



JOHN WEHRHEIM

# A MINDFUL MARRIAGE

## *Kittisaro And Thanissara On Celibacy, Sex, And Lasting Love*

LESLEE GOODMAN

**F**ormer 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](http://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.

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