



Circling the Sacred Mountain: A Spiritual Adventure Through the Himalayas

Robert A.F. Thurman

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Explores Tibetan Buddhism as part of a spiritual and physical journey to Mount Kailash, holiest of the Himalayan mountains, to reach sacred graveyards, majestic monasteries, and meditation caves.

Circling the Sacred Mountain: A Spiritual Adventure Through the Himalayas Details

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From Reader Review Circling the Sacred Mountain: A Spiritual Adventure Through the Himalayas for online ebook

P.B. Morlen says

I absolutely loved this book. Both Robert and Tad are brilliant writers, painting a clear picture of Tibet in the 1970s when they traveled to Mount Kailash. Furthering my research for my own novel, this book inspired me in so many ways. In fact, I intend on meeting "Tenzin", Mr. Thurman soon in a workshop I plan on attending. There I will tell him personally how much his book meant to me.

Scott Rennie says

At first I found the chosen style of this book, chopping between the insights of Robert Thurman and his friend Tad, a bit annoying. But as I settled in to the book I came to really enjoy their different perspectives. I found the Blade Wheel teachings revealed on their journey to be really helpful to me in practice and in life. A very enjoyable book although the last chapter or two seemed a bit like unnecessary padding. I would thoroughly recommend this to any readers who have a good basic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism.

Sphinx Feathers says

This was supposed to be very profound as it was written by a former Buddhist monk who returned to being a layperson, but because of all the sexuality within it mostly just was extraordinarily uncomfortable. There were parts that were very beautiful and were, in fact, profound, but mostly it stuck out in my mind as being embarrassing to read. Similarly, many of the arguments weren't very well written as easily contradicted and as such, it wasn't a good book was for someone looking to learn about Buddhism.

Rick says

spiritual pilgrimage from Buddhist/American perspective.

Renee says

That fact that Robert Thurman is the father of one of my favorite actresses (yes this is Uma's dad) only adds to the layers of why I like him as an author. This is a great book and a great read.

Chris says

This is a book of two natures. One is that it is a travelogue, describing the sights, sounds, and smells of the

journey, with a small group of men, to one of the holiest mountains on the earth. The other is that it is an autohagiography of sorts; documenting one man's own spiritual triumphs as he approaches the mountain which he has sought after for years. The first author, Tad Wise, paints himself as a simple man, of artisanal pursuits, who vacillates between great spirituality and great vice. The second author, Robert Thurman, paints himself as an authority, a scholar, and a true believer. He denies being any sort of holy man or paragon of his kind, although he does not ever engage in any sort of self-effacement or self-critique.

Thurman, who is actually a scholar (and believer) of Tibetan Buddhism, prefers to go by his Tibetan initiatory name of Tenzin. Some of his detractors refer to him pejoratively as "Buddha Bob." Thurman is remarkable, though, in his own way, claiming to be the first westerner to be initiated as a monk into Tibetan Buddhism, along with being, as he says, a close, personal friend of the Dalai Lama. One cannot dispute his accomplishments; but alas, humility is not among his virtues. He reminded me, throughout the book, of one of many who turned to Buddhism, and eastern spirituality more generally, through the Beat generation. Indeed, Wise makes several clouded references to the Beats throughout the book, even referring to himself at one point as a "dharma bum."

But it also means that he carries some of the less fortunate baggage of the Beats along with him, through all this time. Namely, the sort of vulgar chauvinism that alienated many women from the movement. The traveling party to and around the mountain consists entirely of men. Both authors refer to the women in their lives as being the most important people to them, but this special attribute does not apparently extend to women outside of their domains. Wise even considers, near the end, whether he should buy a 15 year old girl as a sex slave and leave his wife, or whether he could just pay the girl's family off to have one night alone with her before he left, since she was going to be "ruined" by a polyandrous marriage anyway. He determines it would be too much of a hassle either way. And this is not the only moment in the book when he describes a strongly pedophilic urge.

The imagery is also rather off-putting at times, hearkening to the sort of early 1970s neo-Freudianism that plagued a lot of social and religious theory. Many things are described variously as penises or phalluses, leaking semen, or as breasts oozing milk. At one point the mountain is described as being almost ready to "fuck the sky" in language actually that vulgar. The book frequently falls into vulgarity, both sexual and otherwise, and it is not limited to only one of the authors. They will interrupt a relatively reasonable passage with startlingly coarse language, and it does not seem to have any rhyme or reason about it.

There are subtler prejudices at work throughout the book as well. Both authors are extremely dismissive and flat-out prejudiced against the Chinese, hardly ever referring to them as anything else but "Chinese Oppressors." They demonize, but also simultaneously try to dismiss and emasculate all of the Chinese people who appear in the book. Without exception, the Chinese officials at all points are compared to children or little boys, wielding their false sense of power and superiority over the tall white men. They are described as seeming to just want to "play soldier," and that they would not actually be able to do anything if the Americans actually didn't want to play along. The Tibetans themselves are often compared to, or related with, imagery of animals; one man near the end, in Nepal, is described as being almost "half animal."

Simultaneously, Tibetan people and Tibetan culture are also idealized, with Thurman holding up the simple life of spirituality that the Tibetans manage to maintain even while crushed under the boot of Chinese oppression, as an example of an "antidote" to modernity and commercialism; the Tibetans live with the earth, and not against it. The fact that almost all places they visit are described as being littered with trash does not bother him; obviously the pollution is due to the Chinese influence.

Throughout the book Thurman is variously zealous, pedantic, dismissive, brilliant, and insightful. His

lectures occasionally veer into the realm of the remarkable, and to a student of Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism or Tantra, he does have some great things to say. Tad Wise plays his part, variously, of being the bumbling acolyte, apostate, and aspirant, wrapped up into one. The book ends on a cliffhanger of sorts; you know that Thurman will continue on much as he always has as "Buddha Bob," but you wonder if Tad Wise actually does learn his lesson on this painful spiritual journey, or if he slips back in to old patterns of vice as soon as he returns to the States.

To a reader wishing to experience this book as a travelogue, an exciting journey through some of the most exotic and difficult terrain on earth to a location drenched in mystery, one might walk away a bit disappointed. There is not much thorough description of anything to really experience the immersion of good travel writing. To anyone interested in Tibetan Buddhism, this book does not provide much "introductory" information; it's very specifically focused on one Buddhist scripture (which Thurman himself has translated) which Thurman has chosen specifically to match the harsh adventure the men are undertaking by discussing equally hard truths. At the end, it still ends up being an interesting book, but I could hardly recommend it to anyone but the most interested.

Craig Bergland says

It was just alright for me. I very much enjoyed Tad Wise's sections, but Bob Thurman was way over my head.

Mo says

Sometimes "Buddha Bob" is a little too over the top for me. I am a sucker for travel narratives, tho, so I stuck it out to the end.

KatyLou says

This book is still on my bookshelf even though I read it two years ago. Not only a sacred mountain but also a most amazing pilgrimage

John says

Robert/Tenzin Thurman and a former student of his, Tad, lead us on a month-long pilgrimage to circumambulate Mt. Kailash, the cosmic center of the Tibetan Buddhist universe. Tad writes a disarmingly honest account of his frustrations and strivings with the spiritual aspect of the journey; Thurman's parts are primarily transcripts of his nightly dharma talks on the Blade Wheel of Mind Reform, an ancient sermon of defeating the demons of self-addiction. The interplay of their accounts works beautifully.

It must be hard to write a journey like this, negotiating the interaction between the forbidding and wonderful landscape with the transformations following from "internal" meditative practice. It is hard enough simply to write well about landscape and travel in the wild. Matthiessen's Snow Leopard is the unsurpassed modern

work in this genre.

Katrin says

This is written in a very fun way. Tad Wise is a cynical, womanizing jerk kind of a guy and he is describing the spiritual journey he took around Mt. Kailash in Tibet with Robert Thurman, who is meanwhile writing all of the Dharma talks he gave during the trip. Tad's descriptions are more fun to read, but without the Dharma and his slow transformation the book would be hard to take. (Since he's a cynical womanizing jerk)

Tony Gualtieri says

If you are interested in the self-obsessed musings of American Buddhist males as they lecture one another on Tibetan religion, then you're welcome to this book. If you're interested in learning about Kailash and walking the kora, then you'd be better served by another book.

Jim Parker says

Made we want to go Tibet and walk around the mountain. But if I can't do that I would like to go to one of Robert Thurman's retreats. Menla Mountain Retreat

Cathy Luchetti says

Been there, both in reality and in this amazing book.
