

## “Radically working with your own mind”

An Interview with Venerable Robina Courtin about her life and work

by Dakini Power author Michaela Haas

Venerable Robina Courtin is a dynamic and candid Dharma teacher. Ordained since the late 1970s, the former Australian singer has worked full time since then for Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche's FPMT. She has served as editorial director of Wisdom Publications, editor of Mandala Magazine, and the executive director of Liberation Prison Project. She does not really have a home, but travels tirelessly to teach around the world. Her life and work with prisoners have been featured in the documentary films Chasing Buddha and Key to Freedom. In her book *Why Buddhism?* Vicki Mackenzie describes her as “funny, dynamic, affectionate, kind, outrageous, her speech frequently dotted with expletives. All this plus her ability to move across the ground at a million miles per minute proved conclusively that you do not necessarily have to be quiet, serene and passive to be Buddhist.”

Michaela Haas: How did you go from being a Kung Fu fighter to a Buddhist nun?

Robina Courtin: Well, the longest distance was from Catholic to Buddhist nun. Growing up in Melbourne, Australia, I went to Church every day. I loved God. I thought a lot about the nature of God, the universe and what makes it tick. From the moment I first went to Mass I knew I wanted to be a priest. Everybody laughed at me and said I had to become a nun instead. I was so little I couldn't understand the reason. When I was twelve, I begged my mother to let me be a nun like my hero St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who became a nun when she was 14. I obviously had a strong connection with the religious way of seeing things and, I suppose, with Tibetan Buddhism: I didn't think of God as my creator, which is interesting. And at the convent I went to throughout all my school years, for our uniform we had a saffron yellow blouse and a maroon twinset. Very familiar!

MH: So you were a good little Catholic girl?

RC: Actually, I was very naughty, always rebellious, and a bit of a fighter. We had a pretty intense family. My mother was a musician and my father a writer and poet, and they had six daughters and a son. My memory of my childhood is mostly of chaos, strong emotions, fighting for space. At the same time we had a very close connection and there was lots of laughter. We went to the fanciest convent in Melbourne, and I think my mother still owes the bills – she and my father always struggled to bring in enough money.

MH: Fascinating that you already wanted to be a nun when you were little.

RC: Yes, God was my life – internally. I didn't talk to anyone about it. Nevertheless, I started thinking about boys when I was 13 so my mother sent me off as a boarder at

school. It was absolute heaven for me. For the first time I had my own bed. I had discipline, a structure, I went to Mass every morning. It was a miracle, because I began to taste a whole new part of myself. I was studying for the first time. It was a whole new experience for me. When you're a child you don't know what you're missing: I didn't know I needed clarity and space and discipline. When I found it, it was nectar for my mind.

MH: You speak about your Catholic years with tremendous appreciation. What made you leave the Church?

RC: When I was 15 I heard Billie Holiday and Miles Davis. This blew my mind. Hearing this music and starting to read about the black American experience opened me up to a whole new world, and gradually my aspirations changed from religious to political and social.

When I was 19, I fell in love with a married man and wasn't yet brave enough to sleep with him so I sort of ran away from home to get some space to think about my life. I decided I wanted pleasure – basically, it was “Goodbye God, hello boys!” But more than anything I wanted to investigate other ways of seeing the world.

MH: How did your parents react when you first wanted to be a Buddhist nun?

RC: My mother had to go through quite a bit before then. When I gave up God for boys, she cried. When I went to London in the late 60s and gave up my classical singing studies for involvement in the radical left, she cried. Then I got into black politics, and she cried. Then I became a radical lesbian separatist feminist, and she really, really cried. So by the time I told her I wanted to become a Buddhist nun when I was 31, she didn't have any tears left. But she always came around: so kind.

MH: What about your father?

RC: My father died in 1969, when I was 25. He would have been very happy about the choices I've made.

MH: Do you still sing?

RC: Only my prayers.

MH: How did you then get into Kung Fu and Karate?

RC: I was pretty speedy and intense and very quickly went through my various phases of thinking. And I didn't half-do things. It is my nature to go the outer edge of things. After feminism, I felt I'd exhausted all options for an authentic political view and I realized that I wanted something spiritual again. More than sex, more than drugs, more than anything, I wanted truth, the big picture, a coherent worldview that brought the internal

and external together. And I wanted freedom. I never wanted to live with anyone, or to have babies. I wanted the freedom to do and think what I wanted, to go where I wanted, for nothing to hold me back. So the next step in this journey from the external back to the internal was martial arts.

MH: Was it an accident that brought you to Lama Yeshe?

RC: I was pretty committed to my martial arts and had been training for three years, in New York and Australia. Back in Melbourne in early 1976, I stopped my car one day to help some women who'd stalled at an intersection. I was barefoot. Somehow a guy ran over my left foot. I'll never forget the shock as I fell to the ground – "No! I can't do karate any more!" During my recuperation, there I was in plaster, feeling sorry for myself, and I saw a poster advertising a retreat with a person called Lama Yeshe. I couldn't train any more, so I decided to go. The point is, because I'm such a fanatic, if I hadn't broken my foot I wouldn't have taken time off from karate to attend; I wouldn't even have noticed the poster. I am forever grateful to Bill Bright, the man who ran over my foot. He stopped me in my tracks!

MH: When you met Lama Yeshe, was your connection immediate?

RC: In one way there was no question the moment I arrived at Chenrezig Institute, in Queensland: I felt like I'd come home. But at the same time I was raging against it. After years of involvement in radical politics, I'd come to the sobering conclusion that I had to stop blaming the rest of the human race; it was time to start looking at Robina. It was really a big shock for me. And not only that. As a radical feminist, here I was, suddenly among all these hippies, for whom women were gentle ladies who couldn't carry the buckets of water or do the wood-chopping – it was pretty basic at Chenrezig in those days. And then I was hearing about how monks sat in front of nuns, and everything was he this and he that. I was in an uproar.

MH: How did you solve your queries?

RC: I realized I had to do what the Buddha said, which is to check everything carefully. If, from my analysis, I discovered that Buddhism was innately sexist or patriarchal, how could I possibly be Buddhist? The view of karma really helped me understand things. Obviously, I had not always been Robina. I must have been male and female countless times in the past. And who caused me to be a woman in this life? It could only have been me. And clearly, consciousness is neither male nor female. These reasonings helped me look beyond the cultural packaging. But now the real work started, the hardest job of my life: working on my mind.

MH: You describe yourself as an extremist, and then you find the Middle Way.

RC: Middle Way doesn't mean nice and balanced. You find the Middle Way when you transcend dualism. You could say that my Lama, Zopa Rinpoche, is a total fanatic, a 100 percent extreme Buddhist: he practices day and night, he doesn't sleep. As someone said about him, "For Rinpoche, sleep is a disgusting waste of time." I want that extreme. They call bodhisattvas "warriors," don't they? Warriors 100 percent of the time against the delusions. That's how you find the Middle Way.

MH: So you met Lama Zopa and Lama Yeshe and spent some years testing them?

RC: No, I did a two-month retreat with them. Then I went home, came back the following year and informed Lama Yeshe that he was my teacher – I didn't know that you were supposed to ask. Then I went to their monastery near Kathmandu in Nepal, Kopan, and became a nun. It took 18 months altogether.

MH: How come you decided so quickly to become a nun?

RC: Well, what choice did I have? Buddhism as it's studied and practiced in the big Tibetan monastic university system seemed to me a coherent worldview that brings together theory and practice perfectly. That's what I had been wanting since I was a child. And by now I had given up sex, drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol, so it was the logical next step to take: "Ah, this is the kind of nun I want to be." Truth and freedom, together.

MH: And yet you said, when you met your lamas, the hardest phase of your life began.

RC: Yes, because I had to start looking at my own mind for the first time in my life. What is a lama if not a perfect mirror to show you your own deluded mind? That's his job. That was the hardest thing, because it had never occurred to me before. Not only was he my teacher, he was also my boss. From day one I worked full time for his organization, and this was always my main practice, not necessarily sitting every day or doing retreat, or studying. In the beginning all that seemed totally boring to me. Sitting still with my eyes closed? Why? Study what? But doing things: yes, that's what I wanted. So working with other human beings was my practice, because that's when you see your anger, your pride, your jealousy, your attachment. Of course, I did my practices every day, my commitments, but always on the run.

MH: So the tough part is what you saw in your own mind?

RC: Of course, isn't this the real practice? I'm a nun and might do my holy practices every day and even teach about it, but the real practice is dealing with my shitty mind, all the garbage, all the delusions. Seeing delusions every moment and not buying into them, abiding by the law of karma, not blaming others, taking responsibility, transforming problems into happiness, all these wonderful teachings Tibetan Lamas give.

MH: What kind of work did you do?

RC: First I worked for Wisdom Publications. My father had been a journalist and started a printing company. All of our siblings worked there over the years. And it was the same when I was involved politically. I was always on the propaganda side: editing, writing, printing, and designing. Wisdom started at Kopan Monastery in the early 70s, and when I arrived in 1977 I totally knew this was my job. Then Lama moved us to London, and I thought I'd be running it, of course. Give me anything to run, I'll run it! But Lama said, "Fantastic, Robina can be secretary." I nearly fainted! I was shocked. I thought, "Poor Lama, he doesn't understand." But I stuck with it. Lama had me by the scruff of my neck, I knew I couldn't escape, I knew this was my practice: dealing with my crazy mind. Being a nun is easy, that's not the issue for me at all. Being female for me is not the issue, it's dealing with my mind. Struggling against my delusions, that's the tough part. That's practice.

MH: Has this become easier over the years?

RC: If it hasn't, I'm doing something wrong, aren't I? It would be pretty pathetic to stick around this long if the methods aren't working.

MH: Do you have a Tibetan ordination name?

RC: Thubten Kunsel.

MH: Is there a reason you didn't change your name?

RC: No, I didn't think about it much. Nobody called me that, Lama Yeshe and Rinpoche kept calling me Robina, so there really was no reason to make a change.

MH: What prompted you to begin the prison work?

RC: I didn't make the decision to go to prisons, the prisons came to me. In 1994 I'd come to the United States to work at Vajrapani Institute, and then I took on the job of editing FPMT's Mandala Magazine, in Santa Cruz. In 1996 I received a letter from Arturo, a Mexican American who was in Pelican Bay in northern California, one of the strictest security prisons. He had read a book by Lama Yeshe, he said, and was moved by the talk about compassion. This letter landed on my desk, I responded, and it all started from there. Within a year I had 40 prisoners writing to me, it was all word of mouth. When I handed over the prison project to a colleague in 2009, we had established ourselves as non-profits in the US and Australia. I had full time paid staff of nine and a team of 200 volunteer mentors worldwide who would respond to the 1,000 letters we received every month. Over the years we had probably received letters from 25,000 inmates and sent them 100,000 free books.

MH: How do you find the Buddhist teachings benefit the inmates?

RC: The majority of the people in prison we had contact with are working class, or in gangs, with a violent upbringing, no education, no friends, no money, no support, and so many of them serving long sentences, not to mention being on death row. We became people's friends. The most basic way of helping is to become a human being's friend – so many of them had no one. Many would enjoy reading the books we sent, and many also became serious students and practitioners of Buddhism.

MH: How did you benefit from the prison work? Is there something you learned from the inmates?

RC: Yes, when your back is against the wall, when you know there is nothing you can do to change your physical situation, then you know that the only thing you can change is your mind. Prisoners who practice really get that. We think we're free, but with all our delusions – our attachment, our anger, our jealousy, depression and fear – we're actually not free. We might as well be in prison. We feel locked in our misery, blame everybody and feel hopeless. Arturo, this young man who first wrote to us, is in his cell 23 hours every day. He is only allowed the inside of a pen because he could use the outside part to stab his cellie. He is given only Koolaid to drink because he could harm his cellie with a hot drink. He can have ten books, but only paperbacks, because he could use a hard cover as a weapon. And you can't imagine the noise. He said it's like being in a rock concert all day. He has no fresh air, no sun, no window, and he is allowed to exercise for only one hour in another, bigger, cell, walking up and down. Now, that's a pretty intense prison, right? So it's quite shocking for us to hear Lama Zopa's response to Arturo when he wrote to him: "Your prison is nothing in comparison with the inner prison of ordinary people – the prison of attachment, the prison of anger, the prison of ignorance." We don't think we're in prison, but this is Buddha's point: the deeper suffering that he points to in the First Noble Truth, the suffering of the delusions. And Arturo and my other friends in prison know this. They know they can't change their gross prison, but they *can* change their minds. That is why I am so inspired. They learned to have happy minds in these garbage dumps.

MH: Do you have another example?

RC: I just visited a friend on death row in Kentucky. He said, "Robina, I'm ready for that electric jolt." He probably has another year or two before they'll kill him. He is a truly happy person, leading a very rich, fulfilled life, on death row. Because he has changed his mind. That's what Buddhist practice really is, isn't it?

MH: Have you ever been afraid of some of the inmates?

RC: No. The people who come to the classes I give in prison choose to come, are dying to hear about Buddhism, are sincere, so why would I be afraid? I have been raped, I have been beaten up by men, I have been held at gunpoint, I have been attacked. For some reason, violence doesn't worry me.

MH: In Vicki Mackenzie's book, you tell the story how someone tried to rob you and you scolded them instead.

RC: Yes, it was in New York, in the early 70s. This guy came out of nowhere, put a gun to my chest and said, "Give me your money, bitch." I'm quite aggressive, and when I am attacked, I attack back. I remember feeling very clear. First of all, it was obvious to me that this guy was more scared than I was. I remember thinking how absurd it was that he was asking me for money. "No!" I said. "Give me *your* money. I'm just as poor as you." I sort of gave him a lecture. We went back and forth like that. In the end, he shrugged and walked away.

MH: Is this fearlessness the result of your Buddhist practice?

RC: I wasn't a Buddhist then. I'd had a lot of violence since I was a child, often sexual: from men on the streets, from my father. But it didn't make me afraid. I'd even fight back. When I was hitchhiking in Italy when I was 26, I was raped by two Americans. I was in the back seat of a two-door car, so I couldn't escape. No need for all the details, but I turned the whole thing around. I was a hippie, I was into having sex. I remember, again, everything was very clear. And again, I remember the absurdity of it. Here are these guys – young, good-looking – wanting to rape me, and I would have been perfectly happy to have had sex with them. I even said, "Why didn't you ask me?" I became the aggressor quite quickly. I instinctively knew I had the power. They became defensive, worried. So I took control of the situation. I knew I had to go through with it, I couldn't escape, so I told them to get on with it, please, as I need to get to Switzerland tonight, and I'm late. It was a farce, of course: it wasn't technically "rape" at all. These ridiculous men having to go through the motions of raping me while I'm lying there, cynical, telling them to hurry up. In the end, they were the ones who were afraid, embarrassed, confused. I'd taken their manhood from them. They begged me not to go to the police. They even invited me out for a meal. "No, thank you," I said. "But you can give me some money." Which they did. It was dark by now, and I continued hitching. A car with six guys in it stopped for me – they seemed okay, so I hopped in. I got to the Swiss border and slept the night in the forest in my sleeping bag. I would never have thought that this is how I would deal with being held up with a gun or being raped, but it's what happened. I learned hugely from those two situations: when you have no fear, there is no suffering. Does this make sense?

MH: It makes sense, but it is probably not the experience of most people. Could you give advice how to achieve a state of fearlessness or at least less fear?

RC: Learning to be fearless is what practice is all about, isn't it? As Lama Zopa says, "When we've realized emptiness, there is no fear." Also, when we have developed genuine love and compassion we would be fearless. They say that Tara liberates from the fears of samsara. This is her energy: fearless action energy, smashing the delusions.

The root delusion, ego-grasping, and all the others that stem from it – attachment and the rest – are in the nature of fear. This is the very meaning of being “in samsara”: buying into all the conceptual elaborations, all based on the nonsense of an intrinsic self. The logical consequence of practice is to go beyond fear. And what would this practice look like? Easy. If every day we happily welcome the things that make us angry, isn't this becoming fearless? If we forgive the person who harms us, isn't that becoming fearless? If we praise instead of criticize, isn't that becoming fearless? It's not complicated. It's just difficult, because we're addicted to giving in to ego, which is what perpetuates fear.

There must have been something in my personality that enabled me to deal with these violent situations. I remember being attacked in the streets by men as a little girl, as I said. And my father was violent. It didn't make me afraid. When I tell these stories, it sounds shocking, and in relation to violence against women, it can sound almost unsympathetic. I'm not unsympathetic, but at the same time, we have to be responsible and realize why we suffer in the face of any violence is because we have fear. This is not to excuse the rapist, but if we don't have fear and are able to deal with the situation, we won't suffer. And, with 100 percent certainty, if we as Buddhists truly lived according to the law of karma, and didn't blame, there would be no fear and we would not suffer. This is a fact. This is what Buddha is saying.

It is easy to be caught up in the victim mentality. On the one hand we women want to be treated equally but on the other we get really caught up in this heavy-duty energy of being a victim. We like to blame men. We can't have it both ways.

MH: When you speak about the victim mentality women have...

RC: We do, don't we? And the politics of it is incredible. In the world, we love to feel sorry for victims. Lama Yeshe would say, “Ego is the self-pity me.” I worked through all of these issues when I was a feminist. Being female now is not the issue for me. I have done my political work 37 years ago, now I want to be a Buddhist. I want to stop believing in my karmic appearances, as Lama Zopa puts it. I want to deal with my mind.

MH: I am intrigued how you could go from being such a political and radical person to not being interested in these topics anymore at all.

RC: I'm just the same radical person. I'm radically working on my own mind. Not believing in the way things appear to us: you can't get more radical than that. How women are treated in Buddhism, full ordination for nuns, whatever – all of these issues are important. But I want to look at the internal component, not the external. I want to uproot the causes of all suffering, which are mental. In that, I am more radical than ever.