



JOHN WEHRHEIM

A MINDFUL MARRIAGE

Kittisaro And Thanissara On Celibacy, Sex, And Lasting Love

LESLEE GOODMAN

Former Buddhist monk Kittisaro was born Harry Randolph Weinberg in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the son of a New York City Jew and a Southern Baptist. Former Buddhist nun Thanissara was born Linda Mary Peacock in London, England, the daughter of an Irish Catholic father and a Protestant mother. Both Kittisaro and Thanissara grew up in households that bridged religious and cultural differences. Both discovered Buddhism as young adults and spent more than a decade in monastic life. And both relinquished their monastic vows to

make another cross-cultural commitment: to each other, as husband and wife.

Born in 1952, Kittisaro was a wrestler in junior high and high school, winning five Mid-South wrestling championships and the National Prep tournament. He went on to wrestle at Princeton University, where he was injured early in his freshman year and had to have four screws put in his shoulder. With his wrestling career over, he initially planned to become a doctor, but after having graduated from Princeton with honors in

1974, he won a Rhodes scholarship to attend England's Oxford University and decided to study English. He was writing his master's thesis on mysticism, science, and art in the works of Aldous Huxley when he developed an interest in Buddhism. Before long he became captivated by the quest for enlightenment and was traveling to Thailand to the forest monastery of Ajahn Chah. Kittisaro became a monk and eventually returned to England to help establish a monastery there.

Thanissara was born into a working-class British family in which children were expected to leave school at sixteen and go to work. To avoid this fate, she got into art school after graduation and worked to pay her own way. She had dabbled in yoga and Eastern philosophy as a teenager, and while in art school she took up meditation. Her interest in meditating soon outpaced her interest in art, and she traveled to Buddhist meditation centers in India, Burma, and Sri Lanka before she came to Ajahn Chah's forest monastery in Thailand. With Chah's encouragement, she took her vows at Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex, England, in 1979 at the age of twenty-two. Thanissara was one of only a few Western nuns in the tradition at that time.

Kittisaro and Thanissara had known each other for years when they fell in love in 1991. But the rule of celibacy for Buddhist monks and nuns prevented them from having a relationship. Within a short time they'd both decided to leave the order so they could be together. They were married the following year, and today they run Dharmagiri (www.dharmagiri.org), a Buddhist hermitage that they founded in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The couple also teach at the nearby Buddhist Retreat Centre.

In response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa, Kittisaro and Thanissara have initiated several outreach and relief programs, including the Woza Moya Project, which trains community healthcare providers in AIDS prevention and treatment. During their overseas teaching engagements, Kittisaro and Thanissara raise funds to support rural education in KwaZulu-Natal, providing computers, school sponsorships, and water systems.

I met Thanissara and Kittisaro when they helped lead a retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. I was impressed by their intelligence, wisdom, and devotion — to Buddhism and to each other. I wanted to ask them how monastic life had informed their lives as married householders. Relationships are often thought to be the razor's edge of Buddhist spiritual practice, because they force us to face our limitations, which so often fly in the face of our spiritual ideals. At the retreat's conclusion I approached Thanissara and Kittisaro about an interview, and they agreed.

Goodman: Being a monk is a calling few people even consider. What drew each of you to monastic life?

Kittisaro: I was studying at Oxford University in England on a Rhodes scholarship when I first encountered Buddhism. I'd been an overachiever until then: championship wrestler in high school, class valedictorian. I was twenty-four but felt as if I were 104. I was tired of trying to be the best, of having my sense of identity depend on my performance. Something

inside me was starving. Though I should have been happy, I was suffering.

When I first heard about enlightenment, I was drawn to the possibility of growing beyond my fears, anxieties, and worries, and touching something within me that was clear and bright. I attended a meditation retreat outside Oxford and saw the madness of my mind. I also had some success stopping the madness. One morning during the retreat I was struck by the beauty of some dewdrops on a bush — and not just the beauty of the bush, but of my heart, that I could be so present with an ordinary moment.

After the retreat a visiting Buddhist academic, Doug Burns, told me about a special monastery and its teacher, Ajahn Chah. When I heard the reverence in his tone, I wanted to go and meet this teacher. Within a few weeks I'd arranged a leave of absence from the university and told my parents I was going to Thailand to study with some monk I'd never even met. I thought I'd go for a year, get enlightened, and come back. [Laughs.] It was a typical American approach: just do it. But when I got to Thailand, I realized there was more to it than that.

Burns met me in Bangkok and brought me to the monastery. I wanted Ajahn Chah to recognize my potential and perhaps pat me on the head and dispel all my suffering. But, again, it wasn't quite like that. Ajahn Chah asked me if I'd ever meditated before, and I proudly said yes; I'd been on a ten-day retreat. (I thought that was a lot.) I explained the systematic method that I had learned, which involved focusing awareness on various parts of the body. But instead of being impressed by my knowledge of meditation or my many academic pursuits, Ajahn Chah got down on the floor and started sniffing around like a dog. People laughed, so I asked for a translation. I was told, "Ajahn Chah says you're just like a dog, sniffing around at all kinds of things. But if you get to know *one* thing really well, you'll understand everything."

Ajahn Chah encouraged me to be with my breathing. He said, "If you can be with the breath until you understand the nature of that, you'll understand all conditions and phenomena." So I moved to the monastery for Westerners a few miles away and started practicing as a postulant.

Goodman: Thanissara, how did you come to be a Buddhist nun and meet Kittisaro?

Thanissara: In art school I started to hang out with people who were meditating. My interest in art faded, and I went on deep meditation retreats in the Burmese tradition.

I met Ajahn Chah in the United Kingdom in 1977, and the next year I went to his monastery in Thailand. He encouraged me to become a nun, but there weren't many other Western nuns there at the time, and it felt like too big a leap. I was only twenty-two and thought I should return to England.

After I got back, Ajahn Chah founded the Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in West Sussex, and I went there in 1979 and became one of the first four Western women to be ordained as Buddhist nuns in the Theravada tradition. I stayed for twelve years.

I knew Kittisaro all the years I was in the Chithurst monastery, although he was in a different monastery a lot of the

time. We were friendly toward each other, but there wasn't any infatuation.

Goodman: What changed the nature of your relationship?

Thanissara: It's a bit mysterious. I'd begun to fade in my monastic life, because a lot of my energy had been devoted to elevating the place of women in the order. I had a hard time accepting the nuns' deferential position to the monks. It wasn't an easy issue, and after twelve years on the front line of the struggle, I felt depleted.

I'd also had some philosophical shifts. I'd begun to feel that the monastic focus on "letting go" wasn't enough. I was also interested in being in the world and responding to it with compassion. I had a conversation about this with Kittisaro, who'd just returned from a yearlong silent retreat. For different reasons we were both identifying less with the monastic form. While we were talking, something changed between us.

Kittisaro: I felt open to what was suddenly happening between us. How does one explain that sense of connection between two people? When she laughed, the world was filled with light. Though we didn't touch each other, there was this sense that we were supposed to be together.

Thanissara: The monastery was a celibate community. As a monk or a nun, if you feel an attraction to someone, you are not supposed to say anything about it; you just let it arise and pass. Kittisaro and I acknowledged our attraction to each other, however, and didn't hide anything from our fellow monastics. We also mentioned it to one of our senior monks. That was like opening Pandora's box. The senior monk told the abbot, who reacted strongly. I was disrobed within a couple of weeks.

Goodman: You've said that you've taken responsibility for it, but it seems as if you might have been pushed.

Thanissara: I do take responsibility for my decision, but the explosive reaction surprised me. One day I was in the robes, and the next I was leaving the monastery with nothing.

Goodman: Kittisaro, what happened to you when the two of you revealed your relationship?

Kittisaro: When I mentioned it to my teacher, he said that he was "sick and tired of hearing about these marriages made in heaven. Our practice is about *letting go* of desire." I said I wouldn't pretend that this wasn't desire, but to me Thanissara was a wise and honest person, committed to the path, and I wanted to be with her. If I saw that my leaving the monastery to be with her would hurt me, or her, or the order, or the *sangha* [the community of monks and nuns], then I would do everything in my power not to leave. But I needed to see for myself.

I went to Thailand to see Ajahn Chah and to meditate on my decision. Ajahn Chah couldn't speak at the time; he'd been paralyzed for about ten years. I helped nurse him for three days, sleeping on a concrete landing outside his hut. In my heart I felt I had his blessing. So I disrobed and went to meet Thanissara in Ireland. Ajahn Chah died about three weeks after that.

So there we were. We'd never touched each other, and yet we felt we had this "arranged marriage." We entered a new world, with our shared love of truth and contemplation as our



THANISSARA AND KITTISARO

foundation. We've been together for sixteen years now and married for fifteen.

There were those who said leaving the monastery for a relationship was spiritual suicide, or a step back. The controversy made it challenging for us to be together. But we trusted ourselves, allowing people to feel the way they felt. As it turned out, for the last ten years we've been blessed by the support of the monastic community.

Goodman: What impact did your disrobing have on your ability to teach Buddhism?

Kittisaro: Being in robes and living the life of a celibate renunciate gives one credibility in the eyes of many. We didn't know how people would respond to us as lay practitioners. Soon after we disrobed, however, we began to get a steady stream of invitations to teach the dharma. Many lay followers of the tradition were pleased to see a man and a woman teaching the dharma from the same platform, as equals. Some people who are intimidated by monastics were happy to have teachers who seemed more approachable and lived in the world of householders. But our many years in robes laid the foundation for our love, practice, and understanding of the path, and I think that monastic background still draws people to study with us.

Thanissara: Being outside of the monastic community gives us the freedom to offer interfaith workshops and to include practices from other traditions. Also, because we, as a married couple, experience challenges that one doesn't experience in the monastery, we have more empathy for the struggles of our lay students. We all need to work on those sharp edges that come up, especially in marriage, and to be more patient, gentle, and compassionate with each other.

Goodman: They say that being in a relationship is the razor's edge of Buddhist practice. Why should it be so hard?

Kittisaro: I would say that everyone's "razor's edge" is different. For some it's learning how to be still or how to be alone. I love solitude, so I have other challenges. Being in a relationship is one of them. My lifelong commitment to Thanissara

has deepened my practice, because she encourages me to engage with her and with the world. On silent retreat you run your own schedule. Being in a daily relationship with another person almost guarantees that friction will occur, which requires you to develop what Buddhists call “skillful means” of dealing with conflict.

Relationships also allow “mirroring”: your partner holds up a mirror to aspects of yourself to which you would otherwise be blind. The primary benefit of *sangha*, or “community,” is that it gives this opportunity to address one’s blind spots.

Goodman: What are some of the challenges that marriage has presented to you as Buddhist practitioners?

Kittisaro: Both monastic practice and lay practice offer ample grounds for suffering and ample opportunity for happiness. Lay life can be more scattered and prone to distraction. It is a challenge to live at close quarters with a partner for many years. I find it hard to know when to let a matter go, to give Thanissara space and not to demand that she be a certain way at that moment. I had to learn about the suffering of wanting to be right or to win an argument. It’s mostly petty grievances: the irritations of living, being tired, and sometimes not being sensitive to the needs of your beloved.

Thanissara: The shadow side of Buddhist practice is what I call “premature nonattachment,” which is actually avoidance masquerading as spiritual attainment. In marriage you’re challenged to confront your shadow side — your anger, impatience, and resentment — whereas in the monastery you can hide behind your practice and never reveal these aspects of yourself. Marriage demands more honesty.

Goodman: What do you fight about, and how do you work it out?

Kittisaro: We’ve had some fights over the years about money. In monastic life we never had to worry about money, because we didn’t have any. As lay people we have bank accounts, bills to pay, and a budget. We both enjoy being generous, but occasionally we have argued about when to give money to others and how much. Once, it was as insignificant as a tip at a restaurant, and on another occasion it involved giving to beggars in India. Each time, a spark of disagreement erupted into a powerful blaze of emotions. We worked it out, though, because we were committed to staying with each other, listening, and loving.

I like talking as a method for resolving disagreements, but I’ve learned how to be quiet and allow Thanissara to feel whatever she is feeling without judging or reacting to it. My acceptance of her feelings can avoid prolonging a conflict. Sometimes the solution is as simple — and as difficult — as acknowledging my mistake and sincerely apologizing for the hurt.

Thanissara: As we’ve grown in our understanding of each other, we fight less. We’ve figured out that sometimes we need to do different things. For example, I like to create projects and nurture my web of friends, whereas Kittisaro loves to spend time on long retreats. I just spent more than a year in the United Kingdom getting an MA in psychotherapy while Kittisaro did a yearlong retreat.

Goodman: Kittisaro doesn’t feel abandoned when you’re

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away, or that you’re not honoring your commitment to him?

Thanissara: No, he enjoys time alone. When we were first together, I would worry about him, but then I realized that to free each other is also an expression of love.

Culturally we’ve had different conditioning. As an American, Kittisaro is more confrontational or challenging, whereas, as a Brit, I’m more suppressed. If I’m upset about something, I tend to feel silent resentment. Kittisaro will sense that something is wrong and keep asking me questions until he gets the answer. For me there’s perhaps nothing more excruciating than this probing. [Laughs.] We Brits have a whole culture based on suppression of emotion. It’s our primary relationship strategy.

Kittisaro and I gained some insight into our cultural conditioning after I got back from the U.K. We had a fight about something, and rather than talk it out, we sat there with our intense feelings, just breathing, and at last I was able to explain what was happening for me: I felt like the more Kittisaro questioned me, the more I couldn’t think. The strategy he was using to get to the bottom of the conflict was unintentionally making it worse. When we stopped blaming each other, we realized that we were responding from our conditioning, using the approaches our parents would have taken. That insight enabled us to respond with sympathy and try another approach.

Goodman: When you give each other feedback, how do you avoid coming across as critical?

Kittisaro: Sometimes we do come across as critical, but I think the most important ingredient in skillfully giving feedback is an interest in the other’s well-being. If the feedback is about your being right — which I can slip into at times — then your words, however wise, will lead only to further contention.

Thanissara is very intuitive and wise, and many times she has jolted me out of my complacency. She’s a great innovator and visionary, and sometimes I’m slow to change. But my cautiousness and conservatism have their place, and we value the balance we offer each other.

Thanissara: Kittisaro’s more disciplined than I am, more focused, able to maintain a strong meditation and dharma practice, which serves as an inspiration and an anchor for me. I’m more relational, so we complement each other. And when we get overwhelmed or upset, we’ll remind each other to let it all go. We try to look out for each other’s needs and to give skillful reflection. For example, when I’m taking on too many new projects and getting stressed out, Kittisaro will point out that perhaps I don’t need to do so much.

Goodman: When Kittisaro says you're taking on too much, how do you know that he is showing concern for your well-being, rather than expressing his own preference for a simple life?

Thanissara: We always have to explore our intentions and their results. We learned from our monastic life to keep working with how things *are*, rather than with our expectations of what one *should* get out of a relationship. Instead of looking at the places where things aren't going well, you focus on the enormous benefits of staying in a relationship — such as the sweetness of having a good friend who knows you well, someone with whom you can stumble along together. Perhaps it's not all fireworks and stardust, but it's sustaining and nourishing.

Goodman: Thanissara, how do *you* avoid coming across as critical?

Thanissara: It's easy to come across as critical, because you do get impatient with what you see as your partner's shortcomings. But often criticism is an attempt to control the other person, or a projection of your dissatisfaction with yourself onto him or her. That's where spiritual practice comes in: it encourages you to turn those reactions back on your own mind and think about what's really going on.

Goodman: How has the monastic life informed your lives as householders?

Kittisaro: The core teachings still apply. Ajahn Chah used to say that if you really understand one thing, you understand everything. For example, the breath: if I look at it long enough, I realize that it comes and goes, arises and ceases. This is also true of feelings, thoughts, and events. This awareness is like a philosopher's stone: whatever it touches, it transforms and blesses, revealing the treasure within.

Thanissara and I live on donations, so, in a sense, we're continuing to live like monks. We rely on the dharma to supply our needs, we live simply and honestly, and we try to make our lives a blessing to others. We also try to live by the idea that whatever happens arises out of perfection, even if it looks imperfect. As Ajahn Chah would say, "If it shouldn't be this way, it *wouldn't* be this way."

Thanissara: I would add that being grateful for the day's food and shelter, which was an important part of monastic life, remains a part of our lives now — aiming for inner simplicity while juggling outer complexity.

Goodman: Did you choose relationship as a spiritual path, or did it become one as time went on?

Thanissara: Absolutely we chose it as a spiritual path. Being more patient, speaking more truthfully, being kinder, sacrificing something you might want to do for something the other wants to do — all these require a spiritual devotion.

Kittisaro: Coming together under controversial circumstances, we sensed that our sincere commitment to each other would create a kind of sacred ground for growing wiser. Practice in relationship is not divorced from the Buddha's teaching. He taught the fourfold assembly: ordained men, ordained women, laymen, and laywomen.

Goodman: Is there a Buddhist approach to sexuality?

Kittisaro: In the monastery we were trying to come to terms with the fact that we each have a body with urges and a mind with desires. Our strategy with sexual energy was not to repress it, but not to follow it either. We tried to open ourselves to it and feel it, even though it is a powerful energy that can carry one away. With practice, little by little, that energy is transmuted into an understanding of our feverish attempts to get somewhere we're not. There's a serenity that comes from recognizing energy without labeling it as "good" or "bad."

During my time in the forest, alone in silence for months at a time, I would often feel close to the whole world, as if all beings were inside me. So, to me, intimacy doesn't require physical contact. One can't assume that, because you have had sex with a person, the two of you are close, or, conversely, that if a relationship isn't sexual, it lacks intimacy. What makes sexual contact truly intimate is a quality of presence and mindfulness, of honesty and tenderness and love. And what steals away the sacred and makes sex profane or exploitative is when it's tangled up in a feverish grasping without regard for consequences.

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Leaving the monastery to be with Thanissara, I felt a great sense of possibility. In a way, fifteen years of monastic training had brought me to a point where I was ready to have a healthy relationship with a woman. My training made me more patient, more honest, and more able to receive into my heart what someone else is telling me.

If one makes a commitment to be loyal and honest, then one can fully appreciate the infatuation, the electricity, the excitement, and the bliss that accompany sexuality. But one can also see how those experiences flare up like fireworks in the night sky and then dissolve back into the underlying blackness. One can appreciate those energies but also see how fragile sexual bliss is, and how fragile pleasure is — not to demonize it, but not to glorify it either.

I don't share the view that the sexual act in itself is liberating. I think liberating insight comes through the process of being with someone over time. It's like when Thanissara and I chant together and listen closely to each other's breathing so that we can keep the chant flowing. I'll breathe when she's not breathing, and she'll breathe when I'm not taking a breath, so that the chant can flow without interruption. That's a good metaphor for our relationship: we're attuned to one another, so that our voices blend and merge, and we realize that we are rising and ceasing in something that just *is*.



Thanissara: It's a misunderstanding that celibate life is a nonsexual life. To be celibate is actually to turn a microscope on your sexual energy. You're just not *acting* on it with someone else; you're looking at all the layers around sexuality, the idealizations and projections, and sometimes you're experiencing the rawness of it without the physical expression. That's the monastic template.

To go from that into an intimate relationship was at first incredibly beautiful. Over time the experience of our togetherness has deepened, and the focus is more on being together as allies who support each other. The romantic, sexual intimacy has changed from more of a buzz or high to something that's nourishing and connecting.

Goodman: Do you think our culture is fixated on sexuality to the point of being stuck?

Kittisaro: Yes, the sense is that if you don't have a sexual relationship, then somehow you're not whole. Or, conversely, if you do have one, then you are whole. There's this idea that, to really be alive, we have to keep being sexually active, even if it requires Viagra and other artificial inducements.

Our culture honors just one part of the cycle of relationship — the youth and beauty part. We need to honor the whole cycle of our humanity and come to terms with this body and its urges, its aging and death. Relationship can give one a deeper appreciation for both form and emptiness — how they keep arising and merging and blending in awareness.

Goodman: What was it like to have sex after so many years without it? What did sex bring into your lives?

Thanissara: The sexual intimacy, after so many years of celibacy, was exciting of course, and it fed a part of our selves that hadn't been nourished within the monastery. Like all couples in the early part of a relationship, we tended to focus on each other, which becomes limiting after a while. In time we found that there was a gradual turning outward and facing the world together with our energies entwined. This brought about a different kind of intimacy that is vital to our work and lives.

As we've gotten older, we really enjoy each other's company — just being together, reading, walking the dog, or watching a movie.

Kittisaro: It was humbling to realize that I had not transcended sexual desire as a monk. During my fifteen years as a celibate, I'd found myself infatuated on several occasions, but each time, after I'd reflected on it, I would let it go. When I fell in love with Thanissara, however, I didn't want to let it go. I saw it was desire, but it was a desire I wanted to follow. When I finally decided to disrobe and flew from Thailand to meet Thanissara in Dublin, and we tentatively held hands for the first time on the bus, I felt shy and anxious. Those first few years together, sex was a prominent part of our relationship. And as with everything, it's more potent when you are present and alert, as our monastic training had taught us to be.

Eventually the sex became less important, but not the sense of closeness. I see sexual attraction as an initial stage of relationship. Its fading has in no way diminished the love, respect, joy, and intimacy we share. Sexual experience helped us to be at ease with each other, to manifest our tenderness and care. Now, however, we merge our beings in a much more subtle way.

As a society I think we see sex as a prerequisite for happiness. But if we're always looking for passion and excitement as a sign that we are in love, we may end up jumping from relationship to relationship in an attempt to maintain that intensity of feeling. As far as I'm concerned, as love ripens, the sexual attraction can fall away. As the pain caused by obsession with physical pleasure becomes clearer to me, I am motivated to continue letting go of sexual desire. I thank my beloved Thanissara for helping me do that.

Thanissara: The hype around sex in our culture is unhealthy. Sexuality *is* sacred: the use of sexuality for procreation is one of the most powerful forces that human beings can channel. Sex also has the power to open one to the divine, to the feeling of being deeply loved and accepted. Yet our culture has become jaded about sex due to its exploitation, which generates its own shadows of shame and sexual wounding. I think too much emphasis is placed on romance and sexuality as means of completion and fulfillment. They're a way for two people to come together, and they're beautiful to explore, but what has been most important in my relationship with Kittisaro is our shared commitment to exploring the dharma and our joint inquiry into freedom.

Goodman: If your relationship is not where you expect to find completion and fulfillment, then why did you give up the monastic life for it?

Thanissara: I didn't find completion and fulfillment in monastic life either. I entered the monastery with a romantic notion of what it would be like. The reality is that each experience — the monastic experience and the marriage experience — fulfilled a different part of me. Each is a vehicle for a deeper inquiry into what true completion actually is.

Kittisaro: Falling in love is not a rational process. All I know is that something deep in me knew that being with Thanissara was important. I believed that together we could do wonderful things and continue to grow spiritually. Still, grasping at the “other,” however beloved, will bring suffering. Ultimate fulfillment is found by recognizing the empty and transient nature of all things, whether you are alone or with others. Everything in monastic life points one toward that realization.

Goodman: Do you feel that religious policies of abstinence backfire and end up leading to sexual transgressions?

Kittisaro: The Buddha didn’t demand that everyone abstain from sexual practice. He taught the five precepts for laypeople, which include using your sexuality wisely and abstaining from *exploitative* sexual practices, such as sex with a minor or with someone who’s already in a committed relationship. For those who were interested in exploring the causes of suffering, however, he laid out the dangers of attachment and desire. He never denied the joys of sensory experience, but he pointed out their limitations. The Buddha taught that to truly know the end of suffering, one needs to let go of sexual desire. If we can’t do that, then the Buddha encouraged us to limit our sexual activity to that which does no harm. Whether a layperson or a monastic, one must wrestle with sexuality to contain it within a moral or ethical boundary, so that it doesn’t harm anyone, including oneself.

The practice of not acting on sexual desire backfires when we are unaware of desire, or we repress it, or we pretend it doesn’t exist, or we judge it. Abstinence backfires when we are too arrogant to own up to our limitations. Spiritual leaders who take sexual advantage of their disciples in the name of some higher principle do great harm to themselves as well as to those they abuse. They cause people to lose faith in spiritual practice.

Thanissara: In lay life our sexual or creative energy can get dispersed in many directions, but in monastic life there’s a lot of focus and intensity. If you don’t have a strong system in place to contain and channel these energies, there can be a dramatic acting-out of the shadow self and desire, followed by denial, which is damaging. It doesn’t have to go that way, of course. I have friends who have lived a celibate, monastic life for up to forty years. They are passionate, creative people who have transmuted their sexual energies and learned to experience intimacy with all of life. I don’t think the rule of celibacy is necessarily flawed. I think it has to be chosen and then used with integrity and compassion. Good peer groups also help maintain honesty and accountability. Too often a guru operates with no accountability.

Goodman: You say that too much emphasis is placed on romance in our society, yet your own story seems like a great romance: two people giving up a life of religious devotion to be together. Is your story not as romantic as it seems?

Thanissara: [Laughs.] Well, the chaos and confusion around our disrobing doesn’t seem so romantic looking back on it, but it did feel romantic at the time. Romance is mysterious. It brings you to life-changing decisions. Entering monastic life was also a romance in a way. But once you’ve made the commitment, then comes the process of negotiating with one’s shadow, dealing

with disappointments, and so on. Our early relationship was a powerful romance, but the practice of dharma continued, and the relationship became a vehicle for that.

Also, I didn’t feel as if I were leaving religious life. I felt our relationship was an extension of religious life. I wasn’t giving up devotion to spirituality; I was giving up a religious form. In some ways a romantic relationship is another form, with its own spiritual dimension.

Kittisaro: I love the wonder and mystery of our romance. At times we are all faced with difficult choices, some of which bring criticism and blame. If, out of fear or duty, we follow the wishes of our peers or our society or our family, we might deny what is right and true for us and end up living the wrong life. Although I am capable of getting entangled in doubts and worries, when I made the two most important decisions in my life — leaving my Rhodes scholarship to go to Thailand; and, fifteen years later, leaving the monkhood to be with Thanissara — my path was clear both times. I knew what I needed to do. I was sorry these decisions caused others disappointment and pain, but my heart told me, *Go through that door.* I’ve never regretted it.

Goodman: How did the two of you choose to go to South Africa and do the work that you’re doing?

Kittisaro: There were already many dharma teachers in the U.K. and the U.S., so when we were invited to teach in South Africa, we were interested. Some of our friends warned us not to go, saying it would be a bloodbath after the 1994 elections. We thought about it and decided to go ahead anyway, for we knew our intentions were peaceful. We arrived a few months after apartheid had been cast aside and Nelson Mandela had been elected president of the new South Africa. It was exciting to live in a country that was reinventing itself, faced with huge challenges, and possessed of natural resources and awesome beauty.

Thanissara: We didn’t come to South Africa to do HIV work. We came here to teach the Buddha dharma. But now that we’re here, we’re confronted with a society ravaged by colonialism; apartheid; disempowerment; lack of resources; and the AIDS pandemic, which is running like a wildfire through rural communities. We were approached every day by people with heartbreaking needs, and rather than wear ourselves out trying to respond to those needs on an individual basis — although we still tried to respond to some of them — we felt it would be wiser to build some system of support. Kittisaro and I had power that the people around us didn’t, so we did what we could to initiate programs.

Kittisaro: It was an organic process. When poor people ended up on our land in need of work, we gave them jobs to do. We saw that their children needed education, and rural learning institutions were in desperate need of basic resources, so we tried to help. As we continued to have relations with the Zulu people, we encountered their sicknesses and suffering. Again we responded not as part of a preconceived plan but as a gesture of compassion.

A good Buddhist practitioner is sensitive to the needs of the land and the community. The same meditative practice

that heals the landscape of one's own body, heart, and mind can also make us sensitive to those around us.

Goodman: Ajahn Chah said, "If it shouldn't be happening, it *wouldn't* be happening." How do you reconcile that statement with your work in South Africa, helping those who have HIV or AIDS? Is your work a failure to accept "what is"?

Kittisaro: Meditation requires one to examine and accept what is, but one's response to a situation is also part of what is. Ignoring a problem is not the compassionate response.

Some people misunderstand karma to mean that people get what they deserve: "It's their karma." But our response to others' suffering also creates our *own* karma. The Buddha said, "If you really want to help someone, first find a solid perch." Say you find a cow stuck in the mud. If you find a solid perch, then you can help the cow get out. If you don't, you'll both end up in the mud. The solid perch is the dharma. Even if you're not able to get the cow out of the mud, to stay present to her suffering is itself a powerful and compassionate act.

The Buddha didn't ignore the world's suffering. He made the effort to teach the truth, even though he knew that it was going to be a lot of trouble and most people wouldn't understand it. He accepted the difficulty and, as a result, was able to touch many beings.

One of the great trials of my monastic life was being sick and almost dying of typhoid fever in Thailand in 1978. I spent three years pretty much in bed. I kept thinking, *I'm a meditator. I should be able to heal myself.* But I couldn't. My Western teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, also wanted me to get well. One day he came to my bed and said, "Kittisaro, I want to apologize to you. I've been wanting you to get well all this time, and I realize that's putting a strain on you." Then he said, "Kittisaro, I give you my permission to die."

I felt so much relief at his statement that I cried with joy. Afterward I still took my medicines and saw doctors, but somehow I found a willingness just to be with the reality of my condition and not believe I *had* to get well. For some reason I did get better after that.

So there's this dynamic tension between acceptance and making an effort. If we try to change things without wisdom, then we burn out. And if we try to force the world to be how we think it should be, sometimes our help is misguided. Sensing the perfection of things can allow us to ground ourselves in the truth of the moment. In moments of serenity and peace, we know what we can do to help.

For me, accepting and helping aren't opposing positions. Ajahn Chah's statement — "If it shouldn't be this way, it *wouldn't* be this way" — was meant to balance our compulsive desire to change the way things are, usually in an effort to make ourselves more comfortable. If we're always changing our world around, we'll never know liberation, because no matter how perfectly we arrange things, life's impermanence will always cause them to shift.

For me, that's the challenge: to keep returning from the ground of my true nature to the suffering of the world, doing what I can to help, and also staying rooted so that I don't get caught up in suffering myself.

I DIDN'T feel as if I were leaving religious life. I felt our relationship was an extension of religious life. I wasn't giving up devotion to spirituality; I was giving up a religious form. In some ways a romantic relationship is another form, with its own spiritual dimension.

Goodman: You say illness has been one of your greatest teachers. What have you learned from it?

Kittisaro: Illness wasn't a teacher I would have chosen, but there was nothing I could do about it. Until that point I had basically been able to accomplish whatever I wanted through willpower, study, and persistence. I'd been able to bend circumstances to my desires. My sense of self was intimately connected with my success.

Then I spent years struggling with chronic pain, overpowering weakness, digestive disorders, internal bleeding, and so on. Though I saw doctors and healers and underwent myriad treatments, I couldn't overcome the illness. Unable to participate in the normal monastic routine, I felt like a failure. Fortunately, the Buddha taught that sickness, old age, and death are heavenly messengers, and that to live in denial of these truths results in suffering.

My illness taught me how to die — in other words, how to surrender to what I couldn't change, and how to make peace with the painful and confused states of body and mind that I encountered. My capacity for patience deepened, and in moments when I wasn't feeling sorry for myself or wishing my life were otherwise, I discovered that there is a deep part of ourselves that is never sick, that never dies. That unyielding illness, which refused to follow my orders, brought me to a place where I lost everything I'd thought I was. Then I found *what remains*, which no one can take away.

Goodman: You both have said that being married has presented you with many challenges. Can you describe ways in which it has been a blessing?

Thanissara: I'm sometimes overwhelmed by inner chaos and despair, and having Kittisaro by my side has been a balm and source of strength. At one point, when I was struggling, we went on holiday to take a break from everything. Standing by the Indian Ocean, which is filled with sharks, I wanted to walk into the dark sea, into oblivion. Kittisaro didn't say anything; he just took my hand. That was all he needed to do. I realized at that moment what a blessing it is to have someone to be with me while I work through my pain.

Kittisaro: If our coming together is sacred, it will take us deeper into the place where we've always been, that place where there is no separate me and you. Our life and dreams are real, and they are empty. They're here, and they're gone. When we're clear and honest, we realize that we're not going anywhere; that, in our depths, we're never apart. ■