upaya* – a skilful and compassionate means to lure children out of what Thurman, and others,<sup>[xcii]</sup> may see as the burning house of rampant U.S materialism and militarism?

Let us continue our exploration of Thurman's use of language. He writes, "When a believer asserts unshakeable faith in the face of the worst experience or apparent reality, she or he is reaching for connection to the deepest awareness of infinite living energy."<sup>[xciii]</sup> This is Thurman describing the role of faith as a starting point in the quest for enlightenment and it is this kind of incredibly vague and indefinable language that constitutes a significant part of the book. He goes on to argue that enlightenment "is not meant to be an object of religious faith" but is "an evolutionary goal, something we want to become, like president of the United States, a concert violinist, or a great poet."<sup>[xciv]</sup> Our goal to become enlightened is "the biological possibility of our evolving into beings of full understanding". We are invited and encouraged by Thurman to engage with a worldly goal which concords neatly with Darwin's scientific views of evolution. "This evolutionary process and its result of buddhahood have profound effects on the individual, on the society one is a member of, and, by resonance, on the whole world. These effects are incalculable by our usual yardsticks of self- and social-improvement, being a transformation of the very ground of the social contract. A society of enlightened beings is bound to be an enlightened society."<sup>[xcv]</sup>

This "enlightened society" is Thurman's ultimate goal and *Inner Revolution* is both an enthusiastic description of this new world and a thorough prescription of how and why we should achieve it. Again what is interesting is Thurman's use of language and appropriation of powerful ideas. He likens achieving enlightenment to both a (Darwinian) 'evolutionary goal', which could evoke notions of 'survival of the fittest', as well as to becoming president of the United States or a concert violinist. Besides the obvious linking of Buddhism to science could we be seeing in Thurman's language an appeal to the notion of American 'manifest destiny' – a broad but powerfully ambiguous ideal that has powered much of U.S domestic and international social and political history?<sup>[xcvi]</sup> Is it now Buddhism's 'manifest destiny' to bring happiness to the U.S?

We could also apply 'manifest destiny' to the American citizen Thurman alludes to who, because he or she is a U.S citizen, is someone who provenance dictates can achieve anything whether it be becoming 'president of the United States', a 'concert violinist' or now, even a buddha. This appears to be a thoroughly American take on enlightenment as a valid ambition for the individual which is very much a part of the Western 'progress' model and, arguably, not traditionally Buddhist. So why does Thurman appeal to these ideals? Has he appropriated these ideals of 'American exceptionalism' or 'manifest destiny' simply in order to make the practice of Buddhism more attractive and appealing to Americans? If so, we can see Thurman continuing in a strong American literary heritage made famous

by Walt Whitman, the Beat Generation and the Transcendentalists who all drew on traditional American ideals to transform society. Or is Thurman dressing up Buddhism as a bourgeois, middle-class goal in order to counter U.S bourgeois society as too materialistic? Or again, are we witnessing the use of an *upaya* to refocus mass U.S attention away from materialist short term goals and toward the very traditional Buddhist transcendental goal of liberation from suffering through individual, inner transformation?

To appeal to a radically individualized culture, namely the U.S and the West, the Buddha's 'cool revolution' in India is presented by Thurman as "the birth of functioning radical individualism".<sup>[xcvii]</sup> This view of Indian society as radically individualistic may refer to Indians' transformed belief in their ability to attain individual liberation however it seems a somewhat dubious connection to draw.<sup>[xcviii]</sup> Thurman's goal, however, is to present Buddhism as attractive and fitting to the Western/American individual and so the connection is made.

Also incredibly important for Buddhism's popularity for a Western audience is that Buddhism not be presented as a religion. This resonates strongly with the central notion of Western individualism of 'not wanting to be told what to do'. Thurman satisfies this criterion by repeatedly presenting Buddhism as an 'educational system'. He writes, Buddha's "movement was not the founding of a religion – it was the founding of a new educational system, a cultural and social revolution that consciously avoided taking over the existing institutions of government."<sup>[xcix]</sup> Here, the Western reader can rest assured that following the Buddha and his teachings need not be an indoctrination into a new religion but merely a process of education. Such an interpretation of Buddhism as a 'philosophy' or 'way of life' is valid. However for a vast number of traditional Buddhists, being a 'Buddhist' or a follower of the Buddha constitutes a central part of their identity. Even Thurman's friend the Dalai Lama often describes himself as primarily "a simple Buddhist monk."<sup>[c]</sup> So by presenting Buddhism as merely an education is, though partially true, somewhat inauthentic and it is done, I believe, to popularize Buddhism amongst Thurman's U.S/Western audience. Perhaps this ongoing technique of partially presenting truth in a way that serves Thurman's broader aims is one reason he is such a polarizer of opinion.

To motivate us to strive for 'cool revolution' Thurman points out many of the failings of Western society. Chief among these is the U.S's massive spending on 'militarism'. While a valid and important point it is Thurman's description of the European Enlightenment as a vibrational effect of Tsong kha pa's influence in Tibet that emerges as a form of wild speculation that inevitably empowers his critics' cause. By making such a claim, Thurman seriously devalues the powerfully original and profoundly enlightening work produced by the thinkers whose insights generated what became known as the European Enlightenment. In addition, the claim could also lead one to seriously question the scholarship that has produced *Inner Revolution* and possibly cast a cloud over whatever else Thurman says and writes.

In *Inner Revolution* Thurman draws on all the roles which I have argued he fulfills in his life as an author, educator and public speaker. He draws on his traditional scholastic, academic, theological and dharma-teacher training and channels it into a populist book which overflows with his own exuberant personality which occasionally calls into question the rigor of his scholarship as we have seen above. Broadly speaking the book can fall under the broader definition of Roger Jackson's term, "tantric eschatology" which is an accurate description of Thurman's work generally. So what exactly is 'tantric eschatology'?

'Tantra' defined as "systems of practice and meditation derived from esoteric texts emphasizing cognitive transformation through visualization, symbols and ritual"<sup>[ci]</sup> leading to the 'process' of positive transformation of the individual adequately describes aspects of Thurman's work in *Inner Revolution* and, his other work generally. 'Eschatological' defined as:

1. *a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of humankind*

2. *a belief concerning death, the end of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humankind* specifically: any of various Christian doctrines concerning the *Second Coming* [of a *messiah*], the resurrection of the dead, or the Last Judgment [ciii]

Italicized in this definition above are phrases which accurately describe Thurman's focus in his work, especially "the ultimate destiny of humankind" and "the Second Coming" which Thurman evokes with his use of the term 'messiah' to translate *bodhisattva*. This 'tantric eschatology' is especially evident in *Inner Revolution*, and his work generally, where Thurman advocates an enlightenment revolution in individuals to actively transform our shared global future. To achieve this, we are to first realize, through an adapted form of tantric visualization, the (Buddhist) nature of the ultimate by seeing the emptiness of the self and thereby our complete interconnectedness with all beings and things and then to progress to the eschatological 'messianic' ideal of assuming the Mahayana/tantric Buddhist role of the bodhisattva who liberates all beings from suffering. Thurman argues that merely trying to adopt "the messianic ideal of liberating yourself so that you can free all others, makes you feel happier." [ciii] He goes on to present the Mahayana, which he calls the "universal vehicle of liberation" [civ] which evolved out of the older Buddhist tradition aimed at individual liberation, as holding the ideal of the 'bodhisattva' which he translates as "messiah" – "the man or woman who works to liberate him- or herself in order to save all beings." [cv]

Thurman's translation of 'bodhisattva' with 'messiah' is intriguing and possibly somewhat jarring – presumably especially so for Jews and Christians. For the majority of Christians, it is no less than Jesus, or Christ, who is the messiah. For many Jews, the messiah is literally God's 'anointed one' who will be, depending on the interpretation of sacred Jewish texts, also the descendant of King David of Israel and will come some time in the future to establish God's kingdom on earth. For Thurman to borrow possibly the most sacred ideals from the great Mosaic religions and present them as the suggested goal for you and I, is creative and very democratic to say the least. It does, however, serve to confirm 'tantric eschatology' as a useful description of his work concerned as it is with messiahs and the ultimate future of humankind as seen through his particular 'tantric Buddhist' lens. It also shows Thurman's incredible agility in appealing to the most sacred Western ideals, whether they are secular or religious, in order to communicate his message.

In summary, in the two populist books by Thurman studied here we can discern a (non-exhaustive) pattern of themes and techniques that Thurman employs to achieve his self-described goal of bringing a contemplative tradition to the U.S/West in order to counter what he sees an excessively materialistic and militaristic culture. To do this, he presents Buddhism in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular through a combination of populist language and esteemed American/Western cultural ideals both secular and religious. In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, he presents Tibetan Buddhism in scientific terms which he continues in *Inner Revolution*. The goal of Buddhist practice is linked with Darwinian evolution and Buddhist thought is linked to scientific method. Thurman also links Buddhism with powerful American cultural ideals enshrined in the most sacred document of secular United States - the *Declaration of Independence*. He also makes a connection between Buddhism and the powerful American doctrines of 'manifest destiny' and 'individual ambition'. No less importantly, Thurman also presents Buddhism as an educational system rather than a religion yet he also draws on the most sacred Mosaic religious idea of the 'messiah' to inspire readers toward the Buddhist work of the *bodhisattva*. Throughout both books Thurman supports the critics of orientalism by presenting (Tibetan) Buddhism and Western culture in a simplistic East versus West dichotomy however he also confounds their criticism of maintaining separateness or disempowering 'the Other' in that he finds powerful 'Eastern' practices which he presents as commensurate to the most noble, powerful and popular Western ideals. Whether or not these books represent a traditional Buddhist method of propounding the Buddhadharmā is, admittedly, debatable. However, there remains the possibility that Thurman's work, while controversial, could be seen as a traditional Buddhist *upaya* which aims to compassionately use the persuasion of speech to save sentient beings from suffering. This theory may, in part, explain the Dalai Lama's ongoing support for Thurman's work evidenced by the forwards he has provided for Thurman in both *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *Inner Revolution*. Thurman's

populist work examined here may very well be a traditional continuation of presenting Buddhism to its new audience in the vernacular. It just may be that in this case the target vernacular and the accompanying interpretive ideas appear just so new and so far from the image we understand as 'traditional Buddhism'.

### CHAPTER 3: THURMAN AS POLITICAL ADVOCATE FOR TIBET

Having explored Robert Thurman's scholarly and popular works in the previous two chapters, we will now examine his work as a political activist for the Tibetan cause – a cause that seeks to gain full domestic Tibetan political autonomy while remaining within the Peoples' Republic of China.<sup>[cvi]</sup> In order to carry out this analysis, we will look to Thurman's most recent and complete work on the subject – *Why the Dalai Lama Matters: His Act of Truth as the Solution for China, Tibet, and the World*.<sup>[cvii]</sup> By making this exploration we can gain a broader and more accurate view of what Thurman does, not only within the field of Buddhist scholarship, but also within the much wider socio-political domain. In this chapter, we will see how Thurman uniquely blends his learning, Buddhist beliefs and charismatic personality in an endeavour to transform Tibet's present and future through what is an unapologetic work of mass social, religious, cultural and political advocacy for the Dalai Lama, Tibet and her people.

To understand this unique work, it is important to do three things. The first is to explore Thurman's motivation and intent in writing this work; secondly, to briefly compare his approach in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters* to a meditation technique he sets out in another work - *The Jewel Tree of Tibet: The Enlightenment Engine of Tibetan Buddhism*.<sup>[cviii]</sup> and, thirdly, to identify and critically examine Thurman's use of language and ideas in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*. However, before we do this, I will give a brief overview of the text.

In *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, Thurman begins with an argument for the great moral authority of the Dalai Lama the Dalai Lama and, based on this, an argument for why China and the world should follow The Dalai Lama's suggestions for the future of Tibet. Thurman goes on to present a detailed vision of a fully autonomous Tibet within China, based on the Dalai Lama's formal ideas for an autonomous Tibet – his famous 'middle-way' approach that has repeatedly been rejected by the leaders of the PRC. Thurman completes the work by presenting the benefits for Tibet, China and the world that would come from implementing this plan.

Essentially, the work could be seen as another example of what has been described as Thurman's 'tantric eschatology', which has been referred to earlier in this thesis. In fact, the full title of the work, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters: His Act of Truth as the Solution for China, Tibet and the World* is strongly eschatological. This eschatological view is supported in the text, not by Thurman's (traditional and not unusual) description of the Dalai Lama as a *bodhisattva*, but, more dramatically, by his unconventional translation of *bodhisattva* (lit. enlightened being) as "a Sanskrit term suggesting a cross between a wise saint and a compassionate *messiah*."<sup>[cix]</sup> In effect, Thurman presents the Tibetan belief in the Dalai Lama as an incarnation of the bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara* - protector of the Tibetan people - and suggests that we too could view the Dalai Lama and his work in this way, thus universalising Tibet. For Thurman, The Dalai Lama's 'act of truth' is a path leading safely away from the dangerous path we are all on.

With this brief outline of *Why the Dalai Lama Matters* and, having noted its central eschatological theme, let us now consider the three perspectives, which can provide us with a more complete understanding of the entire text. Firstly, Thurman's motivation and intent is critical to understanding this unique work and it is set out explicitly in the following excerpt from *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*. It begins with a quote of the Dalai Lama.

Finally, I want to tell you that self-confidence and enthusiasm are the key to a successful life and to succeed in any activity one is engaged in. We must be determined and must

have an optimistic outlook; then even if we fail, we will have no regrets. On the other hand, lack of determination and effort will cause double regret. Firstly because the objects were not realized, and secondly because you feel guilty and regret at not having made full effort in the realization of the objectives.[\[cx\]](#)

Having quoted the Dalai Lama, Thurman then writes:

This couldn't be a better description of what I am trying to accomplish in this book. We need to restore, not only in those that don't care anyway, but also in those who are friends of Tibet the confidence that this problem of the Chinese exaggerations and destructive policies in Tibet can be stopped. The Chinese people and leadership can and will come to see that they are self-defeating, and can and will adopt a more reasonable, effective, and enjoyable policy and practice. How can we work with full enthusiasm and dedication for Tibet's freedom if in our hearts we think it is a lost cause? To achieve success, we need positive thought – it is a cardinal principle in Buddhist psychology. Negative thought is actually despair. Despair only leads to violence, either futile and ultimately self-defeating lashing out at the enemy or internal self-destruction by impotently nursing hatred and bitterness.[\[cxii\]](#)

In this extract, we can see Thurman outlining both his motivation and intention, not only in writing this particular book of political activism for the Tibetan cause, but arguably, for all his other work as well. What characterises Thurman is his incredible enthusiasm, optimism and, many say, charisma, as a teacher, presenter and populariser of Tibetan Buddhism in all its forms and, for at least the last twenty years, his high profile advocacy and activism for the political and cultural future of Tibet and its people. From reading this work, it is obvious that Thurman cares deeply for the Tibetans, and their cause, and we can also see that he closely follows the advice of his teacher, the Dalai Lama. Indeed, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters* appears to be Thurman's own form of engaged Buddhism – something, for which Buddhism has historically often been criticised for lacking. Thurman's form of engaged Buddhism, encapsulated in this work, is, in effect, a more detailed elaboration of what his teacher and friend, the Dalai Lama, has envisaged for his country and people.[\[cxiii\]](#) In addition to this, the references in both passages, to the need for a positive outlook which is based in Buddhist psychology, provides an account for what others may consider (as Thurman acknowledges) an incredibly optimistic, even naïve vision for Tibet considering current 'realpolitik' circumstances. The following perspective will consider this important aspect of Thurman's current work in more detail.

From our second perspective we can gain a deeper understanding of Thurman's work in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, by looking at a mediation technique he prescribes in *The Jewel Tree of Tibet* – a work showing Thurman as Dharma teacher – a role, which, due to the constraints of space, we have not been able to more fully explore in this thesis. Put simply, in *Jewel Tree of Tibet*, Thurman sets out a detailed form of tantric meditation in which the meditator visualizes an imagined scene including himself and all beings as Buddhas. By repeatedly practising this particular visualization in meditation, the meditator comes to see the waking world as a Buddha-realm in which one can then more positively, optimistically and productively engage in the world. The meditator, through this practice, gradually becomes free of negative, habitual conceptual projections, he has placed over the phenomenal world and comes to see it as it truly exists. By transforming the individual's perception *via* these practices in *Jewel Tree*, Thurman aims to help free beings from suffering and to facilitate positive action. It is a version of this method that Thurman appears to be employing when he creates a detailed (highly optimistic) vision of a Tibet, free from Chinese oppression. Explaining this incredibly optimistic or idealistic vision, Thurman writes:

In this book we are envisioning how wonderful and positive the world of Tibet, China, and the catastrophically overheating planet could be, if those responsible would see the enlightened vision and then act in an enlightened manner. They don't have to attain full enlightenment, though the Dalai Lama may be there already; all they have to do is *act as*

*if* they are enlightened. In other words, “Buddha is as Buddha does!” But first seeing or imagining the enlightened, best of all possible worlds is what inspires us all to strive to build it. So let us carry on with imagining the positive, replacing the thought “These good outcomes just aren’t possible!” with positive images of how indeed they are always possible, in as specific detail as we can manage.[\[cxiii\]](#)

Following this passage, Thurman sets out his vision which details the retreat of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, from Tibet to China proper, with a small number of soldiers remaining on the borders of Tibet, the return of the Chinese settlers in Tibet to China proper, a move away from the PRC’s “military-industrial imperialist”[\[cxiv\]](#) system and giving Tibetans full governmental control within Tibet. Based on a critique of the military-industrial imperialist history of the West,[\[cxv\]](#) China’s current move down this same path and an appeal to China’s more noble moments in history, Thurman constructs this optimistic vision for Tibet. It is indeed a positive vision for Tibetans but arguably, a highly controversial vision for China’s leaders and probably, most of its ethnic Han population. However, Thurman has clearly set out his reason for his detailed vision and, by doing so, he may in fact be engaging in a Buddhist *upaya*, using tantric visualizations to transform people’s perceptions and attitudes in order to achieve a positive outcome through their consequent actions based on this new vision. As he acknowledges, his aim is to reinvigorate public support for the Tibetan cause and this is the technique he employs – a combination of research, (tantric) Dharma practice, populist authorship and his long-term friendship with the Dalai Lama.

Now, thirdly, having gained some understanding of Thurman’s motivation and intriguing method, we can now examine some examples of his use of language and presentation of ideas in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*. The work is obviously one of political activism, however it also another example of Thurman’s populist writing which, again, has as its foundation and support Thurman’s academic career, his time as a monk and, central to this particular work, his friendship and proximity to The Dalai Lama. Having said this, nowhere does the work claim to be scholarly and, while based on sound research and Thurman’s vast learning, the presentation of ‘the facts’ is populist in style, highly emotive and, in parts, a continuation of what some critics would describe as Thurman’s idealized or glossed account of Tibet.[\[cxvi\]](#)

Let us look at what Thurman says. In the first lines of the introduction, Thurman reveals to his audience, who may not already know, his scholarly credentials. He writes that, “[t]ravelling the world as an author and professor”[\[cxvii\]](#) he has seen the profound impact the Dalai Lama has on people. Then just after this, Thurman identifies himself as a “former monk and nearly life-long Buddhist [who has] known the Dalai Lama for over four decades and studied under him for many years.”[\[cxviii\]](#) In this way we can see Thurman again, drawing on his: (i) academic credentials; (ii) time as a monk and; (iii) friendship and proximity to the Dalai Lama, in order to provide authority and, we can assume, mass appeal, to his work. This is a method, possibly unique in Buddhist studies, that Thurman uses to increase his appeal to his general audience and this approach makes him unique, as someone who works at the intersection of academic and popular literature and, now political activism for the Tibetan cause.

The introduction Thurman then devotes to outlining the character of the Dalai Lama is emotive and evocative. He likens the Dalai Lama to Jesus, and also presents the Dalai Lama as a living embodiment of the ideal leader, thus also fulfilling for Thurman the template established by Plato in *The Republic*.[\[cxix\]](#) Following this, Thurman also describes the Dalai Lama as “a simple Shakya monk” and “Shakyamuni’s devoted heir.”[\[cxx\]](#) There is, of course, sound grounds for such comparisons, however seeing any human currently living amongst us (even The Dalai Lama) placed in such esteemed company, is highly emotive and a uniquely Thurmanesque style of advocacy for the Dalai Lama.

Thurman continues to praise the Dalai Lama (in a way that Thurman admits the Dalai Lama, himself, would claim to be unfounded) by appealing to the widest possible set of Western ideals and figures in

a way that echoes Thurman's populist methodology employed in *Inner Revolution*. Not only is the Dalai Lama likened to Jesus and the ideal leader of Plato's *Republic*, but also to the most eminent, modern Western scientists and thinkers including Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell and Stephen Hawking. Thurman argues that, like them, he "advances human knowledge from a philosophical and scientific point of view."[\[cxxi\]](#) Admittedly, Thurman does condition this comparison, by suggesting Buddhism is "one-third ethics, one-third psychology and religion as therapy, and one-third scientific wisdom" and writes, that *if* this is the case, "the Dalai Lama brings new aspects of those three values to the world."[\[cxxii\]](#) However, this view of Buddhism that Thurman presents, is a particularly modern Western one, employed by Thurman to make his case in his advocacy for The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause.

This casting of the widest possible net, by likening the Dalai Lama to such a diverse range of the most esteemed figures in Western history, is a characteristic of populist writing. And indeed, it may reflect the way in which many in the West now view The Dalai Lama and Buddhism. The question is whether Thurman is tapping in to existing perceptions and magnifying them or whether is actually the creator of many of them. Of course, he is both. As José Ignacio Cabezón noted, populist Buddhist works help to identify issues that society deem important for Buddhist scholars to address, and Thurman is doing this. However, Thurman also risks falling into the anti-intellectualism and sloppiness that populist Buddhist work can represent, as also noted by Cabezón, by presenting the Dalai Lama as all things to all people. In addition, the continuing highly generalized scientific analogies Thurman draws with Buddhism also potentially invite further criticism from scholars such as Lopez and Dreyfus who see this type of analogy as simplistic and even possibly a misrepresentation of Buddhism, which we referred to in Chapters 1 and 2.[\[cxxiii\]](#) However, even if we give him the benefit of the doubt, some room for poetic license, given that *Why the Dalai Lama Matters* is a populist book with the acknowledged (and noble) aim to re-enthuse people to advance the Tibetan cause for freedom, Thurman nonetheless appears to cross the line in making scientific analogies when he describes The Dalai Lama as "a world-class scientific *discoverer* in the ranks of Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, and other genius thinkers."[\[cxxiv\]](#) No one, who has heard The Dalai Lama teach or who has read his commentaries on Buddhist texts, could reasonably dispute his immense authority as a traditional and modern Buddhist scholar-theologian, but to describe The Dalai Lama as a 'world-class *scientific discoverer*', like Einstein, is a misrepresentation of the method, view and practice of traditional Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism and teaching.[\[cxxv\]](#) The result may be that such analogies could be a disservice to Thurman's credibility as a Buddhist author-scholar and, therefore, by extension, a disservice to his cause.

Another area in which Thurman invites criticism is his alleged idealized representations of Tibet as a uniquely pure land, people and culture.[\[cxxvi\]](#) These criticisms echo those made against some 19<sup>th</sup> century European and American Romantics who saw in the East ('the Other') what was lacking in the soul of Europe and the overly industrialized West. Critiques of orientalist scholars, such as that of Edward Said and his followers, also question the validity and benefit of such idealized images.[\[cxxvii\]](#) Thurman is aware of such criticisms and indeed, in describing the possibility of a 'middle way' Tibetan economy, run by free Tibetans, he writes:

This will be fascinating to see, how the enlightenment-oriented (not simply enlightened, *as some might wish to misread me*) Tibetan Buddhist culture will elaborate an economic middle way between the two extremes of laissez-faire capitalism and state-monopolized industrial socialism.[\[cxxviii\]](#)

However, Thurman's awareness of his critics does not prevent him elsewhere, in at least presenting Tibet's natural environment as pure. He argues for a future autonomous Tibet – "the ultimate organic farm country" to market its edible produce to the world as exports "from the proverbial *land of purity*."[\[cxxix\]](#) Rather than an intentional misrepresentation of Tibet, however, we could perhaps just see this as skilful marketing, which taps into pre-existing mass images, certain environmental realities as well as fantasies about Tibet. Whether these fantasies are valid or not, it is a mark of Thurman's

style as a writer that he appropriates such images for his case for complete Tibetan political and economic autonomy within China.

Finally, recognizing the image of a future Tibet that he presents in, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, as a “miraculous display”, Thurman summarizes and concludes in a highly evocative way:

The miraculous display we all need to experience is the vision of Great Tibet, the Böd [Tibet] Autonomous Region, as the restored home of the *unique Tibetan people*, with their genetically high-altitude-adaptive lungs, their nitric-oxide-saturated oxygen-transporting bloodstreams, their *culturally Buddhacized sharp, rational intellects*, and their kind and friendly hearts.<sup>[cxxx]</sup>

While acknowledging his work employs a “miraculous display” of a future Tibet, it becomes unclear where the miraculous display begins and finishes. As noted elsewhere in this chapter, it would be difficult to reasonably challenge the nobility of Thurman’s aims and the validity of many of his arguments, however, his description of the Tibetan people in the passage quoted above openly continues the tradition of presenting Tibet as a land of ‘special’ people (in this case, almost genetically superhuman) who need to be restored to their home due to their uniqueness; and in the process of saving Tibet, the West will save itself too from its own environmental and socio-political mismanagement.

While Thurman does present valid scientific evidence to support the view that Tibetans as a broad ethnic group have physically adapted to the high altitude environment of the Tibetan plateau over the millennia, it is nonetheless a description that, in its entirety, invites questions. Especially challenging to reasonably accept is Thurman’s notion of an entire people with ‘culturally *Buddhacized sharp, rational intellects*’. Such an unusual description and choice of words is a mark of Thurman’s work generally and has been considered elsewhere in this thesis.<sup>[cxxxii]</sup> However, his particular claim does not appear to be supported anywhere by any evidence. Indeed, even in the traditional centres of Buddhist learning in Tibet and now in India – the great monasteries – it was only a minority, a scholastic elite, who were trained in the practices of Tibetan scholasticism and the accompanying rational methods. As Georges Dreyfus describes, in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, having spent fifteen years training in Sera monastery in Southern India, and finally becoming one of these elite Tibetan scholar monks, even within the monastery it was not the majority of monks (already a minority within the wider Tibetan population) who were trained in the refined methods of applied rationality. With far greater subtlety than Thurman, Dreyfus acknowledges the complexity of traditional Tibetan culture. Dreyfus notes that the culture is comprised of a highly developed rationality (applied initially to the interpretation of canonical views) in the case of elite scholar-monks. However, according to Dreyfus, these same scholar-monks also held, and still hold, like most of the Tibetan people, what would be considered by most Western scholars, to be superstitious beliefs. What this shows us is that it is misleading for Thurman to make such sweeping generalizations by suggesting that the entire Tibetan people are psychologically unique from the rest of humanity by virtue of having ‘culturally *Buddhacized sharp, rational intellects*’. In fact, as Lopez argues in *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, it is questionable whether playing into, and reinvigorating such Western fantasies about Tibet, its people and culture, as separate from the rest of us, is one that actually advances the Tibetan cause for freedom.

In summary, we have seen in this chapter that Thurman’s work of political advocacy for the Dalai Lama and the wider free Tibet movement distinguishes him as a unique Buddhist author. Thurman’s strong, sometimes controversial and, at times, persuasive advocacy for Tibetan Buddhism, Tibet, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people, is a thread that runs through all his work. We have seen in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters* a continuation of what has been described elsewhere, as Thurman’s ‘tantric eschatology’, which centres on his translation of the traditional Buddhist ideal of the *bodhisattva* as a type of messianic figure. In his current work, it is primarily the Dalai Lama who is presented as such. We explored the text from three perspectives to more fully understand it: firstly, showing Thurman’s motivation and intention for writing the book which helped explain its highly optimistic message;

secondly, Thurman's use of a type of tantric visualization to positively transform his readers' vision in order to reinvigorate support for Tibet's struggle for freedom and; finally, we examined Thurman's use of language and ideas in the text. This examination showed a continuation of Thurman's unconventional translations for traditional Sanskrit terms that occur in both his more scholarly, as well as populist works, that have been explored in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis. The study of Thurman's use of language and ideas also showed a continuation of Thurman's tendency to (i) draw overly generalized analogies between Buddhism and Western science; and (ii) idealize and gloss Tibetan people and culture in his advocacy for Tibet.

This being said, it is important to consider Thurman's motivation and goals. However one views his style of authorship, he does argue passionately for a just cause. Whether or not he measures up to the rigours of Western scholarship in his populist writing is questionable. Thurman himself appears unaffected by such debates and, indeed, it appears that he has his view set on higher goals – in this case the freedom of a persecuted and suffering people for whom he cares deeply. In the case of the efficacy of his mission to ease the suffering of all beings (especially the Tibetans) Thurman may well have decided that his most effective method to help others is to make this *popular* work – on a topic that has few positive aspects and may therefore otherwise gain very little popular attention – invigorating, entertaining and even inspiring. It does not appear, that anywhere in this text, Thurman intentionally misleads his audience. Rather, he occasionally presents facts in an exaggerated way, in a positive light, that may help inspire his audience to act. In this way, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, may be seen as another Buddhist *upaya* that has as its goal, the liberation of all beings from suffering and, for Thurman, constitutes his own form of engaged Buddhist practice. Having said this, we can now summarise and conclude by looking to the place of Thurman's work and its effect of raising significant questions for the key issues of authority and legitimacy, authenticity and distortion, that surface when considering the transmission of Buddhist traditions to the West and the development of Western Buddhism.

### **CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THURMAN: SKILFUL MEANS AND TANTRIC ESCHATOLOGY**

What can be missed when making a critical analysis of the work of someone as unique and unconventional as Robert Thurman is what appears to be the compassionate motivation that runs through all his work, as well as how genuine and sincere this motivation does seem to be. He passionately engages through all his work with what are serious social issues that need to be addressed. These issues for Thurman, though I'm sure there are others, centre on what he sees as the excessive militarism and materialism of America and the world and the dangers these present to all beings in an increasingly interdependent world. In addition, he holds grave concerns for the plight of the Tibetan people and as an engaged Buddhist is energetically involved in seeking a just solution for all concerned, including the Chinese. Thurman also appears to adhere closely to the teachings and advice of his friend and teacher, the Dalai Lama. Not only does he practice the Dalai Lama's advice in his life, but in his advocacy for the Tibetan cause Thurman builds a vision of a possible future Tibet by 'fleshing out' much of what the Dalai Lama himself often only hints at in his speeches on Tibet's future. Ironically, it is often through attempting to constructively elaborate on the remarks of the Dalai Lama himself that Thurman encounters his most hostile criticism. Indeed, to understand Thurman as a person and therefore better understand his work, it would help to note again the quote of the Dalai Lama which Thurman himself cites when outlining his motivation for engaging in political advocacy for the Tibetan cause. The Dalai Lama stated:

Finally, I want to tell you that self-confidence and enthusiasm are the key to a successful life and to succeed in any activity one is engaged in. We must be determined and must have an optimistic outlook; then even if we fail, we will have no regrets. On the other hand, lack of determination and effort will cause double regret. Firstly because the objects were not realized, and secondly because you feel guilty and regret at not having made full effort in the realization of the objectives. [\[cxxxii\]](#)

In reviewing Thurman's work what is ever-apparent is precisely such a perpetual and effusive 'self-confidence, enthusiasm and optimistic' outlook. In this way, Thurman follows his teacher's advice to the letter and this manner may, in conjunction with some of his more outlandish, unconventional views and the manner in which he expresses them cause consternation for some. This may therefore be a source of some of the criticism he attracts. However, there are also scholarly issues involved and as we have seen in the thesis and in the work of others, Thurman has misrepresented certain issues. In this summary and conclusion we are seeking to finalise our analysis of Thurman as a Buddhist scholar and author and to interpret the impact of his unique contribution to Buddhist studies and the promulgation of Tibetan Buddhism to America and the West. We will do this by looking at the role of three factors that have emerged in this thesis. They are 1. The nature of isogesis; 2. Tantric eschatology; and 3. The question of skilful means (*upāya*) in regard to Thurman's work. Through these three issues or lenses we will be better able to determine the role of Thurman in relation to the broader issues of authority and legitimacy, authenticity and distortion, that surface in considering the transmission of Buddhist traditions to the West and the development of Western Buddhism. Before this, however, we will briefly summarise Thurman's position in Buddhist studies and Buddhist authorship.

As noted in the introduction and shown through the subsequent chapters, Thurman's work in its entirety falls into at least all four of the main categories we have chosen to help categorise his work. Firstly, as shown in Chapter 1, he has participated in the lineage of positivist Buddhist studies begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through his translation and studies of ancient Tibetan and Indian texts such as Tsong kha pa's *Essence of True Eloquence (Legs bShad sNying po)* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sutra*. In *Essence*, through his use of a Wittgensteinian lens to interpret Tsong kha pa, Thurman has also showed his role as a comparative philosopher. Secondly, from our analysis of Roger Jackson and John Makransky's *Buddhist Theology*, along with the views of its contributing authors including José Ignacio Cabezón, we were able to see that Thurman works as a Buddhist theorist or Buddhist Theologian. As a professing Buddhist and Western academic, Thurman does stand normatively within the Buddhist tradition and combines this stance with some degree of academic rigour in applying his Buddhist views to engage prescriptively with wider social issues. In fact, in many ways Thurman has been a trailblazer in the field of Buddhist Theology, helping to create it, and this is where he has been described by Roger Jackson as engaging in 'tantric eschatology' – the term I have borrowed to identify trends evident in a wide range of Thurman's body of work.

Thirdly, through our analysis of Georges Dreyfus' autobiographical account of Tibetan scholasticism in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping* we were able to see that Thurman's acceptance shown through all his work of a "universe of religious meaning" circumscribed by authoritative canonical (in this case Buddhist) texts, and his time as an ordained scholar-monk does qualify him as a traditional Buddhist scholastic. This view is supported by his (sometimes uncritical) acceptance of the authority of Tibetan (Gelukpa) canonical texts as evidenced in the nature of his study and translation of Tsong kha pa's *Essence* explored in Chapter 1. However, it has also been shown that while accepting the authority of tradition, Thurman's work, especially his popular work, is far from a traditional scholastic approach.

Fourthly, perhaps Thurman's major contribution and the source of most of the criticism he attracts is his work as a populariser of Buddhism explored in Chapters 2 and 3. His work in this area has attracted labels of his being a "Dharma-thumping evangelist" who presents an "Anything goes" style of Buddhism. It is also the area where Thurman's work can be described as a type of 'tantric eschatology' in that it employs an eclectic 'tantric' use of symbols, values, practices and visualisations in unconventional ways in order to transform individual perception. He combines this with a form of eschatological world-view which, with its focus on the perils of materialism, militarism and consumerism, draws attention to the ultimate destiny of humankind, the universal aspiration of all beings toward Buddhahood and the role of 'messianic' *bodhisattvas* engaged in bringing this about.

This mode of 'tantric eschatology' is also where Thurman has attracted criticism for idealizing Tibet and glossing over historical facts as well as possibly overemphasizing Buddhist similarities to Western

science and presenting Tibetan Buddhist spiritual culture as the answer to our Western ills. In this way, it is in these popular works that Thurman can be seen to be continuing in the lineage of the European Romantics who also idealized the Eastern 'Other' in order to cure perceived Western ills as did some Enlightenment thinkers before them. And echoes of the American Transcendentalists with their appropriation of American ideals and Eastern metaphysics to effect social change in America also arise in Thurman's popular works, especially in *Inner Revolution*. While the counter-cultural 1950's Beats and 1960's 'revolutionaries', many of whom found *gurus* in the East, can also be clearly seen in Thurman's life and work. Finally, as can also be seen as a form of popular Buddhist literature, is Thurman's 'tantric eschatology', extended to engage in the work of political activism or advocacy for the Tibetan cause as explored in Chapter 3.

Only briefly alluded to has been Thurman's work as Dharma teacher which is evidenced in his *Jewel Tree of Tibet* referred to in Chapter 3. Due to the constraints of space this role has not been fully explored in this thesis but it is another category in which some of Thurman's work falls. In summary, it is at the intersection of academic Buddhist studies and popular Buddhist literature that Thurman has made the biggest contribution and impact.

I will conclude by drawing on the three issues that will help us better understand Thurman's unique contribution to Buddhist studies and how to account for the charges and evidence of idealization or misrepresentation in his work. Firstly, to isogesis. In describing the process of isogesis, Andrew Tuck writes that it "is a commonplace of contemporary scholarship that any theory or interpretation necessarily reflects the assumptions of its author and its readers."<sup>[cxxxiii]</sup> Tuck goes on to say that though in this sense isogetical, all readings whether positive or negative, are always productive. This notion was specifically addressed in Chapter 1 of this thesis in regard to Thurman's use of a Wittgensteinian lens to interpret Nāgārjuna through Tsong kha pa in *Essence* where it was argued Thurman also sought to reach the widest possible *academic* audience. However an isogetical interpretation of Thurman's work more broadly identifies significant assumptions Thurman holds and includes his adherence to the authority and insights of the Buddhadharmā and specifically Tibetan Vajrayāna practices as well as the central importance of the role of the *bodhisattva* in the Mahāyāna. All Thurman's work reflects these assumptions. From the perspective of Buddhist Theology, the question is not whether this is right or wrong, but whether, as a Buddhist scholar, he applies these views uncritically.

The second issue is that of 'tantric eschatology' which carries into the third issue of questions of validity and authority in viewing Thurman's work as simply a skilful means (*upāya*) of propagating the Buddhadharmā. What we have established through our analysis of Thurman's work is that the title of 'tantric eschatology' is apt. This is evidenced not only in Thurman's popular works as noted in Chapters 2 and 3 and again just above, but also in Thurman's early scholarly work and various other formal and informal communications. Thurman's worldview is founded on an oft repeated insistence that our current direction as a world community, heavily influenced by his own country's culture and political decisions, is at this moment flawed and, if unchecked, ultimately doomed. To avoid this catastrophic outcome, Thurman engages his Buddhist beliefs in order to transform community perception and action on a number of socio-political issues. Part of his view is that we (predominantly America and the West) should engage the 'technologies' of Tibetan Buddhism and hopefully aspire toward the high level of spiritual development that, according to Thurman, existed in pre-invasion Tibet in order to ward off what he sees as inevitable global calamity. This individual transformation he advocates centres on the Mahāyānic ideal of the *bodhisattva* who seeks enlightenment, *via* tantric practices, in order to save all sentient beings and in this sense his mission is one of 'tantric eschatology'. However Thurman is not a traditional Buddhist teacher. If he were, then these views would not be so controversial. Instead, he has deliberately chosen an academic platform to effect the change he sees as desperately needed in the world and this is where some conflict seems to arise. Thurman uses his role as academic to legitimize his various causes. However in spreading his causes he occasionally gives up his claims to rigorous unbiased scholarship, an important foundation for his authority. This was shown in his choice of pejorative terms for translation in his more scholarly work, as discussed in Chapter 1, as well as his

vast generalisations, glossing of facts and occasional misrepresentations in popular works shown in Chapters 2 and 3.

So, what do we make of these distortions coming from an otherwise skilful scholar and generally well-respected teacher? Throughout this thesis the question has been raised as to whether, as an accomplished Buddhist practitioner and scholar and with the ongoing significant moral support of the Dalai Lama, Thurman's distortions can be considered as a traditional Buddhist *upāya* which has been deliberately employed in the higher aim of liberating sentient beings from the suffering of *saṃsāra*. Or, on the other hand, are these distortions just signs of poor scholarship? To help answer this question we can conclude by looking to the traditional definition of *upāya* or "skilful means" which was most famously employed by the Buddha, and various *bodhisattvas* to liberate beings.

The traditional view is that an action, thought or word is considered an *upāya* if either (i) the teacher has a high degree of wisdom and level of attainment; or, (ii) the act is effective in achieving its goal of relieving suffering. If the person is considered wise, then all his or her actions can be considered as *upāya* even if we do not immediately understand those actions. The Dalai Lama would be considered by most Tibetans and many non-Tibetans to be the ideal example of such a figure. Conversely, the criterion of an action needing to be effective in order to be recognized as an *upāya* also means that if a person carries out such an effective action then they would then be considered to have fulfilled the criterion of high-level attainment. In the case of Thurman, the question arises as to whether or not he has the authority or level of wisdom in a traditional sense for his distortions to be considered *upāya*. Alternately, Thurman's work raises significant questions for the application of *upāya*: how far can *upāya* be stretched beyond a traditional authority structure without collapsing into a meaningless and individualistic relativism? This danger is well expressed by José Ignacio Cabezón who warns:

Let me dispel the notion that the doctrine of *upāya* represents a Buddhist brand of relativism. First, it must be remembered that the doctrine of skilful means is essentially a doctrine related to soteriology and not (at least directly) to questions of truth. It does not claim that different doctrines are unconditionally true for different individuals, but that different doctrines are differently efficacious for different individuals with different mental predispositions. Even though all doctrine is considered efficacious, there are degrees of efficacy.<sup>[cxxxiv]</sup>

Attempts to legitimize Thurman's work by reference to *upāya* may show him to, at times, succumb, to just such a "Buddhist brand of relativism".

But, on the other hand, if his work, which includes certain historical distortions, is effective in its stated goal of mobilising public support for the freedom of the Tibetan people, and were it to then led to the actual liberation of the Tibetans from their current state of oppression and suffering, then perhaps those distortions could be considered *upāya*. If this were the case then Thurman's chosen direction of using the Western academy as a base from which to generate intellectual credentials to reach into the public domain and generate popular support for a just political goal or positive social change would also be considered an *upāya*. And finally, if Thurman's promotion of his own position as an ex-monk, 'nearly life-long Buddhist' and long time friend of the Dalai Lama contributed to the cessation of suffering of the beings who were the object of his compassion, then perhaps those actions, seen as unusual and academically suspect by some of us, may well just be seen as an act of *upāya*.

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## ENDNOTES

[i] "Times 25 Most Influential Americans", *Time Magazine*, April 21, 1997.

[ii] Rodger Kamenetz, "Robert Thurman Doesn't Look Buddhist", in *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 1996 at <http://partners.nytimes.com/books/98/07/12/specials/thurman-profile.html> Retrieved 10th November, 2009.

[iii] Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (1998). Lopez's most extensive critique of Thurman's depiction of Tibetan Buddhism as science in *Prisoners of Shangri-la* is in Chapter 2, "The Book", in which Lopez critiques Thurman's (and others') representation of "The Tibetan Book of the Dead". Lopez especially criticizes Thurman's representation of the death-rebirth process described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as "scientific fact" (p. 83) as well as his translation of Buddhist Sanskrit terms into modern Western scientific terminology (p. 81).

[iv] *Ibid.*, p. 81, pp. 147-149. Lopez's critique of Thurman's representation of Tibet as a spiritual civilization is part of Lopez's wider argument that forms the central thesis of *Prisoners of Shangri-la*. That is, Tibet is being unrealistically represented to the West – romanticized, mythologized and idealized - and that this creates a danger for the cause of Tibetans. (p. 11)

[v] An example of this can be seen in his website [www.bobthurman.com](http://www.bobthurman.com). This aspect of Thurman's work has also been satirized in Nadir Balan's satirical comic-strip, "The Buddhaverse of Bob Thurman" at <http://www.enlightennext.org/magazine/j22/thurman.asp> accessed on 27th November, 2009.

[vi] Description posted by nickyskye at 9:20 AM on April 10" at <http://www.metafilter.com/80712/Bob-Thurman-Tibetan-Monk> Retrieved 28th November, 2009.

[vii] The following biographical summary is based especially on Rick Fields *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, pp. 291-294 and Harry Oldmeadow, *Journey's East*, pp. 287ff.

[viii] See Rick Fields (1981) *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, Shambala: Boulder, pp. 291-294

[ix] For an informative account of Buddhism's arrival in America see Fields, R. (1992). *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*. Boston, Mass., Shambhala Publications. See also Charles Prebish, *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (1998) and *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (2002).

[x] Michael Valpy, "Bob Thurman's Cool Revolution" in *Shambala Sun* (Online) 15th November, 2009 [http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2971&Itemid=244](http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2971&Itemid=244)

[xi] See J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* for this description of the American transcendentalist movement, pp. 84-87

[xii] A. L. Willson (1964) quoted in J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 55

[xiii] J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 60. My italics.

[xiv] Lydia Aran, (Jan, 2009) in “Inventing Tibet”, for example, published in *Commentary*, (online) charges Thurman with misrepresenting the role and character of the Great 5th Dalai Lama by presenting him as a peace-loving and peace-giving leader of Tibet and apparently overlooking alleged perpetrations of violence by the Great 5th against his own people. Located at <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/inventing-tibet-14064> Retrieved 28th November, 2009. Thurman countered this type of criticism generally in an interview with Joshua Glenn who asked him if he was guilty of “Shangri-La-izing” Tibet. Thurman replied: “... But to answer my critics who accuse me of trying to pretend that every Tibetan was an enlightened yogi, and they never even wiped their butts, and they didn’t have robbers and bandits and ignorant people, and they weren’t cruel ever — like it’s all just some sort of fantasy of mine, well, that isn’t at all the case. My thesis is a sociological one that has to do with mainstream social trends. The fact that a great majority of a country’s single males are monks rather than soldiers is a major social difference. Now, many of those monks might be nasty, they might punch people, some of them might pick your pockets, some of them might be ignorant. They might eat yak meat; they’re not out there petting the yaks. So I am in no way Shangri-La-izing Tibet when I try to develop a non-Orientalist way of appraising and appreciating certain social achievements of Tibet, which really tried to create a fully Buddhist society.” From “The Nitty Gritty of Nirvana” interview with Robert Thurman (1996) published online by *Hilobrow* at <http://hilobrow.com/2009/07/23/the-nitty-gritty-of-nirvana/> Retrieved 29th November, 2009.

[xv] Oldmeadow, Harry (2004) *Journeys East: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Encounters with Eastern religious Traditions*, Indiana: World Wisdom Inc., p. 245. Note, the “Enlightenment Project” mentioned here obviously refers to the European Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

[xvi] Tonkinson, C., (ed), *Big Sky Mind*, p. viii quoted by Harry Oldmeadow in *Journeys East*, p. 245

[xvii] In an interview in 1996, Thurman was asked why he renounced his Buddhist monk robes only four years after ordination. In his answer he describes his view of the Western academy as a secular monastery and why he followed Geshé Wangyal’s advice to enter it professionally: “After being a novice and then a monk for four years, I decided to follow the bodhisattva path (although I do not consider myself a bodhisattva), which is to seek enlightenment for the sake of others, to serve others. But being a Buddhist monk was not a suitable position, at that time, from which to command people’s respect, to engage them intellectually, or teach them, because everyone thought that an American Buddhist monk was somehow defective. There wasn’t then, and still isn’t, a real social understanding of the place of a monk in Western society. The academy is the monastery, if you will, of modern secular society, so my quitting being a monk and returning to become a professor was just a natural adaptation to America’s social reality.” Original interview with Robert Thurman by Joshua Glenn (1996) in the magazine *Utne Reader*. Republished online under the title *The Nitty Gritty of Nirvana*, 27th September, 2009 at <http://hilobrow.com/2009/07/23/the-nitty-gritty-of-nirvana/> Retrieved 28th November, 2009.

[xviii] For an excellent record of the History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America see de Jong, J. W. (1987) 2nd ed. *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, New Delhi: Mehra Offset Press.

[xix] Makransky, John, “Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology: Its Emergence and Rationale” in *Buddhist Theology*, p. 14

[xx] See J.W. de Jong (1987) *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*

[xxi] See JJ Clarke (1997) *Oriental Enlightenment*, p. 95ff

[xxii] See Harry Oldmeadow (2004) *Journeys East*, p. 245

[xxiii] See Roger Jackson in *Buddhist Theology*, pp. 1-14

[xxiv] Roger Corless, "Hermeneutics and Dharmology: Finding and American Buddhist Voice" in *Buddhist Theology* (2000), p. 100.

[xxv] See Lopez, D. S. (1995). *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press.

[xxvi] Roger Jackson, *Buddhist Theology*, p. 12

[xxvii] *Ibid.*, p. 12

[xxviii] José Ignacio Cabezón uses the analogy of a triangle whose three points represent various disciplines that have created a vacuum in academic discourse in the academy that "yearns as much as a vacuum in space" to be filled by the academic discipline of Buddhist theology. The three disciplines that have created this vacuum are: 1. The positivism of the discipline of Buddhist studies. 2. "the often anachronistic, expository mode of traditional scholarship at another" and 3. "the commodified discourse of much of the populist literature at the third." *Buddhist Theology*, "Theology in the Academy", p. 27

[xxix] *Buddhist Theology*, Editors' Introduction, p. 19. An elaboration of this aim that I think is worth including here is the same editors highlighting that "one purpose" of their volume "is to inspire further exploration of ways that the pressing needs of Western culture and Buddhist tradition for critical reflection may be met through new forms of interchange, new cooperative projects, and new institutional settings East and West."

[xxx] Jackson points out that these writers include D.T. Suzuki, Thurman, Gross and later "Anne Klein in feminist thought, Damien Keown in ethics, Lambert Schmithausen in environmental matters, José Cabezón in sexuality, Sallie King in social activism, Roderick Bucknell and B. Alan Wallace in meditational theory, and, in ontology, epistemology and comparative philosophy, Stephen Heine, Jeffrey Hopkins, C. W. Huntington, Jr., Richard Hayes, and many others." See *Buddhist Theology*, p. 12

[xxxi] An important issue concerning the formation of a discipline of "Buddhist Theology" within the Western academy is involved in the actual term 'Buddhist Theology'. This issue is looked at in some detail by Jackson in his editors introduction, "Buddhist Theology: Its Historical Context" in *Buddhist Theology* pp. 2-13. This introduction includes a useful description of what Buddhist Theology would involve as well as some of the points of dispute mentioned. To summarise: The term "Buddhist Theology" could encounter the obvious charge of being an oxymoron as Buddhism does not acknowledge a creator God in the biblical or Mosaic sense that has come to be the focus of "theology" or "God-discourse". While the contributing authors are in general agreement that although such a charge could be seen as legitimate, there are also significant reasons why "Buddhist theology" should be adopted as the title for their field. Some of the reasons include the use of David Tracy's broad definition of theology as intellectual reflection on a religious tradition's (sacred) notion of ultimate reality. According to this broader definition Buddhism has a rich tradition in "theology". Jackson goes on to argue that Buddhism cannot be fairly referred to as philosophy in the sense of completely open unfettered inquiry as Buddhism has deep "religious presuppositions and purposes" even when these have on the surface been eschewed. He goes on to say, however, that Buddhism can be seen as philosophical in the Western academic sense if it is accepted that both traditions hold assumptions that place them in tension with the claims of another tradition. In this sense, Jackson claims theology to be accepting of open inquiry as it "thrives at the crossroads where the claims of tradition and the claims of reason intersect." (p. 2) Another support Jackson makes for the term "theology" is that even if it were argued that Buddhism's use of reason was claimed as secondary to the Buddhist goal and even at times an impediment to the meditational experience of the ultimate, this would not be enough to sideline the practice of theology in Buddhism. Indeed Jackson points out, it may be common to all religious traditions that reason may be seen to potentially impede direct experience of the ultimate but this does not silence the tradition of rational discourse on that ultimate within religious traditions. Finally, Jackson addresses the argument that "theology" is an imported term and therefore not relevant

to Buddhism. He counters this view by pointing out that Buddhism has a tradition of importing terms and evolving and that due to the wide currency given to the term “theology”, at the very least, its inclusion within Buddhism would provide a significant tool for engaging in fruitful discourse with other religious traditions.

[xxxii] Jackson points out that while the overwhelming majority of Buddhist scholastic activity within the tradition has been carried out by celibate male monks following the example of Śakyamuni, there have been important exceptions. He mentions the role of women with the Indian nuns who created the *Therīgāthā* and the “great Tibetan tantric systematizer Ma gcig lab sgron”. As examples of important lay practitioners, Jackson notes the work of the Tibetan poet and yogi Mi la ras pa and the Japanese Pure Land reformer Shinran. *Buddhist Theology*, pp. 4, 5.

[xxxiii] Georges B. J. Dreyfus (2003) *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 304, 305

[xxxiv] *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11

[xxxv] *Ibid.*, p. 11

[xxxvi] *Ibid.*, p. 268

[xxxvii] *Ibid.*, p. 270

[xxxviii] loc. cit.

[xxxix] Dreyfus, p. 305 makes reference to Thomas Kuhn’s work to highlight the difference between modern scientific rationality and traditional scholasticism, however I have extended the reference to highlight the relationship between Kuhn’s description of scientific paradigms and positivist Buddhist studies.

[xl] Dreyfus, p. 305 points out the notion of “the path” is central to the entire Buddhist endeavour and this guides Buddhist scholastic practices as well.

[xli] Dreyfus, p. 12

[xlii] Thurman, R. A. F. (1990). *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahayana Scripture*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.

[xliii] R. A. F. Thurman (1991) *The Central Philosophy of Tibet: A Study and Translation of Jey Tsong Khapa’s Essence of True Eloquence*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

[xliv] Dreyfus, p. 304

[xlv] Roger-Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness*, p. 78

[xlvi] Eugene Burnouf, quoted by Roger-Pol Droit in *The Cult of Nothingness*, p. 78

[xlvii] Frederic Ozanam, *Essai sur le bouddhisme*, p. 226, quoted by Droit in *Cult of Nothingness*, p. 79. Frederic Ozanam 1813-1853 was a lay French Catholic preacher and founder of Saint Vincent de Paul.

[xlviii] See Donald S. Lopez Jr, “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet” in Donald S. Lopez Jr. ed. *Curators of the Buddha*.

[xlix] Robert Thurman, *Essence*, p. xiii. Thurman’s use of the term relativism is somewhat misleading and should be possibly relativity. His use of the famous snake-analogy cf *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* 24.11: *vināśayati durdṛṣṭā śūnyatā mandamedhasam |sarpo yathā durgrhīto vidyā vā duṣprasādhitā ||*

[l] *Essence*, p. xiii. Thurman’s italics.

[\[ii\]](#) *Essence*, p. xiii

[\[iii\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 105

[\[iiii\]](#) Following Thurman I will use ‘Bhavya’ not ‘Bhāviveka’.

[\[iv\]](#) See pages 103 and 104 of *Essence of True Eloquence* for Thurman’s translation of Tsong kha pa’s position regarding Bhāviveka.

[\[v\]](#) For Thurman’s invocations and dedications to Mañjuśrī see pages xiii and 3.

[\[vi\]](#) Thurman is partisan, not because he is following Prasāngika over Svatantrika (many Tibetan schools, for example the Nyingmas, do this and there is Indian precedent). The issue is that the criteria Thurman uses to distinguish Svatantrika and Prasāngika uncritically is Tsong kha pa’s (ie, the idea the Svatantrika hold *svabhāva* conventionally).

[\[vii\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 21

[\[viii\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 90. Also interesting to note here is Thurman’s spelling of Mañjuśrī. Spelling the name with an ‘sh’ instead of the accented ‘ś’ more common to trained Buddhologists shows that Thurman sees his audience as wider than just trained Buddhologists.

[\[ix\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[\[x\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 33

[\[xi\]](#) *Ibid.*, My italics.

[\[xii\]](#) *Ibid.*

[\[xiii\]](#) For a detailed examination of philosophy as spiritual exercise see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Oxford, New York: Blackwell, 1995 and Mathew T. Kapstein, *Reason’s Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

[\[xiv\]](#) *Essence* p. xiii

[\[xv\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. xvii

[\[xvi\]](#) José Ignacio Cabezon (2000) “Truth in Buddhist Theology” in Roger Jackson and John Makransky (eds) *Buddhist Theology*, p. 149

[\[xvii\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 136

[\[xviii\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 149

[\[xix\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 30

[\[xx\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 28

[\[xxi\]](#) Georges Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*, 2003, see Introduction especially page 4.

[\[xxii\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 4. My italics here is to illustrate Dreyfus’s belief that Tibetan Buddhism is strong enough to withstand direct critical analysis and does not therefore require advocacy of the type that Thurman presents in popular and more scholarly work.

[\[xxiii\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 12

[\[xxiv\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 102 and pp. 323-324

[lxxv] In many of the introductions of his popular texts Thurman will give a description of Buddhism in scientific terms and present it as a system of sciences – both inner and outer. See, for example, 1. Thurman, R. A. F. (2008) Chapter 1: “Who is the Dalai Lama” in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters: His Act of Truth as the Solution for China, Tibet, and the World*. New York: Hillsboro, Or., Atria Books; Beyond Words Pub; 2. Karma glin, pa., Padma Sambhava, R. A. F. Thurman (trans.) (1994). *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Book of Natural Liberation through Understanding in the Between*. New York, Bantam Books and themes of Buddhist practice as a system of evolutionary development in Thurman, R. A. F. (1998). *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*. New York, Riverhead Books as well as Buddhism as science in Thurman, R. A. F. and m. Bstan pa'i ŋi (2005) *The Jewel Tree of Tibet: The Enlightenment Engine of Tibetan Buddhism*. New York, N.Y., Free Press, pp. 188, 196-198

[lxxvi] See Dreyfus (2003), p. 238 (Tibetan versus Indian views of Nāgārjuna), p. 25 (Tibetan organization of non-organized Indian texts), pp. 100-110, pp. 282-283 (Distinction between Tsong kha pa's tradition and Indian Madhyamaka as well as reference to the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction).

[lxxvii] *Ibid.*, p. 283

[lxxviii] *Ibid.*, p. 283

[lxxix] Andrew P. Tuck (1990) *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. v

[lxxx] *Ibid.*, p. 77

[lxxxi] See Thurman's use of American ideals to explain and popularize Buddhism in his *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* examined in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

[lxxxii] Robert A. F. Thurman, “Meditation and Education: Buddhist India, Tibet and Modern America” from *The Contemplative Mind in Society – Meeting of the Working Group, September 29 –October 2, 1994*, Pocantico, New York. Sponsored by The Nathan Cummings Foundation and Fetzer Institute, p. 4

[lxxxiii] *Ibid.*, p. 2

[lxxxiv] *Ibid.*, p. 8

[lxxxv] *Ibid.*, p. 7. Thurman's support of for the canonization of secularism is tempered because although he is aware of the benefits the natural and human sciences have brought to the university and society he believes that students have, overall, become mere tools in the prevailing orthodoxy of materialism and production promoted by the dominance of the hard sciences. To correct the in-balance he sees, he argues that a liberal academic education should be truly liberating in the soteriological sense and he thereby advocates and welcomes a student's full access to all the wisdom/religious/philosophical traditions of the world without the dominance of any of those traditions. This is the secularism he supports – the true definition of secularism in which all voices are heard equally, not just the non-religious.

[lxxxvi] *Ibid.*, p. 8

[lxxxvii] Robert A. F. Thurman, “Meditation and Education: Buddhist India, Tibet and Modern America” from *The Contemplative Mind in Society*, p. 4

[lxxxviii] Lopez, *Prisoners*, p. 47

[lxxxix] Georges Dreyfus, “Are We Prisoners of Shangrila? Orientalism, Nationalism and the Study of Tibet”. In this article Dreyfus doesn't refer to Thurman in this context but to the Dalai Lama (p. 19) who has appealed to the (Western) notions of democracy and human rights for the Tibetan cause. I have

drawn the connection between what the Dalai Lama has done and Thurman's use of scientific language to similarly demystify Tibet and bring her closer to the West.

[xc] HH Dalai Lama in Foreword to *Inner Revolution*, p. xiv

[xci] *Ibid.*, p. 98

[xcii] In *Journeys East: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*, Harry Oldmeadow points out that there is a range of thinkers who challenge not the acknowledged benefits of science, but the effects of unbridled "scientism" as a materialist ideology and practice. He writes, "Social commentators have become more alert to the dangers of a totalitarian materialism, an instrumentalist rationality and its attendant technology. We see that rationality has been allowed to become man's definition instead of his tool. We sense that the disfigurement of the environment mirrors our internal state, that the ecological crisis is, at root, a spiritual crisis which no amount of science and technology can, of itself, remedy. We are awakening to the consequences of a science which answers to nothing to itself. In an era of nuclear threat, genetic engineering and unparalleled environmental vandalism Mary Shelly's nightmare vision in *Frankenstein* becomes a paradigm for our times. Commentators like Rene Guenon, Theodore Roszak, E.F. Schumacher, and Mircea Eliade awaken us to the provincialism of modern science and to the dangers of that Single Vision so fiercely denounced by William Blake." p.356. Such a description supports Thurman's view of the dangers of excessive materialism and militarism he sees in the U.S. Does this excess constitute a 'burning house' of the Buddhist kind that Thurman sees himself as helping his audience escape by developing a spiritual response?

[xciii] *Inner Revolution*, p. 86

[xciv] *Ibid.*, p. 86

[xcv] *Ibid.*, p. 87

[xcvi] The idea of manifest destiny, that European Americans as a group were *divinely* destined to control the North American land mass and more recently to promote and protect democracy globally, could be being re-presented as could easily be applied to the characteristically American individual ideal to attain a high degree of social or political success

[xcvii] *Ibid.*, p. 104

[xcviii] For an extensive examination of the rise of the renunciate in ancient India see Ramila Thapar, Geoffrey Samuel and Greg Bailey.

[xcix] *Ibid.*, p. 95

[c] Tenzin Gyatso, The 14th Dalai Lama, quoted in an interview with Percy Fernandez, "I am a Simple Buddhist Monk: Dalai Lama", in *The Times of India*, 6th of July, 2006, found at:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/india/i-am-a-simple-Buddhist-Monk-Dalai-Lama/a%rticleshow/1711921.cms>

[ci] Powers, J. (2007). *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca, N.Y., Snow Lion Publications.

[cii] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eschatology>

[ciii] Thurman, *Inner Revolution*, p. 20

[civ] *Ibid.*, p. 138

[cv] *Ibid.*, p. 138

[cvi] Thurman follows The Dalai Lama the Dalai Lama in arguing for full domestic autonomy for Tibet

within the PRC - allowing the PRC to regulate foreign relations and international defence of Tibet - rather than full Tibetan independence from the PRC, which some Tibetans argue for. Full details of the position Thurman argues for is set out in his work, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, which we are considering in this chapter.

[cvii] Thurman, R. A. F. (2008). *Why the Dalai Lama matters: his act of truth as the solution for China, Tibet, and the world*. New York, Hillsboro, Or., Atria Books; Beyond Words Pub.

[cviii] Thurman, R. A. F. and m. Bstan pa'i ñi (2005). *The Jewel Tree of Tibet: the Enlightenment Engine of Tibetan Buddhism*. New York, N.Y., Free Press.

[cix] *Ibid.*, p. 3. My italics. Thurman also equates bodhisattva with a type of messiah in another of his popular works, *Inner Revolution: Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*, which was examined in Chapter 2.

[cx] The Dalai Lama (1996) "Hope for Tibet's Environment", speech given at *The Endangered Tibet Conference* in Sydney, Australia (September 28th 1996) quoted by Thurman in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, p. 204

[cxi] Thurman, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, p. 204

[cxii] In *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, Thurman (p. x) clearly acknowledges that his view for Tibet's future, set out in the text, is simply a more detailed elaboration of the Dalai Lama's view for Tibet as presented by The Dalai Lama in speeches and other works quoted by Thurman. However, while not questioning Thurman's use of quotations, his referencing of the Dalai Lama's quoted works and speeches, in this text, is incomplete.

[cxiii] *Ibid.*, p. 156

[cxiv] *Ibid.*, p. 161

[cxv] Thurman's critique of the West as excessively militaristic and materialistic is a theme that runs through virtually all his work.

[cxvi] For criticisms of Thurman on this issue of idealizing or glossing Tibet see, among others, Lopez, D. S. (1998) Chapter 2: "The Book" in *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press and Hebrew Buddhist scholar, Lydia Aran, (Jan, 2009) in "Inventing Tibet" published in *Commentary*, (online) at: <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/inventing-tibet-14064> Retrieved 28th November, 2009.

[cxvii] *Ibid.*, p. ix

[cxviii] *Ibid.*, p. xi

[cxix] Plato and H. D. P. Lee (2003). *The Republic*. London; New York, Penguin Books. See in particular Plato's description of the philosopher ruler in Part VII: "The Philosopher Ruler"

[cxx] Thurman, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters.*, p. xiv

[cxxi] *Ibid.*, p. 39

[cxxii] *Ibid.*, p. 39

[cxxiii] Several Buddhist scholars examine the validity of this interesting ongoing connection that has been drawn between Buddhism and Western science since at least the time of 19th century Western translations of ethnic Buddhist texts such scholars as T. W. Rhys Davids. For more on this fascinating topic see Lopez, D. S. (2008). *Buddhism & Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Chicago, University of

Chicago Press.

[cxxxiv] Thurman, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, p. 59. My italics.

[cxxxv] For an excellent analysis of the Tibetan scholastic tradition and traditional Tibetan Buddhist world-view as well as a strong argument against making too strong analogies between Buddhism and Western science, see Dreyfus, G. B. J. (2003). *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*. Berkeley, Calif, University of California Press.

[cxxxvi] See Schell, O. (2000). *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-la from the Himalayas to Hollywood* New York, Metropolitan Books and French, P. (2004). *Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land* London, Harper Perennial.

[cxxxvii] Critiques made specifically against Thurman in this regard, which questions the benefit of such idealized images of Tibet to the actual Tibetans and their cause for freedom, can be found in Lopez, D. S. (1998). *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. For a broader discussion and critique of the historical practice of 'Orientalism' see Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York, Vintage Books, Schwab, R. (1984). *The Oriental renaissance: Europe's rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*. New York, Columbia University Press and Clarke, J. J. (1997). *Oriental enlightenment: the encounter between Asian and Western thought*. London; New York, Routledge.

[cxxxviii] Thurman, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, p. 180. My italics.

[cxxxix] *Ibid.*, p. 218. My italics.

[cxxx] *Ibid.*, p. 221. My italics.

[cxxxxi] See Chapter 2 of this thesis for an examination of criticisms made against Thurman's popular works for his translation (for example) of yogi to unusual terms such as 'psychonauts' and Chapter 1 and his more scholarly work where, it is argued (for example), his translation of *Svatantrika* to 'Dogmaticist' is pejorative.

[cxxxii] The Dalai Lama (1996) "Hope for Tibet's Environment", speech given at *The Endangered Tibet Conference* in Sydney, Australia (September 28<sup>th</sup> 1996) quoted by Thurman in *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*, p. 204

[cxxxiii] Andrew P. Tuck (1990) *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. v

[cxxxiv] José Ignacio Cabezón, 'Truth in Buddhist Theology' in *Buddhist Theology* (2000), p140.