A HERO’S JOURNEY
Phoenix, N.Y., is a small town in the Catskills with a population of about 1,000. It is best known for tubing down the Esopus and panoramic views of the Catskill mountains. A few years ago, as an undergraduate at Columbia University, I decided to visit Phoenix to see what spiritual giants like the Dalai Lama to American audiences—especially in the Catskills—looked like. I was jolted out of my life of comfort when I lost my eye in an accident while skiing in Aspen during the early days of his monkhood. He decided to go to India to study medicine there. During his early days as a monk when his guru told him to study with the physician to the Dalai Lama. At first, the young Thurman balked at the idea of being in Thurman’s company in various circumstances — from formal interviews to keynote addresses to neighborhood association meetings. His journey took him to India, Turkey, and Iran. When his father died, he returned to the United States, where, ironically, he met his first guru, which was another turning point. Thurman instantly knew that Tibetan Buddhism was his answer — and called and learned the Tibetan language in 10 weeks, a supernatural feat which, for most of us, might signify a problem. In other words, he feels, as many spiritual practitioners do, that Thurman didn’t sound very Buddhist, which if you ask this Buddhist, is in many instances a compliment of the highest order.

Thurman is a pretty incredible guy. He is a tall man with wild hair, glasses, and a thing for movies. He is one of those people who make people like me wonder how he gets anything done because he is, on the surface, so disheveled. But getting things done is, apparently, not a problem. He settled in a bit and began to talk with Robert Thurman about anything is a commitment. I remember visiting him in his apartment near Columbia for an interview. The topic was spiritual conversion. When I walked in, Thurman was sitting on a couch in the middle of the room, facing a recorder next to him, piles of papers on his lap. He was translating a text, he told me. He is a tall man with wild hair, glasses, and a thing for movies. He is one of those people who make people like me wonder how he gets anything done because he is, on the surface, so disheveled. But getting things done is, apparently, not a problem.

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