

LiveWell Interview, Bob Thurman

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Bob Thurman

B Bob Thurman 00:00

The purpose of human life is endless education, not just those years of school, but the whole of the whole of life is a school. And what you're learning is generosity, empathy and ethicality tolerance and non non anger and creativity.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:23

Hi, everybody, welcome back to live well podcast. I'm your host Dr. Wendy Slusser Associate Vice Provost of the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative center. Bob Thurman is a leading expert in Tibetan Buddhism. He's a writer, student and teacher of Buddhism. But I'd say his teachings are not about teaching you to be a better Buddhist, but instead a better human being. He taught at Harvard University as a grad student than 15 years at Amherst, followed by 31 years at Columbia University. He's the active president of the Tibet House and of the American Institute of Buddhist studies. Bob's recent book called wisdom is bliss for friendly fun facts that can change your life served as a guide for our conversation today, we explore what educational ism or super education looks like. And Bob's revolutionising past lives. And so, so much more. So in all of his life, giving wisdom and joy.

B Bob Thurman 01:25

Really fun, I was so delighted to meet you Wendy, when we came there from Mexico. I was I thought it was so auspicious that you are the you are the kindness manager, really, by being the provost there at UCLA, in that beautiful campus. And, by the way, where is this backup garden you're in? It's really quite beautiful.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 01:48

Yeah, it's a botanical garden. Well, I placed it behind me just in honor of our conversation today, given the fact that you're going to be talking about your new book called wisdom is bliss,

four friendly facts that can change your life. So there are some people like you, and as you know, Peter Sellers, who are our hope, and as you know, a few weeks ago, I interviewed him, and we talked at length about how art is a way to move through obstacles. And he even talked about the Buddha's five eyes or five ways of seeing and when you discuss the seventh branch of the eightfold path, you explored art and creativity and you write our life is our art is the boundless love that is the wheel of the bliss, reality, and that it overflows irresistibly and unfolds others by kindling inner bliss and beauty. So you walk me through this and explain how this does this could help us work through obstacles.

B

Bob Thurman 02:47

That's why I love Peter Sellers. And strangely, he loves me, I don't know why he did. He will have someone dancing in a film. And while somebody else reads a footnote in that translation, a book of mine of the holy teacher, click here until we reveal footnote about the five eyes. And while somebody's doing a dance in the video, he's fabulous. I love that guy. Or there's a there's another mutual friend of mine and Pierre is a man who wrote a book called transcendent called Stuart, right. And he has a great great makes a great argument in that book that the artists, the poets, the painters, the Picasso's the Rambo's, the Shelley, that the poets, not to mention all the other languages. Of course, I have been teaching what I like about Buddhism, without even ever heard of Buddhism as like a religion ism as an ism as a religion, but as a way of connecting to reality, and experiencing it beyond just sort of having it fit into your preconceived ideas. And the artists have been doing that for decades and centuries. So they're artists are also what I'm meaning is what we think of is coming like Buddhism, like a world religion or something. The guy who was like the head guy, although they don't have hierarchy, so he's not like a pope. But the Dalai Lama, for example, when he comes to America, he says, I'm not bringing any kind of weird religion. My religion is the human religion of kindness, he says, And he means it and, and the missionary you could say, from India, who went to Tibet at the request of the Tibetan kings to bring Buddhism into a warrior type of society, you know, not unkind type of violence oriented society. He also said to everybody he met including the emperor, he said, Have you been grind today was the first thing he would say. And an artist might say that they might say I want you to go to my exhibit. So you'll see something different in a slag heap, or in a flower, something either thought of as beautiful or even Something thought of as not beautiful, but you'll see the beauty in my point is the artist. And what what meditation truly is about. And what a Buddhist critical wisdom learning is about, is to get away from being completely indoctrinated in a culture, that normal regular culture where you're just a part of the cultures was to do your duty, and you're supposed to be frightened if you don't obey the authority. And their artists have been doing that all along.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 05:29

A more liberal arts education, I think, is lending itself and hasn't passed historically, as, as an opportunity. And I know that was one of the things that attracted you to you today. And, you know, the five tenants of Buddhist social activism, how, how do you consider that as a contribution to our university education?

B

Bob Thurman 05:52

We need from all cultures, to learn things to reinforce our liberal, the liberal side of our liberal

arts, and the first principle of the Buddhist, Buddhist political, actually, they were the politics of enlightenment where I first started those five principles. First one is a radical individualism, meaning you don't have to be a lawyer, if your dad is a lawyer, you don't have to be a business person, if your dad is your have to be a mom, if your mom is a mom. In other words, you don't have to be whatever your tribe is, even whatever your family says it is, you have a special destiny in your life. Because you have a third gene, I call it of your own spiritual destiny that you came from your own past experience in previous lives, you're going to your own future. And so so you need to find your bliss, in your schooling and your schooling should help you find that bliss, but doesn't mean religious. It means have a kind of a character, like for example, the you know, emotional intelligence movement in education. Actually, the people who push that a lot are people who learn something about Buddhism and meditation and things. But they, they're saying it has to be balanced with IQ. So the EQ, the emotional intelligence, corrosion, is equal to the intellectual intelligence, quotient and importance and therefore, our curriculums, you should cultivate it. So but so individualism, other Buddhists, but wait a minute, we don't have a self, how can we be individualized? Well, actually, Buddha didn't really say you don't have a self, he just said, the kind of self you have, is a relational nexus of how you relate to things it's creates can be created by your your culture, your relationships, your behavior, and your instincts. Because you do have one, you just don't have an absolute fixed bar code self, you have a resilient, changeable relational self. And therefore learning is critical to your quality of life. And so that's radical individualism, then based on that, since each individual has worked, since evolution is an individually inherited and carried thing, then you have evolved, you have had a hand in your own evolution toward this human embodiment, which which is immensely precious. So that's the second one, the sanctity of all sentient life, but especially human is the kind of anthropocentrism there. And so then the sanctity of life, especially human life, but all animal life. Third one, then is educational ism. Which means that that's the one about how the purpose of human life is endless education, not just those years of school, but the whole of the whole of life is a school, and what you're learning is generosity, empathy, and ethicality tolerance and non anger and, and creativity. Then the fourth one is kind of democratic, constitutional socialism, but socialism in the good sense of the Scandinavian sense of the word.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:59

All these collectively actually address something that we really are interested in this podcast and what you've bring so much to the table in so many other realms of your world is health and well being and how do you perceive this as interconnecting with that, overall for the individual and the community?

B

Bob Thurman 09:20

Well, what I see is I think if we could start at the university level work has started all levels. And there are a few things that are happening at all levels. The emotional intelligence work in schools is very good at high school level than really definitely trying to overcome sexism and racism specially, and maybe religious fanaticism, not being not not not catering to religion taught as an exclusive iStick in group thing where they fear and hate to people who don't share their beliefs. So I think we're universities have to do that sort of thing. And be activist actually and our humanities strong li activists and the humanities need to be funded equally to the natural sciences and, and the social sciences. And and we really have to take up the burden that we, we when we give somebody a bachelor's degree or a master's degree or a Doctor of

Philosophy, they should be a humane person, character wise, they learn about other people, they learn to not use other people to listen to them, you know, there's that that those abilities should be cultivated. And they've done not necessarily successfully cultivated in families, especially patriarchal male dominated women's suppressing families.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 10:44

Yeah, you know, what you're really pointing out is the critical role that an academic institution really starting before universities, right. One of the things that is striking to me, in addition to how you could determine your own destiny, really what you've described as these tenants, like you can be open, you can be, you know, build empathy, through knowledge, you can learn and keep learning. And one of the things you've talked a lot about in your book, but also in this podcast, is, you know, what you do now will carry over to your next life. And one thing that you've taught me as well is your previous lives that have given you gifts for this lifetime. And it gave me a sense of gratitude, because I thought about what I think are my strengths. And I think, wow, somebody gave that to me, from a previous life. And I'm wondering, what what do you have gratitude for from your previous lives?

B

Bob Thurman 11:47

Well, I think from my previous life, actually, I kind of knew, in the sense that I have had memories eventually, it took me a long time, I know that I came from a society with a culture where there was this kind of these principles of an enlightenment oriented society, which I would say, like individualism, and humanism, and educationalism and, and non violence and democratic things. I think I brought them here to a society that said that is weaker in those areas. We think we are, we think we're the most advanced thing that ever happened on the planet. And we still think that as as a group, you know, and we're better because we beat up the other people on this planet. And we still think that as as a group, you know, and yet we, when we're when we're dodging, really facing the fact that this sort of violence orientation of ours, which is codified in our political science, theories, even you know, that's what a society is, it's someone controls the violence in society, as if that was a normal, natural and important thing. And I think I brought from previous life, I had great kindness from my parents. One thing people will do on this one is they say, I have gratitude to my ancestors, and that's good. And they should, because they are born as human and they're here the ancestors were to, and they, they got something from them, you know, and they should be grateful about that. But, but the Buddhist Darwin theory Buddha's that let's not the Buddhists, but let's say Buddhists, Darwin theory, which gives the individual their own credit as one of their procreate tours, let's say, bringing their own experience from their own other previous life, which enabled them to choose those parents but also gives them something unique that the parents didn't yet have. And, and I brought that from this other society and I always felt uncomfortable a little bit about some aspects of our society. You know, I went to these triumphalist schools where you're told you they lead, you know, and what do you want to do going to be a doctor dentist or go in State Department or go to Wall Street, and I never quite bought the whole thing. I somehow saw a little bit Doom, operating over the battleship, mission accomplished sort of routine, I challenged God with infinity because I never heard I didn't hear I didn't have the teaching of emptiness or selflessness. And so I used infinity to broaden the frame of reference instinctively, so that they're dogmatic, you can understand you have to have this blind faith. I didn't have to get suppressed by that. You know, I loved everything else. I did baby Jesus, I still love the images.

And it's not that it's but it's this suppressive element of it, which Baby Jesus didn't tell people to behave like that. In fact, he showed people they should notice that he let the the Power Authority kill them to show that they couldn't kill him. The central thing is, I think we should be happy I think the life is good. And I think we don't have to dominate everybody else for it to be good. And we can get along with everybody else. So we can share and we can. And we don't have to all be in the poorhouse if we share. We don't have to. We don't have to be conquered if we, if we're distant with people, we need to be free. So I think that's what I brought. And I think I'm afraid of what is wrong with our society fundamentally, is we are taught that life is no good. So we have failed, it's shut, we're justified in behaving no goodly to quite a degree, because it's basically going to be no good. And someone else will be dominantly no good. If we're not dominantly No, good. And and actually, it isn't that bad is a great planet.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 15:47

What a great story. And again, I'm so grateful to your past lives for you to be here today. And I'd love to have you share a little bit what do you call it educational-ism?

B Bob Thurman 15:59

Educationalism. Well, that educationalism is something I've been inflicting at Amherst College and Columbia and Harvard and Williams and Wesleyan where I moonlighted and, and I love to do educationalism. And I say, Well, you see the difference in a Buddhist society and the Western one is here in the Western society, you, you come to get trained to have a profession, you know, to be skilled and have a success or career professional career in life. And so that's where education is for that purpose. Whereas in a Buddha society, the purpose of life itself is education lifelong, because you're going to carry what you learn into a future life. And you're going to have a better future life because of that. So I call that educationalism as a social policy kind of thing, oh, you have to have anism, you know, and, therefore translating that into our American setting. The slogan is, stay in school as long as your parents will keep paying. But the idea being of course, that human being is a learning machine, which sees it and you can learn bad things or good things. And that is really the purpose of life is to expand your being.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 17:15

Well, you mentioned in your book about how the Dalai Lama spoke at a graduation emphasizing the clever brain isn't enough, right? But it's the good heart.

B Bob Thurman 17:25

Yeah. And then the administrators and faculty and some students who were present they were all nodding, you know, are they say "You're right. Isn't this wonderful? Yes". But they never changed anything to 30 years however, there was still the Clever Brain was and and the good heart you're supposed to get from mom, or you're supposed to get in church or synagogue or mosque or wherever you go. Or, and or, what is the secular equivalent? I don't know the psychiatrist office perhaps. And, and formation of character is not on the menu, basically, directly. In a way humanities is where formation of character happens indirectly through

literature and things like that. And obviously, that's the weakest of the three things from your perspective as a as an administrator, right? In other words, the faculty there are the least least honored and a way in our in our thing, because they all contribute to business in this level, to the same level Do they

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 18:27

Also the majors are diminishing greatly those students that are choosing the humanity majors, moving to science, but you know, in your book, you talk about practicing Buddhism as a practicing science and sciences knowledge, right? How do you reconcile knowledge and education, relationship to Buddhism,

B Bob Thurman 18:47

The key to science and success of the Western enlightenment even you could say, since the 17th century, you know, has been empiricism and experience and, and measurement and encounter with facts, trumping dogmatic theories. The Buddha always said the only thing that you could say, has kind of what he called definitive meaning status, as far as teaching goes, is the negation that there's any such thing as a verbal formula or a mathematical formula that captures reality. So reality is a relational matter. And you always have to therefore observe, be open to observing the factual nature of your operational realities. And therefore no theory that you can possibly come up with will get sort of absolute status. Any law so called law of nature is just a relational hypothesis based on what you've observed, but it still has only hypothetical status can still be challenged by further experience, which in fact, most current scientists will not accept when it comes to their dogma that only matter exists. There's no mind and no spirit, they cover up the embarrassing fact that the quantum people have showed them that they still don't know what matter is. Science has to be truly like, as Karl Popper said, and his methodology is truly open and ready for the next observation being without imposing a theory and looking for what you expect to find. And that's what the that's known as the unexpressed ability of reality thesis, which makes education truly open. You know about education, what I love about the Latin word and the our liberal arts tradition, is the Latin root of that a do career to lead out of someone something. So the teachers role then is more like a coach than an indoctrinate or, you know, that is to say they want to lead out of basic human wisdom out of their student, by teaching the student where to find their own basic wisdom, rather than just impose on them a set of skills or formulas or or dogmas, I was so happy that I switched from my monastic vocation, that I was so determined I was going to spend my life had not only spent a few years at and got into academic teaching, where you precisely cannot proselytize or should not.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 21:17

Well, this, like what you described as enlightenment education.

B Bob Thurman 21:21

That's right. So people can learn to think for themselves and have a certain self confidence in their ability to understand if you understand yourself you'll be ready to learn more about

then ability to understand if you understand yourself, you'll be ready to learn more about yourself and the world, maybe always. So the religious people, when I was young told me I had to have blind faith. And then the science people said, well, you can learn a lot about this gene, or that frog or this anatomy or that, that Adam or, but you'll never know, you'll never understand yourself or the world. So you might as well, when you're on your off hours, go to church or something. And then Buddhism not only tells you that you can understand yourself and the world. So education is the staff of life, actually, it's that way of opening up your life for us. But you have to if you want to be happy, if you want less, you have to cultivate wisdom, which means not just having a whole row of facts that you aren't skilled, but actually understanding what you're dealing with, even if maybe you can't express it completely with whatever, no transmission, whatever language system, you're using, either mathematical or verbal. Because reality is always more than whatever anybody says about it, don't you think?

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:28

Yeah. And you're so logical in your way of thinking and the way you express yourself in this book, for instance, the discrepancy of what is your right side of your face or your left side of your face is, is revealed by looking at yourself in the mirror, for instance, you really break it down, and you bring it to you bring it to life and understanding. Yeah, and you talk about the four noble truths as fun, friendly facts, you opened up the door to Buddhism for me, and I love you to explain to me that, you know, these are fun, friendly facts and not noble truths. And, you know, why is language so important?

B

Bob Thurman 23:07

That's why I say friendly fact, Noble Truth, which sort of fits in an earlier culture, you know, and because we don't think of noble people as friendly, we think of them as snotty. We want, we want someone who's a friend to be assuring us of something, then we might take it seriously, you know, and that's what Buddha meant in his time, in a more even more hierarchical and militarized society than this current one, but much more actually, in fact, quite similar. And, and so And education is where it should be totally different. For example, Dalai Lama, who has been coming here for four or five centuries, four or five decades, sorry. He says, He doesn't want to convert anybody to Buddhism as a religion. He wants everybody to stay with their own cultural grandma's spirituality. And they but learn how to use their own mind thinking critically. And in case we have not developed the kind of high power in humanities that can really help someone really changed our life. And because we should be graduating people who are really of buying decent character.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:20

Well, I think that's a great way to have you tell me what does it mean to live well?

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Bob Thurman 24:26

To live well is to be happy to choose, you know that there's a wonderful painting that someone gave our very wonderful collector actually who lives there in LA. And he gave us a painting, which we have at our spa Wellness Spa here in Catskills Tibet House Wellness Spa. This

painting is there's some cherries in the painting and then it has like a text and it says people are always looking for happiness somewhere. Not realizing that happy is a choice. It's pretty minimalist kind of pain a good life is a happy life. And a happy life will be a successful one. If you're happy you will be loved by others. I love a guy called Adam Grant, he should be, you should try to do a podcast with him. He's working school guy, first book that I really like maybe the only one I really read. Anyway, it's it's a sociological study with data, that the corporate person who tramples their competitors and even tries to the one who always tries to take credit, if a team does something, they try to make it their credit, long term, much less successful than the team player who helps their neighbor in the team, you know, and who types tries to build a team. And who becomes a much better top executive, and much beloved in their corporation far more successful in the long term. Although, although there's a level of a team player who sort of self depletes too much, who does it too much, that's sort of a middle way. So be happy. And actually, therefore, our universities should have courses in how to be happy. There's a very successful teacher at Yale and his and her whole thing is just how to be happy. But she has hundreds of students in that class, I think, yeah. And there should be lots of those in every university. Now, why is that such a rare thing, they should be awakened to not being racist, and realize the gifts of all the other types of bodies, people in different kinds of bodies from different cultures, we're like, we're all experimental data. And they've all experiment in different environments and look different. Now. Every environment is different and pluralistic, and therefore, we have to get along with everyone and strengthens everyone.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 26:46

Well, you know, I love that. And I think that's a great way for us to end this and newser, great happiness, I feel in so many ways, and you bring great happiness, just having this time, this gift of, of you talking to us, but also what you've written down and I'm going to listen to it a couple more times, I think, because it's so rich and deep your book.

B

Bob Thurman 27:14

I'd be so grateful. I really admire your work so much. And I really wish it for fulfillment I really do.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:25

I'm moved by Bob's dedication to practicing and teaching lifelong learning. He enlightens all of us with his wisdoms of how to consciously engage in our world today. I love how happiness is his measurement of living well. After all, Noble Truths are really just fun, friendly facts. Thank you, Bob, for teaching us and giving us the opportunity to learn alongside you today on our live well podcast, and thank you all for listening today. We will be back soon with more exciting guests. If you've been inspired by this episode, have ideas for new guests or want me Wendy to be a guest on your podcast, visit our podcast page on our website healthy.ucla.edu and contact us and of course, subscribe if you haven't already. We'll talk to you soon. This episode has been brought to you by The Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center at UCLA.