



# Our Skin is not Our Body

A CONVERSATION  
WITH ROBERT THURMAN AND HYUN KYUNG CHUNG

INTERVIEWED BY LLEWELLYN SMITH

According to many religions and spiritual traditions, the body is a sacred temple where the Divine is manifest.

For the Sufi, the challenge to embody “the qualities of God” is understood as a process of spiritual refinement, a purification of consciousness that leads to the revelation and recovery of these same sacred qualities from within one’s own nature, leading eventually to transformation in outer behavior and moral action.

The human body, our gift of life, obstructs such development if one uncritically identifies with and submits to bodily processes, actions, desires, and satisfactions. Yet our human body is the only vehicle available to us through which this spiritual refinement can happen. In Sufism this refinement is not achieved through asceticism, or by denying the body’s needs, or placing spirit in a false hierarchy above the body. One contemplates the body’s limitations while unveiling its potentials.

Love, charity, mercy, compassion and other Divine Attributes are made manifest in the world by our actions in and through our body, which becomes the site for outward comprehension and love-grounded action as well as inward contemplation of the Divine.

But throughout history—and throughout the monotheistic religions—the body has also been regarded as a site for continuous struggles over morality, gender dominance, racial oppression, commercialization, glamorization and profit.

What is our body, what is its meaning in this life? We put these questions and others to two spiritual luminaries with different cultural and life perspectives, both now teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Professor Hyun Kyung Chung is a lay theologian of the Presbyterian Church of Korea. Her theology embraces feminist and eco-feminist perspectives, as well as spiritualities of

Africa and Latin America and the legacies of Asian religious traditions. Much of her energies and writings are devoted to deepening interfaith dialogue and peacemaking, as well as critical issues in ecumenical theologies.

A prolific author and translator of ancient Buddhist manuscripts, Tenzin Robert Thurman is the Je Tsongkhapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University. In 1987, at the Dalai Lama’s request Thurman, with actor Richard Gere and composer Philip Glass, founded Tibet House in New York, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving Tibetan culture in exile.

Our provocative dialogue on the body and its significance explored numerous topics, including body as a continuum for life, the meaning of the Virgin Mary’s virginity, patriarchal dominance of women in religion, and why even Buddhists may be fearful of root canals.

**Who are we in relationship to our bodies?** Robert Thurman: Well, at my age it’s often a good idea to think as little about the body as possible since it’s falling apart at an accelerating rate. Luckily we are not only our bodies. From the Buddhist point of view we have an ongoing continuum of mind that goes from body to body, although there are different levels.

We have a concept of a coarse body, of the five sense organs, the flesh and blood body, which is also sometimes called the five-sense-organ body. And of course mind is the mind that is aligned with one or the other of the senses usually. And sometimes in a dream state or asleep there’s just the mind sense.

Then there’s the subtle body and mind—the sort of neural system, the chakras or wheels, strung together on the central channel, the energies of respiration and circulation, and the drops (hormones etc.)—which goes with the subtle mind of

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lights of moon, sun, and darkness, in which the instinctual natures flicker.

And then finally there is super subtle body mind, which I guess you could call the soul. The soul body and the soul mind—they are fairly indivisible at a super subtle level, the soul body being something like the body you inhabit in the dream state, which can operate outside the coarse and subtle bodies. The soul body mind is the continuum that goes from life to life in the most sophisticated Buddhist spiritual scientific view.

And that makes the physical coarse body very, very precious. Rather than an instrument of grasping, and alienation, and fear, and paranoia—something different from the universe and harmed by the universe—it becomes a way of expressing bliss and love and compassion for other beings because the super subtle mind and body is in a way fused with everything, but limited in ability to interact with other beings.

So that's a rough outline of the Buddhist view of the body and it is the way I look at it myself.

**Hyun Kyung, what's your thinking on this?** Hyun Kyung Chung: From my Christian-Buddhist-Goddess-Shamanistic perspective [*laughs*], of course we are our bodies. But we are more than our bodies.

Now in the Christian tradition, Christianity adopted a Hellenistic point of view and the philosophical views from Plato and Aristotle, all of which suggest a concept of body as separate from spirit and soul. In this view, there is soul or spirit, which is higher than our body, the body being seen as the lowest level of being. So God would be pure spirit. And the body—especially women's bodies and/or the bodies of people of color, or slaves, animal bodies, plant bodies—these are not as honored as the white male body.

So through the feminist tradition I critique this worldview that makes body and mind separate. And we ask, what would happen if we could overcome this dualistic thinking, this hierarchical stratification of different bodies? Eco-feminist theologians and other traditions are saying that in reality *we are sharing the body of God*. We are part of God's body and earth is a part of God. To this end, many of the new theologians, like quantum physicists, are very much tuned into this mystery of earth and universe; they say we are the result of the Big Bang explosion. After billions of years, where did it go? The answer is all this Big Bang stardust actually makes up our bodies. It all came to our bodies. In East Asian healing

systems, they actually envision the entire cosmos in our bodies. We are really a continuation of this first Big Bang.

**Bob Thurman, so what does all that mean, what are you experiencing when you say your body is falling apart?** Thurman: Yes—that's my coarse body, the one that I identify with when I'm in a state of ignorance. When the body's older and falling apart, the mind is more free because you're looking toward a different horizon in a way.

When you're younger, you're very absorbed in your sense experience. And you're more bound to this body in a certain way, you know. But you can be just as bound when you're old. And you can be just as bound when you die. And people who die in such a state, they find it very painful, I think, because they believe they're only their body and they're losing their body and of course this becomes a very painful experience.

But the gradual falling apart can be a kind of blessed process. I remember Lama Govinda, the wonderful Bolivian-German Tibetan lama who died gradually over a decade through a series of strokes. He said with each stroke his realization of emptiness and ultimate reality grew deeper and deeper, and he grew happier and happier. And each time he would have another stroke the more enlightened he felt, and he would be more and more tearful with joy, though he could barely talk sometimes. And he had to retrain himself to write with his left hand and things like that. He really enjoyed himself in the process of sliding out of that embodiment, you could say.

**Hyun Kyung, when Bob is talking about the deterioration of the body, what does this falling away mean to you?** Chung: Only in ignorance do I think I have a specific, separate body. This specific formation of this historical body in this life as Hyun Kyung, this goes away. This departing body becomes earth again. My bodily fluid becomes water and ocean and rain again. So the elements of my body will wind up somewhere in the universe—a big recycling. [*laughter*]

**The greatest recycling project!** Chung: Yes. The greatest recycling project, because I really believe in rebirth. And this will also be a beautiful process because it gives us a chance to grow again, to become enlightened. Because most of us will likely flunk this life! [*laughter*]

Thurman: Hyun Kyung said that she believes in reincarnation. And actually in Jesus' time, the early Christians also believed in reincarnation, up to the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicea [in 325 AD], which abolished the re-

incarnation doctrine. After that there could be no past life, just the one future life in heaven or hell. And this became Christian dogma.

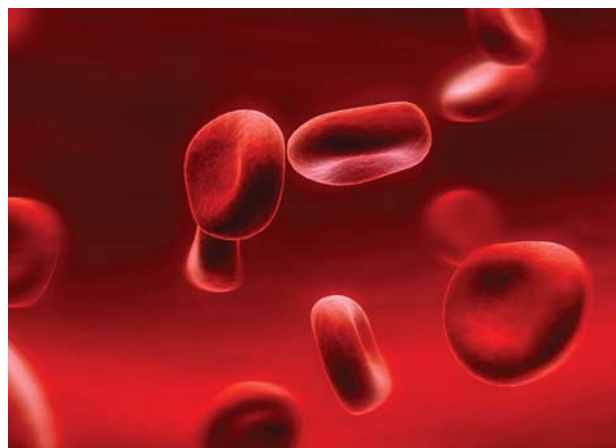
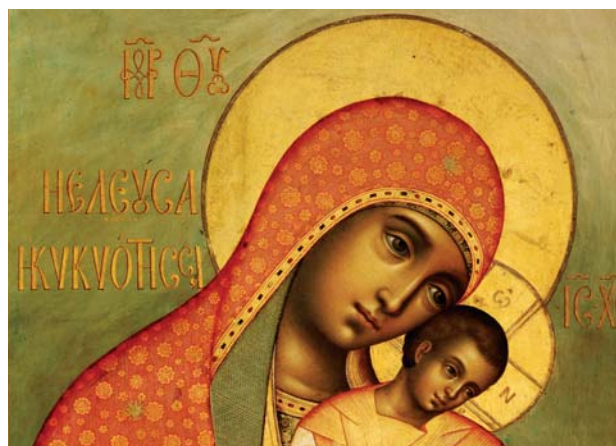
**Why are women and men's bodies viewed differently in religious traditions?** Thurman: Well, I don't think that has to do with religion. I think that has to do with the prevalence of patriarchal, militaristic cultures. Today the worst areas in the world are places where women are most oppressed and treated as chattel, without rights. And I think what I would call distorted versions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam are connected to that phenomenon by catering to those social structures.

And people who become monastics do discover the female in themselves, and the female that becomes a monastic discovers the male in herself. So this is very liberating for people trapped in a patriarchal society.

And this can be described not necessarily as mystical or mysterious because enlightenment is where the person realizes the sameness of self and other; they drop their egocentric identification of themselves as opposed, or opposite to, the other. And I think the female has an easier time of understanding that because she can have the experience of having another take on existence in her body. [laughs] Imagine a woman thumping her chest and saying, "I'm me." And then suddenly there's a little being who shows up in her belly one day and says, "Excuse me, but I'm also you." [laughing] The equality of self and other is viscerally experienced.

Chung: We say in Christ there is no male or female, and in Buddhism the same. But consider that in most religious organizations, menstruating women cannot go into the holy places because their bodies during that period are viewed as being unclean. The menstruating woman is unclean. So when we read the Hebrew Bible, we are told when women are menstruating, they have to be separated from others. And if someone touches such a woman that person becomes unclean. We know the consequence of such a woman's bleeding is life-giving, but somehow patriarchal religion has stood this on its head.

Consider the virgin birth—In Jesus' time virgin did not mean only a woman who never had sex. All young women were called virgin. Who is a biological virgin or sociological virgin? You don't know. So Mary was a virgin means she was a young woman. But Augustine [of Hippo 354-430] moved to create a whole doctrine of original sin and sinless man, who is Jesus Christ. A whole atonement and redemption theory comes out of this. Augustine declares the notion of the virgin birth of Jesus by Mary and the concept of original sin transmitted by intercourse. According to this concept, men and women have intercourse the very moment when the child is conceived and in that moment original sin is the fate of the child. So we need Jesus to be *the sinless man born without intercourse*. That's why Mary cannot be seen as having sex because as soon as she has intercourse she is contaminated. When I teach this I say original sin is a sexually transmitted



disease in humanity. [laughter]

So even though I am a Christian, I think we need to revise Augustinian Christianity in order to affirm the goodness of our bodies and sexuality. Too much of Christian theology has been dominated by Greco-Roman and Hellenistic thinking. Consider the two central women in Christianity: Mary, the virgin-mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, a woman priestess made a whore by a patriarchal Christianity. These two symbolize women in Christianity. I think it's time for something else. Also Christian theology says that Eve, the first woman, brought sin upon humanity. But when you actually look at the Old Testament, the Serpent, Adam and Eve, all had equal responsibility as co-criminals. [laughter]

**A conspiracy!** Chung: Some theologians say that in this action [seizing knowledge symbolized in the act of eating the apple] we become partners with God. Before this act we are like infants, we are like children. But taking the fruit of knowledge, the fruit of good and evil for the first time, we become mature human beings who need to take responsibility for our action and our lives—

**So you're saying this story is not a story of sin?** Chung: I don't think so; actually this signals a departure to higher consciousness and maturity for human beings. All this making a woman's body and a woman's actions unclean is really in furtherance of the patriarchal interest of subjugating women, of using women according to the desires and will of men.

**Would both of you talk about your own experience of your body right now, where you are in your life and what you're seeing and learning in your physical existence?** Chung: Me? Okay, I'll speak first. I just entered menopause. And it is wonderful because before menopause I felt that when I met a beautiful man there was a pink curtain between us—something kind of erotic and mysterious. But after menopause I felt this pink curtain just go poof! It's gone [laughter]. Before menopause when I walked on Broadway, there were men, there were women. But after menopause when I walk down Broadway there are only human beings.

Thurman: [laughs] I like that.

Chung: Yes—I just see human beings. Even now I feel as if I'm almost beyond gender. It is a great feeling. Maybe this is emptiness. Really, we are all beyond gender. Before, my hormones kind of controlled me. I over romanticized and I had a prejudice toward very beautiful men. But now I feel, "Wow. This is great. We are all human beings." I see femininity and masculinity within me, and I see beautiful femininity and masculinity in men, too. So actually my hormones and my body were really deluding me, giving me the illusion that men's bodies and women's bodies are so different. Shedding this illusion is liberating. It is so amazing and, you know, so curious.

But I want to tell a funny story. One year we were invited to some big festival for the goddess Kali. I went with [Union Theological Professor] Paul Knitter, when he took his students

to Nepal. We were invited to the holiest of the holies, which is not open to the public. But since both of us were religious scholars we were allowed to enter the holy inner sanctuary of Kali. And amazingly in front of the temple there is a sign—"Menstruating women cannot enter this festival." Well, I was not menstruating, so I went into this sanctuary and bowed to the goddess. And at that very moment my menstrual blood started to pour out—in the holiest of the holy places! [laughter]. So I said, "My God, my body has become such a feminist body!" My body made a real demonstration against this patriarchal religion, in the middle of the holy sanctuary—and it was not even my time for menstruation but I started anyway, [laughs] in the midst of that big festival. So, it was as though my body was laughing at all this patriarchy, at the lies they made up about women's bodies.

**It was like your body was demanding its own say!** Chung: Yes, my body wanted to make a statement [laughs]. My feminist body is saying "Hey, look at me. I'm in the holiest of the holy sanctuaries—and I didn't lie to you before entering here. I wasn't menstruating. But now that I am with Mother Kali I am going to menstruate. How do you like that?" [laughs]

**Robert, what would you say about your own experience of your body?** Thurman: Well first before I talk about myself, I have to say to Hyun Kyung that while you're talking about going in the Kali temple—which is not Buddhist I know—what seems ironic is that they have a big thing about no menstruating women, but meanwhile they're killing animals for sacrifice [to Kali]!

The one thing Buddhists don't actually like about religious institutions is holy killing. And here you are a woman when you go in and Kali is supposed to be the most powerful female of all time and yet you're not supposed to be menstruating, bleeding your own blood, but they can go and kill some buffalo, and have blood flowing all over the place. I think it's kind of strange, you know. And I applaud your body for making a comment on it. I wanted to say that.

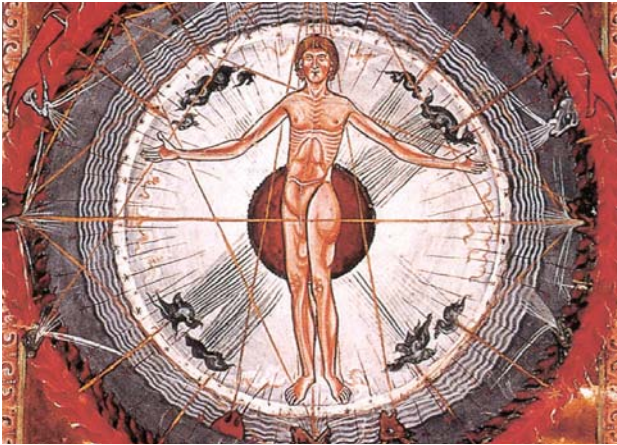
Now as to my own body, one reason I think I never believed in God the Creator, is that I felt that teeth have been badly designed [laughter]. I don't like the whole teeth process, and particularly in America the expense of dentists is very boring [laughter]. As you get older you get more than a little bit concerned about your teeth and root canals, and inflammation and what have you. And that reminds you that the ordinary body is actually a bit of a problem.

But this negative aspect toward the body in religion Hyun Kyung is talking about has another element, and that is this desire to connect the body with negativity and to connect that with the female and use this deduction to put the female down. This anti-body business, this whole program of pretending that females threaten males with their passion, while really it's the men who lose control of themselves.

But the ordinary attachment to the body is an obstacle for people, and there has to be a way to help them discover that the soul is the essence of life. All the religions indicate such a



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path, a wisdom path, you could say, that leads to the discovery of emptiness, of transcendence. Otherwise all we're left with is the ordinary materialistic attachment to the body, and this leads to the reification of self and other, to my body against your body. *I can eat the animal's body because it doesn't have a soul.* All kind of stuff flows out of that.

And so I think there is a need to re-evaluate the body on the basis of love and wisdom, where it becomes valued as the means of connecting between self and other. And yet the body is something that you're free of. You can give it away, offer it, you know, it's not something that you're attached to. We want to be careful not to get confused with modern materialism where there is no soul, where the mind is only an epiphenomenon of the brain and all there is body. If all life is sense experience, we must keep the body alive as long as possible. And so you have the Frankenstein legend, which reflects our imagination that there is some stupid way of being immortal by having stainless steel lungs, and heart and so on. I mean Walt Disney's body is cryogenically frozen in some warehouse in Hollywood, waiting until he can be downloaded into a Mickey Mouse computer.

Chung: But loving ourselves, as in our bodies, can allow us to grow in the fullness of divinity. In my Korean Buddhist tradition there is a story of a young monk, who just couldn't control his sexual desire; his penis was erect all the time, even when he was meditating [laughs]. So he went to his Zen master and asked, "What should I do? My penis is always up. And I just cannot concentrate." And the Zen master said, "Use that power, that sacred energy. Utilize that energy to take you to enlightenment."

Thurman: My own body is all right. If I exercise I feel better. If possible I do 100 prostrations every day, but usually more like every other day. I like my body. It works okay. When I stub my toe I don't like it. I don't like having toes that bang on objects. I don't like that pain. And I don't like going to the dentist. And [laughter], when I die, I hope I won't be too attached to it. Actually every day I think about dying, about falling asleep as a kind of dying where you let go of your ordinary senses and you melt into the subtle mind.

I think materialist, greedy, aggressive, egotistical persons engage in a fight with their bodies and with other people's bodies, and they are going to have a bad time with death. So it's good if they learn detachment and de-glamorization of the body. And meanwhile, people who are overly focused on the transcendent, and who are perhaps even afraid of their bodies, may benefit from learning to be more in their bodies. So it depends on the person and how they develop and evolve spiritually.

**I've got one last question for you both: talk about embodiment and if the idea of embodying a concept or an idea or a reality means something to you.** Thurman: A Buddha is said to have three bodies: a Dharma Body, meaning a Reality Body in the sense that the buddha experience occurs when you feel as if the whole universe and all its beings and

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things are your body, forever, an inconceivable, conscious infinity. Luckily it's inconceivable so no need to worry about what it is! Then there are two material bodies: first, a Beatific Body of subtle bliss energy infinitely present as the experience of the Reality Body, and second, an Emanation Body, which is actually limitless extraordinary and ordinary bodies which the Buddha person emanates from the infinite subtle energy body to help sensitive beings in need. More simply, perhaps you could say that from the infinite good energy of Reality, universal compassion emanates whatever is necessary to make beings happy. I must say, however, I am always impatiently wondering where are all those helpful Emanation Bodies I see the crying need for! But I'm sure that's only my own imperfect vision!

Chung: Yes this issue of embodiment, is a very important issue in Christian theology—especially in a Christian theology that challenges a hegemonic, white male, elite priestly Christianity. Christianity is still very colonial, and in an imperialistic Christianity we see these images of the paramount sexless white male God, and sexless Jesus.

It is clear that the historical Jesus was not white, but in this hegemonic Christianity Jesus is usually portrayed as a white man. This concept grew to be the basis of conquering dark people, women, and earth, animal, nature, in this world. There is a joke told in South Africa. The missionaries came and asked us to pray with them. So we closed our eyes and prayed. When we opened our eyes, we got their bible and they got our land! [*laughs*]

But Jesus is the Son of God as much as I am a daughter of God. And many people in the world, they are also sons and daughters of God. In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus says very clearly about salvation, "If you bring out what is within you... what is within you will save you. But if you cannot bring out what is within you, what is within you will destroy you." What is it that is within you? That is God. So if you bring forth the divinity in you it will save you. But who is going to bring that out? You. And I can make a connection with Buddhist teaching, in that if you bring out the compassion and wisdom in you to the world, that is salvation. So in a way all of us are embodying God, constantly manifesting God in our every day life. In our concrete life situations we make this importing of God through our own bodies.

So I think a body is very important because it is the vehicle, or the temple for this "God-ing action," this divine spark within us. We make God grow with our life.

Now for many theologians from Asia, Africa, Latin America, so-called former colonized subjects, we have begun to reclaim our bodies in holiness. The new embodiment theology comes from these regions from these people whose bodies were once subjugated. So when we talk about embodiment, all of us—white, black, African, European, heterosexual, transgender, homosexual—no matter who we are, we have holiness in our bodies and we have to honor that.

Too often a woman's body is seen as a location for corruption, temptation, the opposite of enlightenment. But women and men's bodies are also symbolic manifestations of this God-body, this God whose compassion is supreme in the Islamic and Hebrew traditions as well. Thus the redemption of the body has been a very important theme of late 20th- and 21st-century theologies. At the same time we see the glamorization and commercialization of the body in the general culture. See what it leads to—look at fashion models. They're so skinny and tall. They are the standard of beauty in the Western world, and so many young women suffer to reach this ideal body. Commercialization of the body leads to sex trafficking all around the world. Young boys and young woman, especially in poor countries, people of color—their bodies are trafficked for the benefit of rich people all over the world. Trafficked not only for sex—but for organs. In third world countries, many young people sell their organs, and these organs are cut out and sent to the developed countries for sale.

**What you're talking about is this idea of bodies as products.** Chung: Yes. A spiritless, godless function. And this is the real sin we're committing: taking God out of our bodies. This is a great sin, not just against the human body but, against the earth's body. See how much poison we pour on this earth through limitless production and consumption, wasting the body of earth. I call this a sin. So when I talk about body I want to make it clear that my body doesn't end with my skin. My skin is just some small amount of solid material around my energy. When we practice tai chi, or kundalini yoga, you see that this energy, these chakras, these auras of human body, are also extensions of your body. My body is connected with the cosmic body. My body is connected with Buddha body, Christ body, earth body, universe body. So my body does not end with my skin.