Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and we thank you for being here tonight for a conversation entitled “On the Pursuit of Happiness: An Evening with Robert Thurman and Pico Iyer.” As many of you know, the Aurora Forum is guided by the rubrics of exploring democratic ideals and inspiring social hope. And both our guests tonight have been deeply engaged in studies that illuminate our typical themes.

Robert A. F. Thurman is the Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies in the Department of Religion at Columbia University and Founding President of Tibet House, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Tibetan civilization. He received Upasaka ordination in 1964 and Vajracharya ordination in 1971, both from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He is the author of *Essential Tibetan Buddhism; Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* and many other original books and translations of Buddhist texts, including *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* and *The Great Book of Liberation Through Understanding in the Between*, otherwise known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. His forthcoming book, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters: His Act of Truth as the Solution for China, Tibet, and the World*, which we will discuss in the course of this conversation, will be available this June.

And, in some circles, he is recognized as Uma Thurman’s dad. [Laughter] He is the father of four other children, the grandfather of five, and an inspiration to people all over the world.

Pico Iyer was born in Oxford, England to parents from India, grew up in Southern California, and has lived in Kyoto, Japan, for the past twenty or so years. He is the author of many books about cultures converging, including *Video Night in Kathmandu; The Lady and the Monk*; and *Falling off the Map*. His new book, *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama*, follows upon *The Global Soul*, a book that has enabled people around the world to better comprehend the process and promise of globalization. His articles appear frequently in such magazines as *Harper’s, The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker*, and *Time*, where, since 1982, he has been a regular contributor on world affairs. He has written introductions for more than 20 books, has written the liner notes to four Leonard Cohen albums, and has seen his most recent novel, *Abandon*, translated into languages including Russian, Turkish, and Indonesian. He is often a retreatant at the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur.
The Indian writer Pradeep Sebastian has called him “Thomas Merton on a frequent-flier pass.” Others call him the “poet-laureate of wanderlust.” And he himself he notes that his circumstances made him “a traveler at birth” and that today he may be known either as “an Indian writer living in America” or an “American writer living in Japan,” and he loves this state of betwixt and between, a characteristic of 21st century people that he incessantly and brilliantly explores.

Our guests have much in common, and one thing they have in common is they have both had very long-term relationships with the Dalai Lama, who was our guest here at the Aurora Forum in November of 2005. I want to begin with a story that says something about the Dalai Lama that both of them are very interested in and write about. Many of you may have been at the teaching the Dalai Lama gave in May of 2001 hosted by the Land of Medicine Buddha, where for three days he talked about the *Heart Sutra*. At the opening of this teaching, the Dalai Lama comes out on the stage, as he usually does, and he looks out at the audience, the thousands of people gathered, and he bows and waves to familiar faces and smiles. So he did that at the start of this teaching. And then he walked around, climbed up to his teaching throne, settled in, got himself comfortable, was very quiet, and said, “You know, when I go to a place and see old, familiar faces of people I haven’t seen for a very long time, I ask myself, ‘Have I made any spiritual progress since we last met?’” How remarkable. And the two of you have written in your books about this long-term relationship and watching this person grow and develop as a teacher, as a human being. Do you want to say something about that—the long-term relationship and what you’ve observed in how the man has changed.

**Pico Iyer:** I suppose my first encounter with him came by proxy because my father went to visit him just a few months after he came out into exile in 1960. And happily for me, just a couple of years ago, I discovered that my father had written a long essay after meeting His Holiness when His Holiness was just 24 years old. And what struck me, reading it now, was that everything he said, word for word, was what he says in 2008, at the same time as he seems to me to have adapted brilliantly to changing circumstances. So my sense is that his foundations remain rock solid, immovable, the opposite of impermanent. But each time he comes into a room, he finds out how best to apply those changeless, timeless principles to the moment and to these individuals, which, from the little I know about Buddhism, seems to come right out of what the Buddha used to say about skillful means and talking one way to a little girl and another way to a philosopher, but however you’re talking, it all flows out of the same rigorous, deep, and penetrating knowledge. But Bob has known him much better than I have.

**Gonnerman:** You first met him in 1974.

**Iyer:** 1974 when I was a teenager, and like any teenager was very keen not to listen to my father talk to a fellow philosopher. So I did everything I could to block my ears. But some important seed was sown. I remember to this day the one word that His Holiness spoke of over and over again was “Bodhicitta” [awakened mind], which, I think, is his talisman and his guiding anthem, which has to do with, really, it seems to me, a mixture of compassion and intelligence, which is what he speaks for. And, of course, his English
has improved a lot. His sense of the world and whom he is interacting with has changed a lot. I saw him the first time he came to the U.S. in 1979. I was studying at Harvard and he came to Harvard. And I remember, and you will remember much more of this, but he gave a very, very high-flown philosophical discourse because he thought Harvard is the Stanford of the East [Laughter]. He felt with a certain innocence and a certain trustfulness in us that he was addressing a very, very erudite, sophisticated audience, and I fear that most of what he said was like Wittgenstein talking to kindergartners. Most of us didn’t follow it. And so what I’ve noticed is with that beautiful practicality that I see as one of his sovereign qualities, he’s realized that when he comes to a room like this, what he has to do is not to give the full complexity and beauty of his philosophy, but give us simple, lucid, everyday precepts that any one of us can apply to our lives. And I think part of what is so fascinating is seeing him translate what might be nine volumes of complex thought into an epigram and risk being underestimated in the process. But what I’ve found, spending five years intensively looking at him doing this book, and 30 years, really, intensively thinking about him, is the more you look at even three or four words, the more you see the many volumes of life beneath that.

Gonnerman: I’ve heard you use the phrase “high simplicity,” which is really an achievement.

Iyer: Yes. I found out in the course of researching this book that students at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, which is like an advanced university outside his home, will spend four years just analyzing a single phrase. And one of the phrases that I’ve been thinking about is “simple Buddhist monk.” I think if we were to ask everyone in this room who is the Dalai Lama, the one phrase everyone could hang onto is “simple Buddhist monk” because it’s so transparent, so human, and so universal. But the last time I saw him, just four months ago, he said, “Well, I’m a simple Buddhist monk because in my dreams, I see myself as a monk, but I’m not so conscious of myself as Dalai Lama. In my memories and faint intimations of past lives, I feel a very strong connection with a monastic calling, but not so much the sense of Dalai Lama.” So he does have connections, he says, with the two previous Dalai Lamas, and most important, he says, “Anyone at any time can take away from me the Dalai Lama designation, or the name, but nobody except me can take away the monastic calling, so the heart of my life is my monasticism before anything else.” And then when I researched a little further, I found that the thirteenth Dalai Lama, when asked “Who are you?” said “I’m a simple Buddhist monk.” And, of course, the current Dalai Lama is drawing upon all of that, but when he says, “I’m a simple Buddhist monk,” some people may say he’s being modest, or falsely modest, not knowing that “falsity” is not a word in his vocabulary. And most of us, I think, won’t realize exactly how much he’s saying.

Gonnerman: Bob, you first met the Dalai Lama in 1964, and then you had a lot to do with that visit to Harvard in 1979. In the interim, you met him for ordination again in 1971, and you said that you saw in between 1964 and 1971 that he had become philosophically alive during that stretch. What did you notice?
Thurman: Well, I think you remember better what I said than I do. [Laughter] That’s wonderful. You’re young and have a good memory. The Dalai Lama … I have noticed him change a lot in the years that I’ve known him, and I was very interested in what you said about the “simple Buddhist monk.” Actually, when Spalding Gray interviewed him, he asked him if he ever had erotic dreams and things like that, and that’s when he then came up with the “simple Buddhist monk.” [Laughter] He retreats. He said he does sometimes have some kinds of dreams but then he retreats and his fortress of identity is the Buddhist monk identity, where either aggressive dreams or visions that he has or erotic ones, he comes back to that one—the simple Buddhist monk—where he has renounced everything.

When I met him, I was introduced to him as a crazy American boy who was very smart and loved Buddhism and desperately wanted to be a monk, but that my own geshe told him that he shouldn’t make me a monk, and the geshe himself was refusing to make me a monk because he said I wouldn’t stay a monk. But then he said, “What do I know? I’m just an old Mongolian geshe and you’re the Dalai Lama.” He said, “I brought him to you because he just pesters me all the time about being a monk, and I’m not going to deal with it.” So the Dalai Lama said, “Hmmm.” Then the Dalai Lama observed me for a year and we had a lot of conversations and this and that, and finally he did ordain me as a monk. But then I didn’t stay a simple American monk. I did for a while, a couple of years, but in those days, we didn’t even have Hare Krishna people on the corner, and nobody knew what a Buddhist monk was, and I was just like a weird-looking guy with a huge shaved head with funny lumps on it. And my daughter later said, “Oh, look at dad (when she saw a picture of me). He looks like Henry Miller in drag.” [Laughter] So when I resigned, it was not practical, really, in those days in America in the sixties. And His Holiness was upset about that because there is a certain fortress thing of calm, and you know the way the monk’s robe is sewn in patches, there’s language in it that the patched robe is like a fortress where you withdraw from all the sufferings of the samsara and all the passions and all this kind of thing, and you have this space of calm, and so forth. It’s a very powerful thing, actually—very, very ancient and very powerful. And then in the Tibetan tradition, you can’t go back and forth, you know what I mean? You can’t be a monk and then not a monk and then become a monk again. It’s not possible. So he was a little tense with me for a while, and about ten years later, he suddenly found himself a room—Middlebury College, I think, is where it happened—and I was kidding around and we looked around at his brother, his secretary, his security man, myself, and everybody else in the room was an ex-monk. [Laughter] Finally, he said, “Oh, you guys. Hopeless.” [Laughter] Then he relaxed about it. But at that time, he would not really answer my questions about Buddhism. He was wanting to talk to me about Western things and about Freud and about Jung, and I was very disappointing to him in one way because he was very interested in the hard sciences and I was a humanities person—an English major. As Garrison Keillor says, “I was an English major.” And so I could help him with Freud and Jung and things like that, but when it got down to how you make a nuclear weapon or something, I was not really very good. [Laughter] Then he would refer me to his own teachers, so my main teachers in those days were his teachers, actually.
Then in ’71, when I was back for a year doing my dissertation research, he was so sharp on the…. Actually, I was doing my thesis on a book which he had given me in ’65, and he then annotated it. He gave me all his annotations on it. He explained it very excitedly and we started working on a book project, and he was really, really sharp philosophically. And then I had another seven- or eight-year gap when I didn’t see him because I was this impoverished professor trying to get tenure and he was barred from the U.S. by Kissinger and others and Brzezinski and people, not to mess with the China relationship, so they wouldn’t let him in the U.S. until ’79. So we didn’t see each other until ’79. But then, when I met him in ’79, he was a Tantric Vajra Master, 100 percent.

That’s the one great thing I love about the Dalai Lama: he has what I call flexibility of identity of a tremendous range. He can be majestic on the teaching throne and particularly, not just when lecturing, but when he is giving some sort of ritual thing like an initiation, and gestures and his tone of voice and his intonation of mantras is amazing, and he’s just like an amazing being And then he suddenly will change his tone of voice right then and there. I remember once when he gave the first Kalachakra in Wisconsin, and he was doing this and all these Dharma fanatics were there, and then he put on a hat at a certain moment, a special kind of hat—it wasn’t black, it wasn’t red, it wasn’t yellow—it was just a different kind of hat. And then he said, “Now I have to wear this hat.” He changed his tone and said, “Now I have to wear this hat,” and he puts it on. Then he takes it off and starts scratching his head and says, “I don’t like this hat. It’s uncomfortable. It’s really not nice.” [Laughter] And a lot of the Dharma people were very disappointed that he got out of the theater, you know, of the ritual thing, which he was so beautifully trained to do, and lucidly explaining, and started talking very colloquially, like: “These hats are really a pain,” he said, and “We shouldn’t be paying much attention to these hats. Buddha didn’t even have a hat—he didn’t even wear a hat—so what’s going on?” [Laughter] I love that. He’ll come out of a setting like that and then he’ll say, “Well, what do you think?” And then he’s totally normal. He doesn’t stay stuck in any particular form of identity. He goes back and forth.

Iyer: Well, as you know, Paul Ekman, very close to here, who is known as the leading scientist of the emotions, has been studying this for 40 years. He said that the Dalai Lama goes through more facial expressions more quickly than anyone he’s studied in four decades. For one moment, he’s completely concentrating, and the next, he’s completely jolly, and the next minute he’s solicitous and the next minute he’s contemplative. It’s exactly what you’re saying. Each time he’s inhabiting 100 percent of the identity, but then he’s on to the next one.

Thurman: That the thing. In his early forties, then, he got his full … grew back, I think, into his full Dalai Lama thing. And actually, by the time of the scene that you mentioned in San Jose, that teaching, I was blown away there because I was in that audience. When he arrived and then all the monks on the stage, and I had just flashed on Shakyamuni on Vulture Peak, the Heart Sutra, you know, teaching the transcendent wisdom of the great emptiness, and if Shakyamuni were alive today, that would be him. There seemed to be no difference at all, whatsoever, and I had never seen that. I knew always the Dalai Lama
doing something very marvelously, but actually he was Shakyamuni at that time, I thought. That was a very amazing event.

Iyer: I like what you said about the fortress identity. Isn’t there a sense that in those early years in exile, the sixties and early seventies, when the world was relatively neglecting him, he went into that fortress and went on retreat—went deep into his studies—in a way that he might not have been able to in the seventies, and then came out radiant and directed.

Thurman: Absolutely.

Gonnerman: Let’s talk about the way the two of you have gone into that fortress and on retreat and cultivated your own identities as teachers and scholars. We’ll talk more about the Dalai Lama later.

Thurman: Cultivated or lost? [Laughter]

Gonnerman: Pico, you have studied at Eton and at Oxford; Bob, you’ve been a Harvard student, you’ve been teaching at Amherst and Columbia, and so forth. You’ve taken the opportunities provided by these institutions very seriously, almost as a monastic retreat. And I’d like to, for the sake of the students who are here, hear how you approached those years. Yo-Yo Ma was here a few years ago, and he talked about his undergraduate days as a time when he was deposited knowledge and experience into a psychic bank account that he will continue to draw on. What were you depositing into your psychic bank account, Pico, during those years?

Iyer: Dare I say, the longing to play hooky? [Laughter] I shouldn’t say that at the university, but I learned how to live in the margins and how not to do what I was asked to do, and how to travel. I mean, one of the great things about the English educational system is you have a year off between school and college at the age of seventeen, so I went and was a bus boy in Santa Barbara, California, for three months, and then went by bus down to Tijuana and La Paz, Bolivia. And one way or another, by the time I arrived at college, I knew that nothing could compete with what I had experienced in the Hotel Picasso in Bogotá, of which I will say no more. [Laughter] But, I mean…

Thurman: Isn’t that a song? The Hotel Picasso?

Iyer: I’ll leave it to you for the next act. [Laughter] But I think must of us know that what we learn is outside the framework. You’re [Gonnerman] a Gary Snyder scholar, and he’s a great person who says when you’re walking along the park, the most important thing is to get lost—to take diversions, to lose all sense of orientation and explode $A$ to $C$ and get lost in $Z$ en route. So I suppose I did that with a vengeance.

Gonnerman: But that also helped your time inside Oxford and the studies that you did—the formal studies—which you must have taken seriously.
Iyer: Well, I studied literature [Laughter] so there wasn’t much to study. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: You’ll have to explain that.

Iyer: I do have to explain that?

Gonnerman: Yes, yes.

Iyer: By which I mean, I had to study reading and writing which, to some extent, was something I had done already. And literature is a great thing to study, but you can do that in your free time. You don’t need formal instruction. And what I realize now, for the students who are in this hall, is that I wish I had studied something radically different from my interest or background. Since I knew already that I loved words and I loved reading and I wanted to try to write, if I had studied a formal body of knowledge—Japanese language, history of France in the sixteenth century—anything, really, Tibetan Buddhism, the story of Tibet—any of that would have made me that much richer. But by taking the easy way out and doing what I knew I already liked and maybe had some small aptitude for, I really curtailed … I closed all the doors of my knowledge, and I have nobody to blame for that but myself.

Thurman: It’s not too late. We have room for you in the Sanskrit and Tibetan department. [Laughter] You would love it here.

Iyer: Thank you. My mother, born and entirely grew up in India, learned Sanskrit in California and now teaches Sanskrit here.

Thurman: Oh, really? Tibetan is actually a bit easier than Sanskrit. You go straight to the Buddhism. But, you know, in my case, when I encountered the Tibetan alphabet, which is the Sanskrit alphabet reworked a little bit—very closely connected—it was like attaining nirvana. It was better than anything. As I look back, that’s what I really loved most because A-B-C is completely cuckoo. [Laughter] A-B-C-D-E-F-G: what is it? A vowel: A is not “ay,” it’s “ah.” B is with the vowel “e,” and it’s a labial. C is really “ka.” I mean, it’s completely cuckoo. [Laughter] It’s like a mad language whereas Devanagari, The City of the Gods, you know? ka kha ga gha na ca cha ja jha ña. It’s all linguistically ordered and organized, and very much like a homecoming for me, you know? I learned it in ten weeks, practically.

Iyer: Because you had studied English literature already.


Gonnerman: Well, you thought you were going to become a poet, and you have become a poet in certain respects, Bob.

Thurman: Who’s become a poet?
Gonnerman: You have. [Laughter]

Thurman: Oh, I thought you were going to say him. [Laughter] He’s the writer, you know.

Gonnerman: These verbal thangkas you create are beautiful and poetic, and you’re making worlds, as poets do.

Thurman: You must be an English major. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: So what happened to you in school? Formal schooling?

Thurman: Well, in school they kind of…. The problem with these schools … now, I am also a professor at a university similar to this, and the problem with them is that there is not enough carpe diem. There’s not enough awareness of life and of the moment. There’s this Protestant thing about deferred gratification and reaching the goal and getting into the next course and getting an exam right and then moving on to the next program and being pre-med and pre-law and pre-everything and, in my case, pre-life. [Laughter] And actually I’m still in that mode because I was brainwashed like that, you know? That’s what my oldest son calls me: “Bob Get-a-Life Thurman.” [Laughter] And my wife says I’m a Buddhaholic [Laughter] because since I was trained—Exeter, Harvard, not Oxford—but it’s the most nasty thing they can do to you in America. Before that, St. Bernard’s in New York, an English school, where they had the switch when I started—a little bit on the back of the legs—but they were stopped by the courts, fifth grade; they got Americanized. So the problem with these schools is it’s always: Achieve something and get somewhere else, and never really have…. You know: no happiness. I think we’re supposed to be about happiness.

Gonnerman: We’re getting there. [Laughter]

Thurman: So there’s no such thing as happiness. It’s this “inner-worldly asceticism,” as Max Weber called the Protestant ethic, and it’s like if you feel a little bit good, you worry about who’s going to spank you or step on you or freak out, and so don’t bother. But later, someday, you’ll get there, so then study a lot and prepare and get there and then go on to the next one, and never do it. My favorite thing as a teacher in college is Parents’ Day, once a semester, usually, often in the spring, and the parents come with the students. And then I get into the topic of education and I say, “You know, the thing about school and learning is that’s the purpose of life and that the greatest thing you can do is learn more, which is, you know, reading and whatever. That is the best thing. Human beings are learning machines. The greatest pleasure is opening your mind to something more.” “So therefore,” I said, “don’t rush to get out into the world and think you’re in an ivory tower, because you’ll just become a wage slave when you get out there. Stay in school as long as your parents will pay.” [Laughter] And the parents go, “Oh, no! I want them to be a dentist, a lawyer…. The parents freak out. [Laughter] And they don’t get what I’m talking about. But the point is that people should realize
that being in school is this fabulous privilege because you can lie around and read or you can do this and that, or you can leave for a year and go somewhere. It’s totally great. Lifelong, it should be. Look at all these people…. All these students here look like they’ve been studying for about 30, 40 years. [Laughter] And you’re here studying tonight. That’s good, that’s good.

Iyer: And I think education means to draw out, doesn’t it? So falling in love draws you out and getting lost on the way to the classroom draws you out. Anything can.

Thurman: Exactly. It’s the perfect thing. I always say Buddhism basically is a system of education, really, because Buddha wants people to get from the truth of suffering to the truth of freedom from suffering, which he was too modest to call happiness. Or, rather, he knew he would be too suspicious if he called nirvana happiness too easily. People are so used to being miserable that if you say there’s something called happiness you can have they say, Oh, what are you trying to sell? What are you doing? They get very suspicious. So that was what it was. So how to you get from here to there? You can’t do it by believing there is nirvana. You can only get it by re-educating yourself.

Iyer: Unlearning, too. But unlearning all the habits.

Thurman: Unlearning and relearning.

Gonnerman: What kind of activities makes you happy?

Iyer: In my case, whenever I lose myself. I think happiness is absorption. Happiness is a state where you don’t even think that there’s a word or a concept like happiness. I find it a lot in this monastery that I go to, but I find it when I’m reading a book or when I’m talking to a friend. But, by definition, it’s something you don’t seek. It finds you rather than you find it. Can I say just one more thing on education?

Gonnerman: Of course.

Iyer: To drag the conversation back to the Dalai Lama: One thing that really struck me the last time I was traveling with him five months ago in Japan…. He was traveling for a week in Japan, and the last day was in Tokyo. And almost every eminence or political figure I know, when they go to Tokyo, they want either to meet people in the government or to talk the media and the television channels and all the movers the shakers—the ostensible powers that be. And the Dalai Lama spent his entire day in Tokyo visiting two high schools. And he said, “These are the powers that be. These are the people who are constructing the future, who will be the caretakers of a future Tibet, who will be the caretakers of our world. I would much rather talk to a group of teenage boys than to the heads of NHK or the other major TV networks. And it seemed in ways that you know about so much that he’s just redefining education, redefining power, redefining importance and priority in such an interesting way, and reminding us that education means the future tense in some ways and therefore it has much more to do with minds
that are still in the process of being formed than the ones that are already settled into their moribund habits.

**Gonnerman:** But it seems like an education ought to enable people *not* to settle into moribund habits—to stay engaged, to stay alive. And I think that seems to be a constituent part of happiness—the constant process of reengagement and process of surprise and discovery in life. You seem to have discovered that.

**Thurman:** Well, I don’t know. But I think this is very happiness producing—this place right here now. Being on a stage, with a bunch of nice people looking happy with Pico Iyer, whom I’ve long idolized as a writer and whom I’ve listened to and read for years. I’ll never forget your editorial in *Time* magazine where you talked about a monument to prevent a holocaust in relation to Tibet. I don’t know if you mentioned Tibet House by name; I wish you had, but we used it as a kind of charter for Tibet House, to preserve the Tibetan culture. It was an editorial on one of those last-page editorial things. I don’t know if you remember it.

**Iyer:** Not so much. [Laughter]

**Thurman:** You said you wished there was such a thing as a monument to prevent a holocaust. Of course, we should remember the ones that have happened so that never again, but they are going on still today, and so there should be these kind of monuments that prevent them. I remember that was such a brilliant thing. I said, “Who is this Pico Iyer?” Well, yeah, I thought you were of course a Madrasi Brahman and I was wondering…

**Iyer:** Well, half.

**Thurman:** That’s what Iyer is, a Tamil name. You know Tamil?

**Iyer:** No, not a word.

**Thurman:** Really?

**Iyer:** No, not a word of any Indian language, to my shame.

**Thurman:** But you know that Tamil literature is where they have women who wrote the poems.

**Iyer:** You know more about it than I do.

**Thurman:** It’s one of the very few cultures where many of the poems are written by women. The ancient … wonderful poems. Although there are some scholars—male chauvinist American scholars—who are trying to prove that they’re really men impersonating women, but I don’t believe that. [Laughter]
Iyer: Well, we are in San Francisco now. That’s all right. [Laughter]

Thurman: But, anyway, this is very…. We’re here in this school. This is a wonderful place. Universities are wonderful. They are not at all respected in this country. It’s much better to be a dentist or a lawyer or a businessman. Somehow, if you’re at a university it’s because you didn’t want to run out and make money, you know? And so that’s what they tell you, actually—the deans and the faculty and the president. When you complain at the faculty meetings about the salary levels, they say, “Well, you didn’t join this professional to make money, did you? (So we’re going to make sure you don’t).” [Laughter] But that doesn’t matter. That’s not the purpose of life. But learning and thinking…. You know, in Buddhism, dharma is defined as the three *adhishikhas*—you know that term, *adhishiksha*? They tend to say the three precepts. But the word Adishesha in Hindi, for example, is Shiksha Department is the education department. And that actually means the three higher education things: *adhi* means higher, *shiksha* means education. So morality, meditation, and mind and wisdom—educating those three things. That is actually what Buddhism is. So we’re very at home in the academy. It’s just that our academy does not have an existential dimension. It sort of defers being alive until you’ve learned whatever skill you’re learning, and it doesn’t really address…. When you come to a university, you might hear the president or a dean say something about decency and sensibility and something like that—responsibility—a few terms they’ll throw your way, and then you’ll never learn anything about it. Just skill and competence and competition—you learn all through—and football. You have football instead of yoga, you know? Your yoga is football or lacrosse—somebody beating somebody over the head with a stick, you know? And then when you leave they give you a big talk about going out in the world and being responsible because you are the elite. But they never teach you moral qualities. They never teach you to meditate. I tried to have people meditate in my class once and it created a scandal. People were like, “What?” It’s like we were practicing religion in the classroom. It had nothing to do with religion. It was like observing your breathing just to show what Buddhism was about and what these different practices were, but they almost had a conniption about it, thinking that we might be getting people to be conscious about their breathing as part of their education. [Laughter] But, in my opinion, people should not get a bachelor’s degree until they have developed a certain moral quality where they’ll at least be decent husbands or wives instead of being some sort of performance freak. [Applause] Oh, good! [Laughter] There should be some enlightenment quotient, some development of that type, otherwise we produce only…. The Dalai Lama said it once. When he got an honorary degree from Columbia from George Rupp back a little bit before the Nobel Peace Prize, he said, “Well, thank you very much. I love to get this degree, especially because I didn’t have to do any work for it.” [Laughter] “A great education is a wonderful thing,” he said, but he was a little worried about our education, he said, because “All you’re doing is really developing your knowledge, but you don’t develop the good heart. There’s nothing about developing the good heart,” he said. And he said it’s of course imbalanced for the person who gets that, but also for society. Producing clever brains without a good heart is dangerous. So they all said, “Oh, yes sir, absolutely” to the Dalai Lama, and they totally, of course, forgot about it. [Laughter] All the high administrators.
Iyer: And to go back happiness for a minute … [Laughter] An example of happiness may be an explanation of it. But there’s a great book by Matthieu Ricard, whom I think all of us know, called Happiness, that came out two years ago which drew upon all the recent scientific research to point out what I think everyone knows, which is that happiness is a function of perception and not of circumstance. And a Tibetan monk in a very dreadful position can be absolutely serene and in a state of joy and somebody in a $6 million house in Cupertino may be seeing a therapist three times a week. I don’t want to make a flip example, but they conducted these tests and they found that people who are suddenly rendered paraplegic, after a year more or less can say they are no better or worse off than they were before the accident. People who win the lotteries after a year say they are no happier because they’ve ended up in a posh neighborhood, they spend all their time with lawyers, they don’t know who their friends are. In other words, it’s just a way of underlining that it has nothing to do with whether we’re making it in the public, official sense and it has everything to do with what we’re making inside ourselves. And, you know, His Holiness is a great example of this because exile, which is a word that so many of us think of as fraught and shattered by a sense of loss and severance, and he says, “Exile is opportunity. It allows me to do all the things I couldn’t have done in old Tibet.” Everything in front of you, depending on how you look at it, you can make possibility or blockage. Nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so, as Hamlet says. And, you know, I think it’s easy to forget that as we’re racing after happiness that we’ll never find because as soon as we get to find our latest iPod there’s a new model on the market and we’re hungry for another one. And then it’s only when we cut through the hunger that we suddenly realize, “Gosh, I’m so much happier without any of it.”

Gonnerman: Let’s talk about the situation in Tibet and ways of thinking about and framing that. What is happening now?

Thurman: In Tibet?

Gonnerman: Yes

Thurman: People are being rounded up, they’re being killed, they’re being tortured. And then those who are not being actively persecuted by the cultural revolutionaries currently running Tibet, they are being brainwashed, reeducated. There’s a whole huge reeducation campaign going on. And they’re observing members of the Tibetan bureaucracy to make sure they’re loyal and anti-Dalai Lama. So they’re trying to rub everybody’s face into how they should be hating the Dalai Lama, whom everybody loves. So it’s really quite dreadful, actually. His Holiness was very upset when they stood up and made a big fuss—Tibetans themselves—on March 10 because it’s all right for the exiles to make protests and mess with the Olympic torch as long as they just shout and don’t do anything violent, but in Tibet, that’s not tolerated. It’s lethal; it’s practically suicidal to do that. And so it’s very, very sad what is going on in Tibet now, and the Dalai Lama is earnestly appealing that the international community get some press up there, get some investigation going, send some people. And of course the key thing would be if President Hu would realize that he’s been misled and what has caused this is
the bad policy of the current people who are running Tibet who are real cultural revolutionary types. You know, they’re like throwbacks to the sixties and seventies, and they’re using rhetoric and language that we haven’t seen since the Gang of Four. And that’s what’s been stirring up the Tibetans and making them so upset that they did this, so it’s not good—not good. And only if Beijing wakes up to the fact that the people in Tibet are mismanaging it and assigns them perhaps to … they can’t send them to Siberia yet—later … but now they can send them to Manchuria. They should. Then there could be some hope, but otherwise it’s still a bit worrisome.

Gonnerman: What is the way forward?

Thurman: What is the way forward? What do you [Iyer] think?

Iyer: Well, you’ve written a book that’s about to come out on this, so I defer to you on that one.

Thurman: Well, yes. Pico’s book is about reality. It’s a wonderful description of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in action. Beautiful, marvelous thing. I enjoyed it so much. Mine is about fantasy. My book is about … actually, it’s the Dalai Lama’s fantasy as well. It is based on his speeches, and I analyze a lot of his speeches in the book and I present a vision of what could happen if President Hu would be the Gorbachev—if Hu would decide that he’s going to be the Chinese Gorbachev. He could get the Nobel Prize, too. All he would have to do is allow one country-two systems—allow it to be like the new Hong Kong and to let the Tibetans be free in their own place and take care of their own environment and proclaim actually Tibet to be the whole of the Tibetan plateau to be one huge environmental preserve and keep it green, restore the headwaters of their own Chinese rivers, and so forth, slow down the melting rate of the glaciers, which have accelerated hugely by bringing too many people there, and just mismanaging the whole place—creating desert instead of a steppe and cutting the forest too much. So if he did that, which would save the Chinese government huge sums of money, that would be so much bigger for China than just a short Olympics with some Coca-Cola and some NBC, or whatever. It would be huge. Imagine the president of China being a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and joining with Gorbachev and Tutu and His Holiness. That would be pretty cool. I think Mao would be jealous. [Applause]

So I unpack this vision because I got upset that everyone I know in the Tibetan movement—the patriots: Free Tibet, Let’s See it Happen, and all those sympathetic and the many other people who are very sympathetic to Tibet—everyone says, “Oh, it will never happen. Oh, no. It can never happen. China will never leave.” They’re like that. They have lost heart. They think that somehow China is this big giant miracle that will never change. Somehow the Chinese are different from the Russians who walked out of Eastern Germany. They’re the same as Dick Cheney (sorry) [Laughter] who is trying to remake America into an empire, stupidly, instead of following the path of the twenty-first century as it should be as we should have done—as Al Gore would have done, in fact (our president-in-exile, as Michael Moore calls him.) [Laughter, Applause] America would have taken the lead in restoring the environment and behaving realistically in
terms of the twenty-first century where the planet is. Anyway, we’ll get back to it, I’m sure. (I won’t mention names.) [Laughter] It’s just too crazy what’s happened to us—trying this old eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century behavior.

But China could skip these steps. Why should they try to be an empire? Why should they try to talk for everybody? Why should they try to conquer and suppress the Tibetans? The Gorbachev of China will realize it’s much better to devolve power consciously and to share and then to enlist people’s creativity and then have them join your union because they’re getting a benefit out of it and enjoy it. This is the way of the world. Happiness is the way of the world in the twenty-first century. If we don’t get happy with what we have, we will never learn contentment, and then we will never stop this insanity of growth and the destruction of our environment and we will destroy the enjoyment of all future generations, which is what we are currently doing. You know, where is the happiness for our great-grandchildren? Actually, I have a great-granddaughter at this point. Where’s their happiness if we keep using everything up?

This fantasy that everybody in China is going to have a Mercedes or a Buick, I guess. But General Motors is more or less finished. I guess a Toyota is what they’ll have because of the mismanagement of General Motors, and we’ll all choke. There will be no oxygen left on the entire planet. So I tried to develop a positive vision of how this could be done and how easy it would be for the Chinese to do it and what a huge benefit they would get out of it if they owned voluntarily the true Switzerland of Asia. I went nuts on it and I had a little fun. Fantasy is fun: A UN branch where they learn world peace; a banking system were they can all put their blank accounts, and their numbered accounts; a sanitarium system; a retreat center where we can go to have retreats; a world religion center to overcome fundamentalist fanaticism under the inspiration of the Dalai Lama. I think it would be marvelous. And the Dalai Lama could be reborn and he could relax; he wouldn’t have to do politics. He could just have a happy time in the monastery. [Laughter] And then they would vote voluntarily to join China because they would get a benefit from it. And then they’d actually, legitimately have Tibet, which is why they’re so nervous about it now because they know that their case for holding Tibet is ridiculous. Even some of their own history professors say so nowadays. It’s silly to say they own it. There wasn’t one Chinese person there before 1950 except on temporary assignment—some merchant on a temporary mission or some soldier. Otherwise, they didn’t live there because they can’t. None of us can live there either except Tenzin Tethong who is here tonight; he can live there. But the rest of us could not take that high altitude for many years without getting sick. And all the people who are trying to colonize now will get sick. So I just feel we should all project this possible image of how wonderful and how easy it would be for the Chinese to do the right thing, and how much cheaper it is. That is the Dalai Lama’s basic view: enlightened self-interest is the way. That is the way of true happiness. As he always says, a selfish person wants to be happy: “I want to be happy.” But because they’re selfish, they can’t be happy because the minute I have a nice time and I’m being happy, then I want something more. I’m not happy just to have Pico Iyer; I want to have Pico Iyer and Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg and Buddha here, too, and the Dalai Lama. And so, you’re just Pico; that’s no fun! [Laughter] But if I’m a wise selfish, as the Dalai Lama puts it, then I realize, “Oh, I shouldn’t think about
what I want; I should think about what Pico wants; I should about what the people here want,” and then forget about myself. And if I can do that, then I will be happy. Let’s put it this way: I won’t notice that I’m miserable. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: Let’s stay with your vision and let’s look toward the Olympics. Pico, you’ve covered five or six Olympiads. What do you foresee for Beijing?

Iyer: Well, to go back to your earlier question, I think there’s a component of realism and a component of hope. The realism is the Dalai Lama has been telling all of us to speak out, not to lash out—to care passionately about the Tibetans without denigrating the Chinese. I think of all the Tibetans in exile, the one who really knows how the Chinese work is the Dalai Lama because he’s been dealing with them day in and day out for fifty-eight years. He was going one-on-one with Mao Tse-Tung and Chou En-Lai in 1950. And so he knows how delicately they have to be handled, and any too confrontational approach will only bring, as you were saying, so much more suffering on people who have suffered too much already. But what he has stressed all along is the really important thing: what happens after the Olympics. We can almost take it for granted that during these few months insofar as Chinese can be on its best behavior, it will be, because it needs and seeks the approval of the world. Insofar as our leaders and leaders around the world have any chance and leverage to try to push them just to meet this monk, which isn’t such a great or remarkable thing—just to talk to him for one hour—this is the moment. But he says that come September, those of us in this country will be thinking about the presidential election, the war in Iraq, the unraveling economy, and China can just execute, so to speak, its policies brutally. And so I think what he’s calling for, especially in his debate within the exiled community is: Care about Tibet now, but try to do it with a long-term vision both in terms of making a practical solution but also not being buffeted by the media cycle, so that you care about Tibet when there’s a disturbance in the newspaper, and next, you’re caring about somewhere else. Think through to September, October next year just as Bob is doing so transcendentally in his book in trying to picture the next twenty steps. The point of hope for me…. And to answer briefly your question, having covered six Olympic games, I know that you can’t say that they’re sporting events. They’re all about politics, and they’re all about countries attempting to show off their achievements to the world, which is exactly what this is about. So those who say that they’re apolitical are people who haven’t been to the Olympics.

But in terms of the position of hope, the thing that has taken me aback in recent weeks is the Chinese who have spoken out on behalf of Tibet. I’m thinking especially…. I was just talking about it at Grace Cathedral a few days ago. Twenty-nine Chinese intellectuals and rioters are releasing a petition with their names on it calling on their government to talk to the Dalai Lama, stop suppression in Tibet, bring in, as Bob said, an outside investigating body to see what really happened. But I think most of us could to some extent expect and understand Tibetans to risk their lives for Tibet, but for Chinese to risk their lives for Tibet is something extraordinary and it plays exactly into what the Dalai Lama has been saying all along about looking at the larger picture—realizing that you can’t resolve the Tibetan situation until or unless you take into account all the
Chinese, who are, after all, the majority of the population in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. And he’s been saying—as Bob knows better than I—for fifteen years that he has great faith in Chinese individuals to wake up, one by one and day by day to the fact that they have more in common with Tibetans than apart, that they’ve been starved officially of religion for sixty years, and there, now within their own borders they have this extraordinary, liberating, deep religion of Tibetan Buddhism. The last time I flew in to Lhasa, in 2002, ninety percent of the people on the plane were Chinese, and I think most were going for economic opportunities and some just as tourists to enjoy the amazing vistas. Quite a few were going to make offerings at the central temple, to seek out Tibetan Buddhist lamas, to pick up Tibetan texts. Again, I won’t just keep on reeling off anecdotes, but the last time I was with His Holiness in November….

Gonnerman: Reel away!

Iyer: Just one more, which is the last time I was traveling with him in November in Japan, at one point we were at a large glossy hotel in Yokohama, and we went into a conference room and there were about sixty people there. And as soon as the Dalai Lama stepped in, they all began to sob. And they prostrated themselves; they did full three-part prostration on the floor. There were beautiful chairs laid out for them, but they abjured the chairs and they sat on the ground as he was giving very specific Tibetan Buddhist teaching in referring to certain texts. And as soon as he’d finished talking, they all clustered around him just to get a blessing or a touch of him. Every one of those people was Han Chinese from the People’s Republic of China. Sixty people amidst 1.2 billion is a tiny percentage, but there are more sixty people every day, and I think that’s something that goes against all our polarized thoughts—these guys over here and these guys over there—and actually shows a certain deeper wisdom in the Dalai Lama’s and the Tibetan Buddhist vision that everything is connected and you can’t separate one from the other.

Thurman: You know, it would be a huge thing … actually, it would be an amazing thing when Hu, or whoever, [Laughter] President Hu or President Whoever, realizes that the Chinese emperors could not put a Mercedes in every household in China and therefore they had to patronize religion and spirituality so if the Chinese people couldn’t all be upper middle class or super filthy rich or whatever it would be, they could all at least have some sort of spiritual satisfaction. That was key. That was why China was a great Buddhist nation. And so when they finally make that turn and instead of Jung Zemin preaching out and hiding in the closet from the Falun Gong and then sending police out to beat them up and dismember them, instead of that, they get the coolness of patronizing. The new thing will be that for the first time in Chinese Buddhist history, Tibetan Buddhism will be a huge component of Chinese Buddhism. Because traditionally Tantra or esoteric Buddhism was never big in China. It existed, but it was minor because Buddhist esotericism deals with the female element in life, and you know, China in the ancient Confucian time was no California. They were a little bit scared of the power of women. They’ve tended to be since Confucius’s time. And so it did much better in Japan, where they had Amaterasu and this and that… a little more something about it. But now, it’s hugely popular in Taiwan and all over the Chinese community, and when His Holiness went to Taiwan, it was like Jesus had returned—more than the
Pope. They were flipping. He is Kuan Yin to them, you know. He is the Messiah. Avalokitesvara is the Buddhist Christ. And, you know, he’s a little bit angelic but a little bit human, and he’s the human form of it, and that has really grown into the Chinese mind broadly, and there’s so much underground Tibetan Buddhism in China that we hear about. My friend, a Tibetan scholar who lives in Germany, had a wonderful idea; I thought it was really wonderful, which is that when Hu Jintao, or whoever Jintao, talks to the Dalai Lama and they make peace and they leave Tibet alone—one country, two systems—and Tibetans start to thrive under the management of the Tibetans, and the Chinese who can’t breathe up there get to go home. Then the Dalai Lama will become a great teacher within China patronized by Hu, or whoever, and that Hu or whoever will become finally popular to his own people and he won’t have to send out People’s armed police to beat them up. And they’ll actually like him because he’ll be presenting Dalai Lama to them, which will give them some spiritual satisfaction. And then, the brilliant thing is…. Of course, they still will be Chinese Buddhists learning from the Tibetans, and the great thing about Chinese Buddhists among all Buddhists is they’re the most vegetarian of all the Buddhists in all Buddhist countries. They have the best vegetarian cooking: sweet and sour wood ear, like all kind of weird barnacles they take out of the woods, and bamboo this and that. Really good, and you’d just never think you’d eat the big weird mushrooms like you couldn’t believe. So then, there’s a big grain drain in China today because the wealthier Chinese are eating pork once a day or even twice a day instead of once a month, and there are hundreds of millions of them, so they’re feeding all that grain to the pigs, and once they get back more into their Buddhism, they’ll stop eating those poor pigs and they’ll eat their wood ears and weird things, and this will save the economy of China enormously. And the world grain supply will be vastly benefited by the Chinese having this return to their spiritual thing. And there were one billion Chinese Buddhists, after all, and this will be an enormous thing on the planet. And they’ve been deprived totally of any spiritual relief other than worshipping Mao, who is not nearly as cute as Amida Buddha or Avalokitesvara or Tara or Kuan Yin. [Laughter] Mao? He looked cute when he was young, but old? Really. And this would be a wonderful side benefit.

Gonnerman: We’ve reached that portion of the evening when we’d like to bring people in the audience into the conversation, so if you have a question or comment to contribute, please line up behind one of the two aisle mikes and we’ll bring you into the discussion.

Thurman: It could be one of the reasons they’re sort of nervous about talking to the Dalai Lama because it would be such a huge thing amongst the Chinese people. That would be embarrassing to them.

Iyer: Yes, and I always think that the reason that they hurl these schoolyard taunts at him is that they’re terrified of his power because he has power of precisely the kind that they can’t trump or touch, which is invisible power, moral power, spiritual power, and therefore power around the world. However rich, assertive, established China becomes materially, it can’t get at that.
Thurman: Exactly. But the point is, he wants to give that to them. Now, China has been dealt with paternalistically by the Western economies and the Western corporations because they all have a fantasy they’re going to make a lot of money in China. We used to call it in the Tibet movement “the billion shoelace syndrome.” “Oh, we’ll sell them a billion shoelaces.” Meanwhile, they’re going to have a billion shoelace factories and crush our shoelace industry, which we’re now seeing. So the point is that the world is now going to be seeing them as a competitor. Already the resources of Africa and South America and Indonesia and the oil… Everything. They’re going to be buying up everything. And so then people are going to start the old sort of racism about the Chinese that all us whites have a little bit under the skin—not so much in California because everyone is enlightened in California, but the Midwest and the East will rise up, at which time, who would be the best goodwill ambassador for China in the world? Who could possibly be better than the Dalai Lama? “Oh, now, don’t get racist with them. Oh, the Chinese are so nice.” [Laughter] I mean, western sinologists—they all say, “Oh, the Chinese are different; they don’t like to lose face. They can never do this.” Treat them like a bunch of ten-year-olds having tantrums. They pretend like they’re different beings because they have tantrums that they can’t recover from. Meanwhile, what about some of our politicians and their things about losing face and stubbornly persisting in asinine policies, and so forth? [Laughter] How about that? How about whitey losing face? I’d like to know what difference. So the Dalai Lama would be the most … and he is beloved everywhere on the planet where they’ve ever known him or seen him. And he’s there saying, Be nice. The Chinese are important; they’re one-fifth of humanity, they have great talent, they’re an ancient civilization. If they would learn what their ancient civilization was…. Confucius was no nervous about lying, for example, that he didn’t allow for the writing of fiction. They were so much into telling the truth, the Chinese. And then a Communist says, You can’t believe anything they say. Statistics: Oh, we produced ten million cabbages this week, and meanwhile they imported three cabbages from India. [Laughter] They haven’t even seen a cabbage. But it’s a terrible, messed-up situation. So the Dalai Lama has real service to offer to the Chinese—leadership as well as people—and why don’t they accept it, is the thing. I’m sure they will. It’s just fear; it’s pure fear. But what they should be afraid of is they should be afraid of not doing that—that’s what they should be afraid of—because their own people will get them if they continue to suppress them.

Question from the Audience: Hi. Thank you for coming. My question is about the comment you made about happiness being perception and not circumstances. I can’t help but extrapolate from those terms that happiness is about self-delusion and about kind of rejecting truth. And all of my intuitive opinions about truth would want to counteract that because truth is supposed to be very good and what people are supposed to be striving for and searching for. So is there a conception of happiness that you have that reconciles truth and perceptions and refutes the self-delusions?

Iyer: My assumption would be that happiness is a muscle that we cultivate. I had previously thought that happiness is a choice that we make, and then I was speaking to Matthieu Ricard, who happens to be a distinguished monk as well as a Ph.D. in science, and he said, No, it’s much more like a muscle. And each one of us has our own set limit.
For example, I wouldn’t be able to dunk a basketball, but I could learn through working hard to jump much higher to shoot the ball better. And so many of us work so hard on our bodies these days, just making them more limber, making them stronger, making ourselves healthier, and we don’t do the same with our minds. And when we talk about mental training, what it really has to do with, I would imagine, not having done it myself, of course, is calmness, self-possession, and happiness. Self-delusion is misery because it’s a very, very short-time kind of happiness that’s going to leave you a little later suicidal, so that would be a fraudulent happiness or chimerical happiness. And I think the only kind of happiness that’s worthwhile is when you see things as they are. And there are different kinds of perceptions: some that open a door to doing more and some that leave you just trapped within your own world. I mean, whenever the Dalai Lama comes to Japan, people ask him … they pour out their hearts to him as they do everywhere and they say, What do we do with out shut-in kids or the fact that we’ve lost confidence or we don’t think we can do anything? And he says, Go to Africa, volunteer, do just as you were saying. Do something for somebody else and immediately you’re out of the prison of yourself and you can’t even remember that you were feeling miserable the day before. So I think your question is a very good one and one has to distinguish between happiness and delusion or fantasy and self-hypnotism, as it were. But I think a real kind of happiness is precisely about clear-sightedness. When I was traveling with the Dalai Lama in his train a few months ago, somebody came up to him and said, “You have seen 1.2 million of your people killed, you have suffered in exile for 49 years, you are looking after 6 million people who are imprisoned and who will officially be in prison for six years if they even carry a picture of you. How do you remain so cheerful and buoyant and confident?” And he said: My profession. And I’ve spent a lot of time trying to think what an interesting answer and what did he mean by “my profession,” but I think he really means: it’s my practice, it’s my commitment as a monk, and what I’ve done over these many, many years is build so solid a basis in myself that even as these impermanent sorrows are passing through, beyond me and inside me, even, there’s a core that absolutely knows, as he always says, that truth will prevail and that good things will happen and that all of this is, in fact, the delusion. I mean, just as you were saying, we are born happy and we train ourselves to become ignorant or miserable. But in some ways, those of us in the West grow up with the notion of original sin, and I know, living in Japan, people there in the East talk a lot about original happiness. In other words, we’re fundamentally happy and the task in life is to get rid of all the clutter and obscuration to find again that happiness that we had when we were three years old or whenever we were fully clear and aware of the moment.

Thurman: I didn’t know you were a dharma teacher.

Iyer: I’m not. I’m a journalist for Time magazine!

Thurman: This actually takes us back to basically what Buddhism is. As I grow older, maybe 20 years ago or something, I finally began to realize—I began to feel grateful that when the Buddha attained Enlightenment, which means not just some mystical something; it means that from the Buddhist point of view theoretically, anyway, it means that he came to understand the nature of reality precisely, exactly, and thoroughly. And
then, this is what I’m grateful about, he then smiled, and you could come to the exact understanding of reality and then go, Oh no, what a bummer! Oh, that’s really awful! [Laughter] I mean, that’s what we might suspect reality is: a bummer. We’re all scared of that. So the discovery on which Buddhism is based is that the nature of reality itself is bliss: it is happiness. The world is made of happiness. It is the fabric of the world. Nirvana of the Four Noble Truths: nirvana is the one that is actually real. Samsara is unreal, was the Buddha’s discovery. And so, therefore, another slogan I sometimes use when people say, What is Buddhism in a word? Buddhism is engaged realism. Just as you said, it’s knowing how things are. Buddhism is knowing the world. If you really know what your molecules are, if you know what the energy in your molecules is, you will realize that it is what they call “bliss freedom indivisible” in the sort of more advanced, more explicit teachings of Buddhism. Buddha just said nirvana. And so what he discovered was that he as a human being who had been miserable, dissatisfied, worried—actually, he was pretty in this world; he was a happy prince, he had a lovely wife he was in love with, he had a lot of other entertainments, and he would have been a king, but he realized that was unsatisfying because you grow old, you get sick, you die, and all the people you love die, and if you’re attached to all of that, you’re going to be miserable. And then he discovered that the actual nature is that it is all made of bliss. So therefore the more ignorance is not bliss: ignorance is suffering, it’s the root of suffering. And the more you get beyond ignorance and the more you know reality, the more free of suffering you become and the happier you become. Most importantly, it is opening the awareness of the nature of life and the world and then its own nature bubbles up in you, which is happiness. And therefore that happiness doesn’t depend on this or that circumstance; it doesn’t depend on this or that success or this or that thing—you yourself or others. It depends on being open to what you really are and where you really are, and then you’re made of it; you’re made of happiness. And this is a startling discovery. No teaching almost…. This is Buddha’s great discovery. No teaching really teaches that. They say: Oh, yes, well, God is happy, and then somehow he was in an off-day when he made the world and people are kind of screwed up [Laughter] but later he’ll make you happy,” in the theistic tradition. The materialistic traditions don’t have to worry about that because we don’t exist anyway so it’s just all going to be obliterated and we’re just hanging out in our Cadillacs until we get obliterated [Laughter], the materialists think, so that’s the solution for them. But in fact we are ready right now to discover that and to promote that and to teach that, and to teach people how they can understand that. That is the power and the widespread, long-lasting usefulness of the Buddhist tradition … of the Buddhist education. That is what it is about. So it’s no accident that His Holiness’s first bestseller in this country was The Art of Happiness, written by somebody other than his translators, by the way, which is very important in communicating the message. But that’s what Buddhism is, you know. So it’s neither a muscle…. Perception it is—perception of reality, though. It’s not a fantasy reality. However, fantasy is very useful because when you’re stuck in ignorance and perceiving the world as all of you against me, which is the way the self-centered person does—he looks at the universe and there’s a lot more of the universe than there is of me, so I’m clearly going to lose [Laughter], so when you’re stuck there and then somebody says, Well, but the universe really is bliss, then you and the others enfolded in this inconceivable matrix of bliss, you can’t immediately understand it, so it helps to start by imagining that it is possible, and then
that gives you the motive to slowly peel away the delusions and come to understand it. Releasing the imagination from being stuck in the routine of me versus you and then imaging being you and imaging how by being you, between you and me, we can share something—that’s the beginning of it. So imagination is essential to begin with. Will you forgive me for a little basic Buddhism?

Iyer: No… I think one of the first things I learned as a non-Buddhist journalist traveling in Asia was that suffering is not the same thing as unhappiness. In other words, suffering is a law of the universe. The First Noble Truth: everything fades. everything dies, everything’s impermanent, but that’s very different from unhappiness, which is just the position we can or cannot bring to that.

Thurman: I have a vision in Tibet, for example. There’s one image that’s always indelibly in my mind from the last time I visited there in the Barkor, and there were a couple of Khampas—older ones, very weather-beaten faces, very few teeth left, very poor, red cheeks and dusty and having prostrated to Lhasa, and they’re sitting there in the dust, you know, and there’s a grin on their faces like Ahhhhh. And they’re really uncomfortable. And then standing next to them were three or four Chinese police with sneakers and sticks and guns and polished uniforms looking at them, and can’t wait to get off duty and run off to one of the 1,387 brothels, and so forth, to try to get a moment’s relief, but even that will not be that much fun for them. And so they’re suffering in the dust; happy guys, happy campers. And then there’s someone in control who is miserable, really miserable—would be so much happier back in his village with his sweetheart rather than this horrible frontier assignment. So that image is always with me.

Question from the Audience: Thank you all very much for this evening. I wonder if anyone knows whether the fate of the Panchen Lama has ever been definitively learned. If yes, what was it? If not, what are the current theories?

Thurman: The Panchen Lama: no one knows where he is except, presumably, somebody in the Chinese Guoanbu (the Chinese CIA). And nobody even knows if he’s alive or if he’s healthy, his parents and his tutors, although the Chinese say he’s on some military base somewhere in central China and he’s getting an education and he’s living a life and being protected from the Dalai Lama clique. [Laughter] The Dalai Lama clique is all six million Tibetans, actually, is what they’ve proven by their courageous acts. That’s what the Dalai Lama clique it. But nobody knows that. And as for the other Panchen Lama, who the Tibetans call the fake Panchen Lama because of the way he was selected, he’s a rather nice fellow, people say, and he’s learning and he’ll be a useful lama, probably. It’s sad that Tibetans will not accept him because of the Chinese interference. That would be a complicated thing. When they do talk to the Dalai Lama, of course, he will insist on seeing the real Panchen Lama, but then, by the charitable nature of the Dalai Lama, I’m sure he will decide that the other Panchen Lama that they’ve trained up can be considered the speech emanation of the previous Panchen Lama. There will be a mind emanation and a speech emanation, and then…. No, Pico will be the speech emanation, and mind and body and speech, so they can have three, four, five. Tibetans are very pragmatic and they incarnate all over the place [Laughter]
and that’s how they emigrate to other countries. To avoid having to get a visa or a green card from Homeland Security, they just die and incarnate in the womb of a nice lady in California. [Laughter] That’s how they do it. Or New York….So don’t worry. But actually, Panchen Lama’s birthday or something is coming up tomorrow or the next day, right? My friend Ruth Hayward told me that, I think, in the next day or two—April 23 or 25 is the Panchen Lama’s…. What is it? It’s tomorrow, right? So it’s very nice that you asked that question. Tomorrow is the Dalai Lama’s Gedhun Choekyi Nyima chosen, recognized Panchen Rimpoche’s birthday, so we all want to wish him a happy birthday, and hopefully he’ll have a chance to teach what he’s learning and hopefully he’s well and will be…. Although, I think the Chinese would try to keep him well if they can because it would be a card they’ll play later in the poker game.

**Question from the Audience:** I think my question is a bit of an offshoot of the lovely question that you asked. You talked about the wheel of samsara, if you will—the bigger, faster, stronger, harder, better, more, just pushing, grind. It was nice to hear you talk about it. The opposite, obviously, being what you talked about greater presence. I’ve struggled in trying to achieve, if you will, the point of contact—having greater consciousness, greater awareness of what’s happening, getting outside my shell of limitations, glass ceiling, however you want to define it. But getting away from that bigger, faster, stronger, new, I feel like I’ve just applied that same push towards consciousness. [Laughter] So I’m not a bigger, faster, stronger, more Mercedes; I’m a bigger, faster, stronger, more presence now. [Laughter] So I’d just like to hear your experience with that potential struggle.

**Thurman:** Well, the thing is that the medicines in the Buddhist pharmacopeias of educating different kinds of people different ways. There is a method of doing bigger, faster, stronger, quicker, longer, etcetera, and making some progress and eventually having bigger, faster, stronger collide with bigger, faster, stronger, and sort of collapsing in a heap of joy. They have that method. And then they have the one of not striving and just relaxing and then letting go and doing this and that, but for a very few. But the one about relaxing and don’t strive and just be here now and do all that can be very delusional for people, and especially the idea that what Buddhism really is a kind of meditation where you don’t think anything and you just step out of your thoughts, and then your final mantra is “Duhhhhh” [Laughter] and that’s Enlightenment. That’s a very big misunderstanding. That is really…. Because we do start out kind of very close to “Duhhhhh,” and if we think that’s where we get finally with “Duhhhhh,” then we’re actually making a big mistake because what happens when you just do that: you can get a little effect from that because you’ll feel more calm. It’s like a kind of meditational Prozac where you’ll feel better because you’re not thinking about how miserable you are, but your underlying misery is there, and the minute someone steps on your toe it pops out and you get all upset, and so on. So there’s a little bigger, stronger, faster, deeper, sharper, and it’s good to do that in a modest way, and then, luckily, eventually, as I say, you just melt down probably when you keep at it. But you have to keep at it. You can’t just pretend to melt down ahead of time [Laughter] and keep the bigger, stronger, faster ego hiding inside, because then it jumps out and bites you later. How many people who
meditated for how many years jump up and they say, “Eureka! Now I’m enlightened”? “I own a Cadillac or a BMW or a Rolls-Royce, and many disciples.”

**Iyer:** A temple.

**Thurman:** How many people are there, and what are they meditating on? They were clearly not meditating on selflessness, on reality, on the importance of the other—on let the other be bigger, stronger, faster and yourself go under and get down to reality rather than just dominate something. What do you say [Iyer]?

**Iyer:** Well, a Buddhist magazine once asked me to write a piece on desire, and I knew they would want me to write about sex, intoxicants, or addictions, and I said the most important desire was the desire for enlightenment—spiritual materialism as Chögyam Trungpa said—and how that was what was underlying all these surface things. They never ran the piece. That wasn’t what they wanted to hear, I must say. But, spending a lot of time in Dharamsala in recent years, I ran into a Californian monk who studies and lives with the Dalai Lama and travels around the world with him. And this goes back to what we were saying about how so many emotions pass so quickly across his face. And this monk said one of the very touching things that we all know about His Holiness is that, on a stage in front of 20,000 people, he’s so unselfconscious, it’s almost as if he’s alone at home. He’ll throw back his head in laughter, he’ll wave to his friends, he’ll show every flicker of his emotions. And he said that often, before huge audiences, His Holiness would shed tears. And most often that was when he was thinking of the Buddha or Milarepa one of these great Tibetan figures, and ones really, really trying hard and never, never giving up. But he said that the other time that His Holiness often shed tears was when he traveled in the West and someone would say, “What’s the fastest, cheapest, easiest way to get enlightenment?” And His Holiness, apparently faced with that, just.… Isn’t that right? You’ve probably witnessed that.

**Thurman:** Yes, he did.

**Iyer:** He always stresses that this takes millions and millions and millions of incarnations before you see any progress, so probably, as you were saying, even the sense that “Oh, I’m getting further” is one of the first delusions, to go back to the earlier question. It’s not a quick program.

**Thurman:** Well, they have a huge phenomenology, though, of where you are at. You can test yourself. And they do have so that you can sort of figure out where you are, and that’s considered useful.

**Gonnerman:** “Have I made any spiritual progress since we last met?” [Laughter]

**Question from Audience:** Hi, Pico. The last time we met, you were lecturing or talking about Islam in California, and if I didn’t know better, I would have thought that in this, among the speakers, you, that Bob was the journalist and you were the professor of religion. [Laughter] But I don’t think that would make either of you happy. But talking
of, why the stress on happiness? And I don’t want to ask it in a tautological fashion, but life could be about contribution, about saving the earth, as you brought up, and unless you feel that a person who’s happy will contribute better, will achieve more, will save the earth more efficiently (and I think there is some evidence to the contrary—that tortured souls in fact produce great works). I would not give up Mozart, for example. Maybe you can talk about the indirect relationship. Okay, Mozart eventually created a lot of happiness, but basically my question is: Why the stress on happiness and achieving happiness in life?

Iyer: I think it’s because happiness is contribution, service, and selflessness. In other words, that’s what really is being talked about. I have many friends who have been very miserable and then they’ve borne a child, and instantly there’s a radiance, and they say, “I would not give up this moment or these years for anything. I cannot believe how fulfilled I am.” And the reason is they’re living entirely for that person. All they’re thinking about is the welfare of that little child, and they’re prepared to run in front of trucks and things just to protect that child. In other words, they’re contributing to another life, they’ve forgotten themselves, and they’re thinking of a larger good. And I think happiness if just … it’s a way, just as Bob was talking about enlightened self-interest, most of us know we’re happiest when we’re making somebody else smile. That’s really what the emphasis is. Your question is a very good one because we’re sold the notion that happiness means having a swimming pool or a Porsche or being tanner than anyone else. But we know that none of that is going to make us happy. And the only happiness we trust is the happiness we don’t even have time to formulate in my experience.

Question (continued): Well, it’s more like if I had to make a choice, I would be really unhappy, but I would be making a fantastic contribution of some sort. So that was really my question. There might be a trade-off between being really unhappy personally but making a great contribution.

Iyer: I think most of us feel so rewarded and realize if we are making a great contribution that that would really temper any discomfort, suffering, or inconvenience we’re going through. Look at somebody like Bill Gates, who has spent so much ingenuity and imagination to making money, and now he’s realized his greatest happiness is using that same ingenuity and imagination to give it away and to give it to people who really need it. And we’re seeing that. I think it’s part of the life cycle. Your notion of happiness when you’re sixteen is probably very different from when you’re forty-six, and the evolution has to do with moving out of the self into a larger sense of responsibility. That doesn’t answer your question, I don’t think.

Thurman: Sure it does. She’s asking, Is happiness useful? And maybe then you’re feeling you’re not going to go for happiness unless it’s useful. But I think everyone…. There’s even a commercial, actually, of some mother and she’s in a kitchen and some kid is throwing something on the floor and the dog peed on the icebox and all kinds of things and she has a headache and something’s burning on the stove and it’s just completely unmanageable, and then she takes a Zoloft or a Prozac or an aspirin or something, [Laughter] and finally like this she takes care of this and that and then she’s much more
effective. And I think any mother who has a child or father who has a child—when you’re in a really good mood and your child is all grumpy or something is going on, you can figure out a way to cheer them up. If you yourself are all grumped out, then even they might be cheerful and you’ll bring them down. So I think if you have this kind of happiness that isn’t the artificial one based on some ego gratification but is just being in touch with reality, you’ll be much more effective in saving the world. You’ll be able to suffer much more heartily, and you’ll be generally … you’ll inspire others. And also, you won’t stay happy if you worry about how happy you are. Shantideva is the great teacher of this, and it’s like definite: when were you ever happy? He calls on us to analyze, the great Shantideva and his *Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*. And the one time…. We are only happy, if you analyze when you are happy, when you’re not thinking about whether you’re happy or not. The end of being happy is when you start to think, How happy was I? or How happy am I? And the minute you think that: I’m not happy enough. Of course, it was much better yesterday. Tomorrow, another time. Let’s have a cigarette and think about it. Then you’re going to be totally unhappy. So if you do that, just go straight to the thing and don’t think about how happy you are, and then you will be happy and then you’ll definitely save the world. How can we save the world if we don’t let it be itself? If we think we need something from it, we will continue to destroy it. Even if we think we need to save it, we will continue to destroy it. Only if we are happy with whatever it is, then we will extend that to save the world by leaving it alone.

Iyer: If I can say just one quick thing. I think your point is a wonderful one insofar as the pursuit of happiness is written in almost to the Constitution of this country, and most of us know that the pursuit of happiness is doomed to fail, or happiness can’t be successfully pursued. And in that sense, I live in Japan, and I think in our ancestral home of India, there’s much more a sense that the constitutional right would have to do with the acceptance of reality. There’s much less presumption of entitlement in Japan. People don’t expect to be happy; they’re not conscious that they’re pursuing happiness, and yet they’ve got a great gift for finding joy in the moment and they’re surprised by joy, in some sense, rather than disappointed because the happiness they’ve been promised by their founding fathers hasn’t come to their doorsteps. [Laughter]

Thurman: Actually, Matthieu Ricard’s wonderful book was written to respond to French intellectuals who were like, “*Le bonheur! Je n’aime pas le bonheur!*” You know, sitting there on the Rive Gauche, Café Deux Magots, with their Gauloises: Who needs *le bonheur*? We don’t need *le bonheur*. [Laughter] And so he defended happiness and he went to Montesquieu and all kinds of fabulous sources in the classical world, and he proved how wonderful and how important it is. It’s a beautiful book: Matthieu Ricard’s book on happiness, in defense of happiness. It’s marvelous.

Question from the Audience: Hi. Thanks again for this discussion. I have a question regarding … you mentioned how little kids often are just happy to begin with, and I think that’s something that I normally see, but I was wondering if you have any advice or elaboration on the difference of training your mind versus your heart, especially for adults and even children with, maybe, intellectual disabilities who might have trouble
with problem solving or children with autism who inherently have a problem stepping outside of their own shoes, and advice on how to work with such kinds of people.

**Thurman:** That’s so difficult. Well, I don’t know. I’m sure people who have dealt with autistic children of their own or of their friends have a much better idea of what to do. But it’s like dealing with people in any kind of difficult situation. The person who truly cares for them—who truly is willing to be with them and to sort of accept them however they are, first of all, there’s this sort of basic acceptance, which then gives them a space in which they can unfold whatever it is that they can, and then help them work that out. I think it is that basic thing that people can feel if you’re looking at them with an idea of their being defective and you want them to be some other way and yet you’re trying to be kind and nice, they feel that, no matter what their disability, and then this has a crippling effect on them. But if you can completely accept them as they are while being completely committed to helping them improve or ameliorate their situation, I think that fundamental ground of acceptance is really, really key. I know that people who are dying, for example, and being with them, that they can sense very much when someone is basically getting into the tragedy with them. You know, enlightened consciousness, they say, is very complicated, actually, not simple. And it is complicated in the sense that an enlightened person sees a suffering person totally compassionately and feels their feeling and therefore feels their feeling to be intolerable. If I have a burning pan on my hand, that’s intolerable to me. An enlightened person feels that about another person’s hand. They’re not walled off from sensing the other person’s feeling. But at the same time, even that suffering that the other person is feeling, they see the whole thing as built of a deeper energy that is a blissful energy, so they have a double awareness. As one Japanese great Buddhist philosopher, Keiji Nishitani, who was a friend of mine, he was really an amazing guy … but he used this metaphor of double exposure. An enlightened consciousness is like it has the picture the samsara an unenlightened sees it, but it also sees it as the enlightened see it. And that’s how we can really effectively be loving to the unenlightened, because loving means wishing for the other to be free of suffering and to be happy, and if you have no idea of what happiness is yourself, how can you genuinely wish them to be happy? You would just get into their misery with them, which wouldn’t help them at all, right? So it’s this complicated awareness. So dealing with people who are in some sort of terrible situation, difficult situation, I think the foundation is that you completely love and accept them as they are and see their fundamental perfection within their situation for themselves, and not see them as something awful or terrible or that you’re averse to or frightened of. And then, though, with a more complicated thing, help them get a better purchase on their situation at the same time. So you don’t just passively leave them there; but you do both at the same time. The wisdom and compassion being together is the key, and the wisdom doesn’t get sucked into some sort of sentimental sympathy, but the compassion is completely committed to improving their own feelings about themselves, I think. But I’m a terrible professor, so I don’t really know. You should really ask my wife. [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** We’ll take one more question, and then Pico and Bob will be at the book table in the lobby.
**Question from the Audience:** Hi. We were discussing earlier the notion of education, with one perception of education being almost an unlearning or a drawing out, and almost reclaiming our innocence or kind of negating the complexities that we’ve built up in the world and going back to a simpler version of reality. And then you also have Tibetan Buddhism and Tantric philosophy, which, I think, really embraces everything that exists, even what we may think may be bad, and just that everything is perfect just because it exists. Do you see that as a contradiction between these notions of simplicity and complexity, and how do you deal with that?

**Iyer:** My sense is all the problems come in the mind. That’s to say, when we’re at college, we have certain expectations of our formal learning and very different ones of what we do in our spare time. And it’s those expectations that make all the difference. You’re absolutely right. We could get as much from the classroom as we do from our friends, but we have certain notions in our heads that aren’t being met or that are met indirectly in one place, and we’re being wonderfully surprised in another, and so we say that we’re getting more educated in the margins than at the center of our lives. But you’re right: potentially all of them are equally instructive, I think, if that begins to address your question. And in terms of simplicity, I see the most important enduring simplicity is the one on the far side of complexity. So if you look at the works of Shakespeare, Graham Greene, any great artist, you see them begin with a form of comedy, pass through tragedy, and then arrive at a second comedy—a much more enduring comedy that knows all the suffering and complication of the world but still can smile on it just as Bob’s Buddha smiled when he had penetrated reality, which consists of suffering, in part, but there he is smiling. So the simplicity that lasts is one that isn’t the full knowledge of the world but embraces fully knowledge of the world and is still content with the way things are.

**Thurman:** My mother thought Shakespeare was Buddha, and especially, you know, “There’s a special providence in the fall of every sparrow.” The readiness is all—a very Buddhist insight. She was very much into Shakespeare. In your earlier question about happiness, there was one thing that I was trying to say that I forgot when I was talking. I think happiness has a bad reputation for French intellectuals and others because it’s associated with hedonism and sort of ego-centric, exploitative happiness, like pleasure, whereas in the Buddha’s definition, happiness comes from the awareness of reality, which is called the awareness of selflessness—the experience of selflessness—having yourself expand in some ways by merging with another or with an aesthetic experience or with the universe or with the planet or with whatever it might be. So therefore, that deeper type of happiness is not to be confused with ego-centric hedonism because, in fact, to achieve it, you have to forget your ego-centric desire and therefore you then become … that’s what makes you happy. And in that process of being selfless, you are connected to the reality—you’re much better aware of what’s real—and as the great Buddhist philosopher Dharmakirti said, “All successful human action is preceded by accurate knowledge,” in other words, knowing what the situation is is the first thing you need to act successfully. So therefore, if we know the state of the planet, then we will act to save it. If we don’t, we will persist in delusions and we will destroy it, which we mostly are doing.
Iyer: That’s why happiness isn’t pleasure, and that’s why happiness lasts while pleasure doesn’t.

Thurman: Yes. Well, it seems to be fairly pleasurable, they say, also. [Laughter]

Iyer: Yes, a different, deeper kind of pleasure.

Thurman: Well, as long as you don’t stop and try to grasp it as pleasure, apparently.

Iyer: I believe that, especially coming from you.

Thurman: I believe it. I always reassure people that I am the most miserable person. [Laughter] And I just tell them to ask my wife or my children. As I told Pico earlier, my middle son calls me “Bob Get-a-Life Thurman,” [Laughter] so I don’t pretend to be happy. But I have a sense that it’s there. I do have that feeling.

Gonnerman: Pico Iyer, Bob Thurman, friends at the Aurora Forum, thank you very much. [Applause]

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Pico Iyer was born in Oxford, England to parents from India, grew up in Southern California, and currently lives in Kyoto, Japan. He is the author of many books about cultures converging, including Video Night in Kathmandu; The Lady and the Monk; and Falling off the Map. His new book, The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, follows upon The Global Soul, a book that has enabled people around the world to better comprehend the process and promise of globalization. His articles appear frequently in such magazines as Harper’s, The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, and Time, where he is a regular contributor on world affairs. He has contributed introductions to more than 20 books, has written the liner notes for four Leonard Cohen albums, and has seen his most recent novel, Abandon, translated into languages including Russian, Turkish, and Indonesian. He is often a retreatant at the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur.

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Mark Gonnerman (moderator) earned his Ph.D. in religious studies at Stanford and is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

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