

## Hudson Valley Healing Buddha:

# Robert Thurman and Menla

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

### A HERO'S JOURNEY

Phoenicia, 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 pancakes from Sweet Sue's — lovely, yes, and quaint, but not exactly a metropolis. So what brings spiritual giants like the Dalai Lama to the area? Is it the mystical mountains and rivers, the uncanny collection of religious centers and monasteries? Enormous breakfasts? Perhaps. But more likely, it is Robert Thurman, the department chair and Je Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University; bestselling author; father to Uma, yes; co-founder (with Richard Gere) of Tibet House in New York City; founder of Menla (which means "healing Buddha") Mountain Retreat and Conference



Center here in Phoenicia; and totally brilliant, driven, charismatic ex-monk-turned-Buddhist-ambassador-to-the-world. I would be remiss if I didn't confess that over the years I have had the good fortune of being in Thurman's company in various circumstances — from formal interviews to keynote addresses to neighborhood association meetings — and I have become a huge fan. His hard-core devotion and sense of humor are, in a word, heroic.

Thurman's life does in fact read like a hero's journey. After growing up in a home where he participated in dramatic readings with guests like Laurence Olivier, he went to Exeter and Harvard, then was jolted out of his life of comfort when he lost his eye in an accident fixing a flat tire. He decided, as heroes do, to drop out and see what existed beyond the confines of this fleeting life. 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 — his call — and learned the Tibetan language in 10 weeks, a supernatural feat which, for most of us, might signify the *culmination* of a search, rather than a means to an end. He told his guru he wanted to become a monk. The guru resisted, then gave in and took Thurman to meet the Dalai Lama, who agreed to ordain Thurman — a first for any Westerner.

Robert Thurman is a pretty incredible guy.

### NOT VERY BUDDHIST

Sitting down 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, an old 1970s tape 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 western-style belt buckles. 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.



After settling in a bit (and he razzed me for being a Zen practitioner by offering me a cushion to sit on the floor), we then talked for three hours on the topic at hand; rather, he talked and I did my best to get my questions in edgewise. His answers included references to things like the Bill Murray movie classic "Groundhog Day," "Star Trek," the subtle teachings of the Buddhist sutras, and government conspiracy theories. Everything Thurman says is practically orated with high drama in his unmistakable voice and intonation, like a 1940s stage actor. When I turned in the interview to my magazine, the piece was rejected because the editors thought Thurman didn't sound very Buddhist, which if you ask this Buddhist, is a compliment of the highest order.

Clearly, Thurman is a brilliant man who could do just about anything. When I asked him recently how and why he continues to work so tirelessly on behalf of Tibet, he told me it's "a gratitude thing." In other words, he feels, as many spiritual practitioners do, that his life has been so radically transformed by the teachings he has encountered, that he owes the balance of it to not only manifesting,

but serving and protecting what he has found. In his case, Tibetan Buddhism, and his teacher and close friend the Dalai Lama, define his devotion.

### HEALING BUDDHA

Thurman's interest in Tibetan medicine and healing was piqued 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 - "'Me study medicine? I'm, like, a yogi, I want to meditate, I want to be a monk, like forget it. *You* study medicine.' But he gave me that guru's command. That thing." And so he began to learn.

Tibetan medicine is a mixture of traditional Chinese medicine, Indian Ayurvedic medicine, Greek Aesculapian healing, and indigenous Tibetan treatments including herbology and massage, perfect for an integrative medicine approach like the one Menla is offering. Menla's mission grows out of Tibet House's mandate to preserve Tibetan culture, which does not mean pushing Buddhism, or religion of any kind. Instead, Thurman hopes that the center — located on 320 stunning acres — will become a leading integrative health center, fostering connections with smart Western medicine, and possibly even including a spa-like component to keep the business fruitful. Ultimately, he hopes that Menla will become a place where people from all traditions come to train in the healing arts, and to be healed. While Thurman recognizes that his connections are primarily to the Buddhist world, which leads to a Buddhist-heavy curriculum ("This place is crawling with Buddhists"), he is hopeful that as the center expands, different traditions will be represented and taught.

The other intriguing aspect of Menla is what is in store for the folks who find themselves lucky enough to work there. As Thurman told me, there is a "big population of people who should be enlightened, who have done tons of retreats, etc., but they have no licensing. They like to live a little bit in retreat, but [at Menla, they can] learn massage therapy, cook, serve people as their bodhisattva vow [to work on behalf of all beings]. So whether people come in to teach, learn, or serve, Menla promises to deepen the consciousness of all who enter.

In a place like the Hudson Valley, who needs another retreat center? Thurman told me that he doesn't want Menla to be "a mini-Omega or Kripalu; we can't compete." Instead, as an offshoot of Tibet House, Menla offers something unique; for instance, a rotating position of Tibetan Lama in Residence — a teacher who will be on the grounds and offering meditation and teaching to anyone interested. Some of the programs that Menla has, or will offer soon, are "Qualities of an Awakened Life: The Six Paramitas," taught by well-known

Buddhist teacher and writer Sharon Salzberg; "Discovery of Mother Voidness: Integrating Buddhism and Psychotherapy" with Mark Epstein, a popular writer on the topic; and "Hiking in the Catskills," a day of local exploration led by Thurman himself. Generally speaking, Thurman is a co-teacher at every event. While there is plenty of good work happening here, Thurman is, no doubt, a main attraction.

### A METEORITE HITS

Pantherkill Mountain, where Menla is located, has an intriguing history of its own. It is believed that approximately 375 million years ago a meteorite blasted into the earth, creating a massive crater, which eventually filled with sediment. Add erosion, natural uplifting of the earth, and hundreds of millions of years, and you get a mountain. Before you know it, you also get all kinds of people attracted to that kind of energy, catching the vibe. As Thurman noted, the place has a "magical atmosphere. I have observed that students get a stronger pulse from the whole area, and Menla, specifically."

Regardless of what one may think about magical pulses, the Menla site has housed several groups who felt it. First, it was a campus for the International Pathwork Foundation, a group with communities around the world dedicated to spiritual transformation. Its founder, Eva Pierrakos, who died in 1979, is commemorated on the grounds with a shrine and a house named after her. Thurman reports that she continues to speak with people, specifically his wife Nena, but not with him because he is "too dense." He continues in his classic style, "We've had reunions of

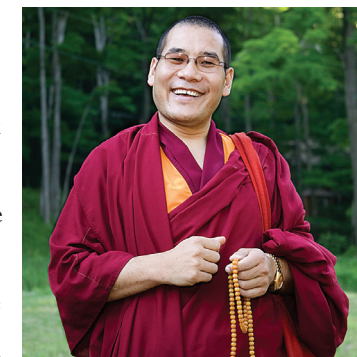
Pathwork classes here. People come and they're flipping out, they're hugging this tree and that tree. And they're not doing drugs at all!"

Apparently, the group wasn't able to stay financially viable, and the bank took the property. Then their leader died.

The next group to settle into the property was the Aesculapian Foundation, an organization devoted to the Greek tradition of healing, which worked with people who were ill, encouraging them to have a dream that would tell which type of treatment would be successful. Unfortunately, according to Thurman, the healers kept leaving the center, preferring life in the Mediterranean.

Finally, the owner of the property decided to donate it to Tibet House. Enter Robert Thurman.

*Continued on page 88*



*Bethany Saltman (pictured here with Bob Thurman) is the Managing Editor of InsideOut and is writing a book called "Sweet Jesus: American Conversion Stories." She has published essays and interviews in magazines such as The Sun, Buddhadharma, Killingthebuddha, and Geez. She is a Zen practitioner who has studied with John Daido Loori, Roshi for over ten years. She lives in Phoenicia with her husband and baby girl.*