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# SHAMBHALA SUN

BUDDHISM CULTURE MEDITATION LIFE

JULY 2014

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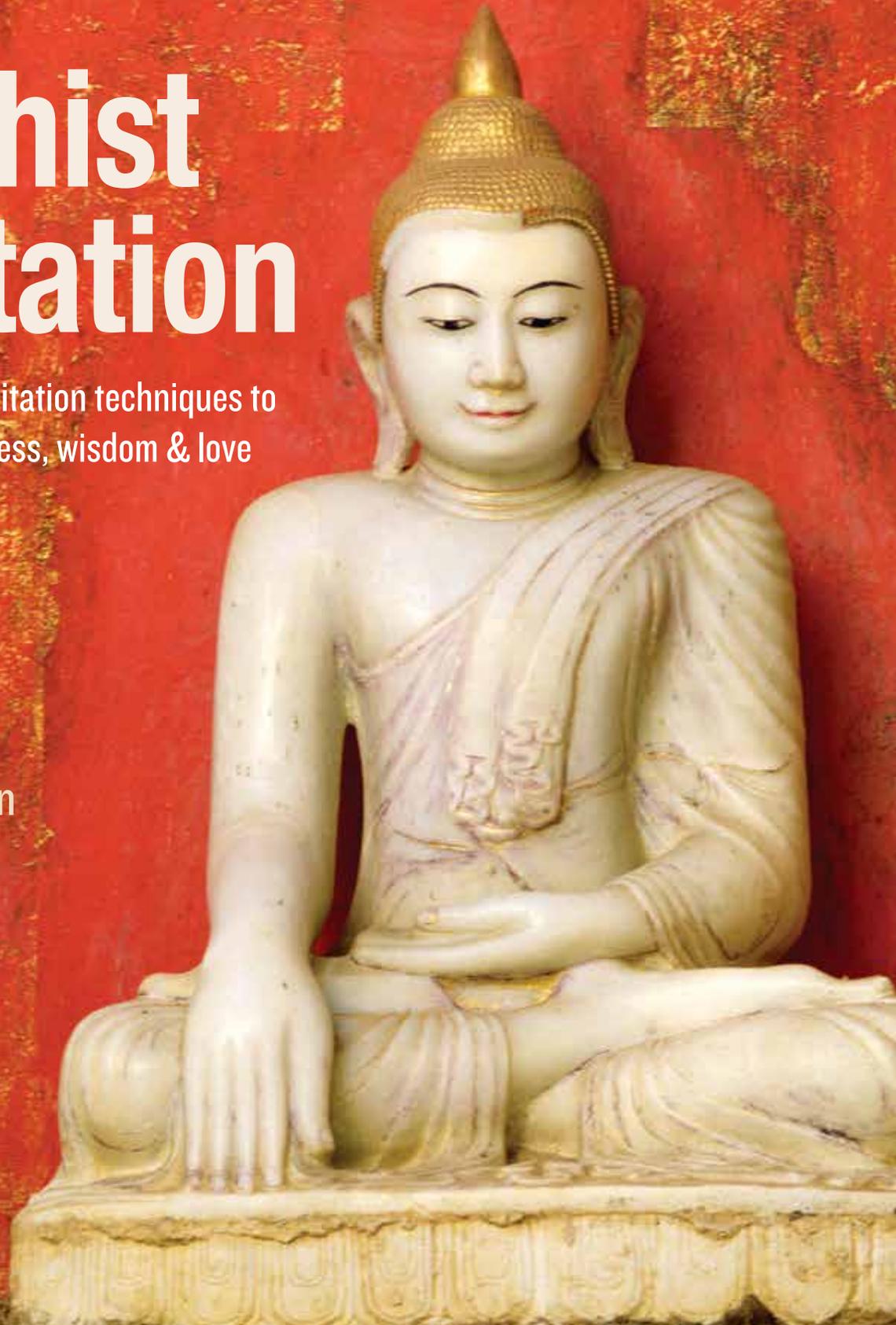
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# The Buddhas of West 17th

The art, spirituality, and ideas of the Himalayas meet the best of the modern world at New York's Rubin Museum

LOCATED IN THE FASHIONABLE Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, the Rubin Museum is not just the world's leading museum dedicated to the ideas, cultures, and art of the Himalayas. It's also a hot spot of innovative, contemporary programming. It was founded a decade ago by the husband-and-wife team of Donald and Shelley Rubin, philanthropists and art collectors who donated well over a thousand pieces from their personal collection. As Donald Rubin says, "We have always seen art as a source of joy, inspiration, and healing. I also see it as a means of positive social change and cultural education." Today, under the leadership of Tim McHenry, the museum's director of public programs and performances, the Rubin offers a unique combination of art exhibits, contemporary cultural events, and dialogues that bring together diverse voices exploring topics from happiness to neuroscience to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Celebrating its tenth anniversary, the *Shambhala Sun* presents a sampling of the stimulating dialogues the Rubin Museum has hosted and the extraordinary art it has showcased.

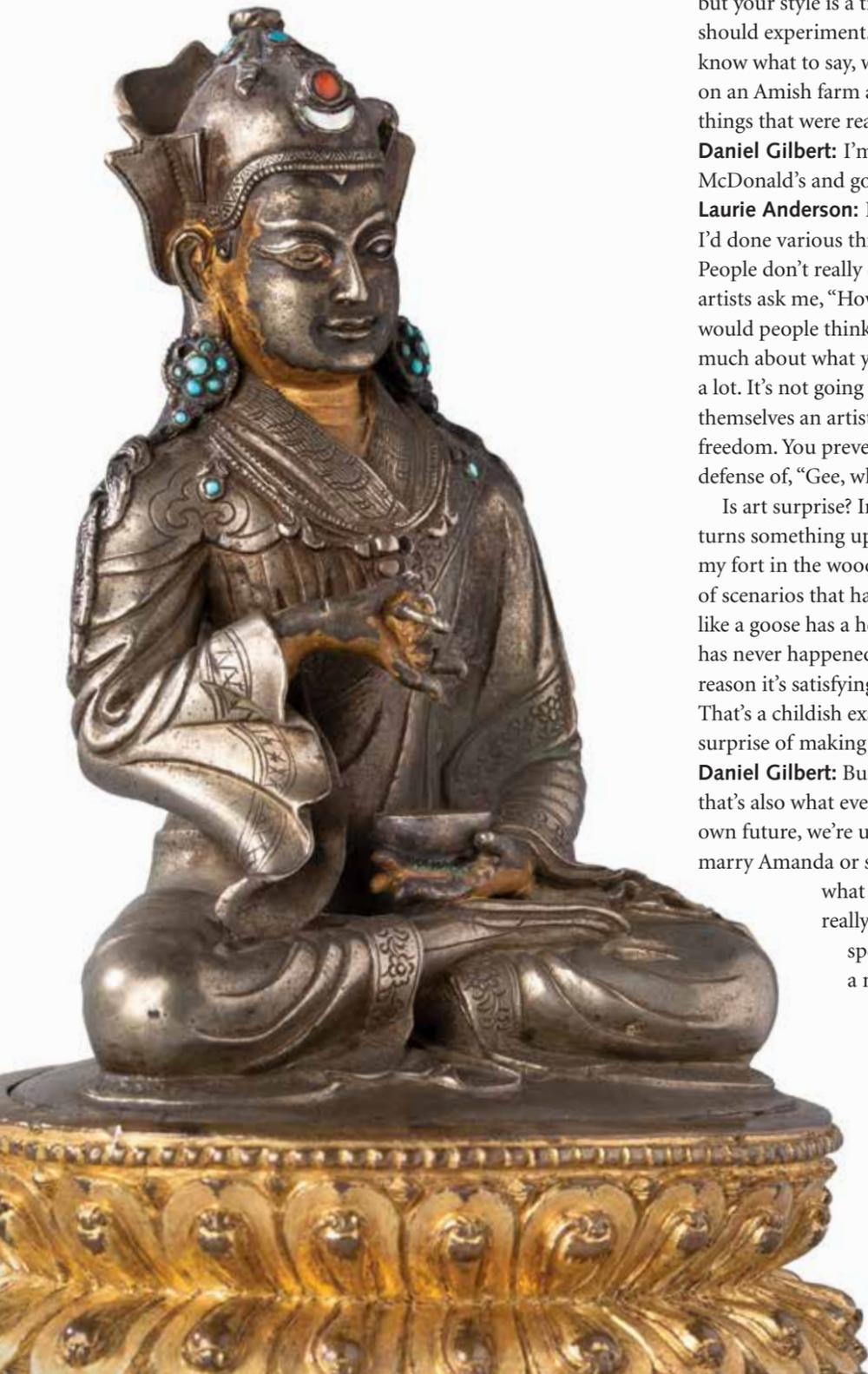
*Opposite page: A Mongolian silk appliqué with pearls, coral, horsehair, and gold thread. It depicts Magzor Gyalmo, an emanation of the goddess Sarasvati and protector of the Dalai Lamas.*

*Below left: Laurie Anderson and Daniel Gilbert in one of the RMA's many spirited dialogues, which can touch on art, spirituality, creativity, psychology, and scientific innovation—often, all at once.*

*Below right: The Rubin Museum is housed in a former high-end clothing store on West 17th Street, New York.*



PHOTO: MICHAEL PALMA



## A Question of Freedom

Artist/musician Laurie Anderson & Daniel Gilbert,  
author of *Stumbling on Happiness*

**Laurie Anderson:** When you move through your life, you have your schtick about who are you. You have your stories.

So I had my style and people would say, “That’s your style,” but your style is a trap. I thought, I’m an experimental artist. I should experiment. So I put myself in situations where I didn’t know what to say, what to do, who to be. I did things like work on an Amish farm and at McDonald’s. I just did a bunch of things that were really awkward for me.

**Daniel Gilbert:** I’m still stuck on the moment you walk into a McDonald’s and go, “Hi, can I get an application?”

**Laurie Anderson:** It’s easy to work at McDonald’s. I just said I’d done various things in my life. They didn’t ask questions. People don’t really care what you do. In fact, a lot of young artists ask me, “How could I dare call myself an artist? What would people think?” I have to tell you that people care as much about what you do as you care about what they do. Not a lot. It’s not going to rock your world if someone else calls themselves an artist. So knock yourself out! It’s a question of freedom. You prevent yourself from being free by this little defense of, “Gee, what would people say?”

Is art surprise? In certain ways, for me, it is. I like art that turns something upside down. I spent a lot of my childhood in my fort in the woods, smoking oak-leaf cigarettes and thinking of scenarios that had never happened. Just weird little stories like a goose has a heart attack and falls on a man’s head. That has never happened in the history of the world, and for some reason it’s satisfying to think of something that has never been. That’s a childish example but there’s something about the surprise of making something. It’s godlike.

**Daniel Gilbert:** Building reality—that’s what artists do. But that’s also what everybody does. Every time we think about our own future, we’re using imagination to create scenarios: If I marry Amanda or study the violin or move to New York, here’s what will happen, here’s how I’ll feel... This is really the thing that sets us apart from every other species on this planet. “Be here now” is easy for a mouse.

Left: Fifteenth-century Tibetan statue of Padmasambhava, the legendary figure credited with bringing Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet.

## I Look at Pleasure and I Get Scared

Philosopher Simon Critchley & the late actor Philip Seymour Hoffman

**Simon Critchley:** The word “happiness” is strange. Is happiness pleasure? Coffee gives me pleasure—it makes me happy. There’s that basic model of happiness. Or you could say, the more coffee I get, the happier I get. That would be a quantitative idea of happiness. Or you could go qualitative and say, it’s not any coffee that makes me happy—I want good coffee. So it’s not just about pleasure, it has to be exquisite pleasure.

**Philip Seymour Hoffman:** I would definitely say pleasure is not happiness because I kill pleasure. I take too much of it in and therefore make it unpleasurable, like too much coffee and you’re miserable. There’s no pleasure that I haven’t actually made myself sick on.

So I look at pleasure and I get scared. But I have three children, and I think I’m happy when I’m with them and

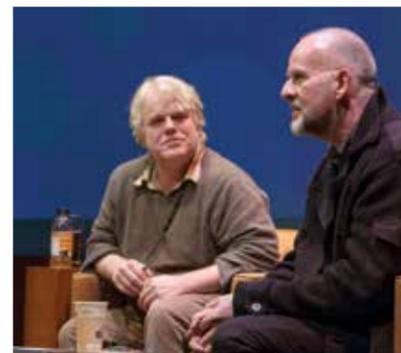


PHOTO: MICHAEL PALMA

they’re okay. Something happens in that moment when I see them enjoying each other in front of me, and they let me enjoy them in turn. I’d say it’s happiness.

**Simon Critchley:** Normally we think happiness is something that lies within. I don’t think that’s true. Happiness lies with-

out, in our relationship to people, so happiness is achieved through acts of love. And what is love? Love is to give something that you do not have and to receive that over which you have no power. Love is not a contractual relationship. It’s not a mutual exchange. It’s not “If I give you this, you give me that.”

**Philip Seymour Hoffman:** I love my kids unconditionally. But when they’re enjoying each other and they let me enjoy them, there are moments when something else creeps in, and I’m not conscious of the love. I’m conscious of my own childhood. It’s like they’re taking me back and I’m going, “Oh, God, it’s so good to be young and enjoying each other.” It feels good.

**Simon Critchley:** There’s the line from *Magnolia*: You might be through with the past, but the past isn’t through with you.



A sixteenth-century Tibetan painting of Abhedha, one of the original disciples of the Buddha.



Mount Kailash, a 6,656-meter peak in Eastern Tibet, photographed by Kenro Izu. It is recognized as a holy place in Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Bön.

## When the Censor Goes to Sleep

Novelist Amy Tan & Deirdre Barrett,  
author of *The New Science of Dreaming*

**Deirdre Barrett:** Every part of your brain is doing something during dreaming, but some parts are ramped up and some damped down. The area that says, “No, that’s not the way to do it” is much quieter, and the one generating 3-D visual images is much more active.

So we’re less likely to censor ourselves, which is why some scientific breakthroughs have been made in dreams. They almost always involve a scientist stuck on something because the conventional approach to the problem happens to be wrong. The most famous example is Kekulé figuring out the structure of benzene when it was believed that all molecules were in a straight line. He knew the atoms in benzene and was trying to figure out some straight line with side chains. In a dream, he saw the atoms dancing and they formed snake-like lines. Then one of the snakes took its tail in its mouth, and he realized that benzene was a closed-ring structure. His mind went there faster in a dream because the prefrontal wasn’t telling him as loudly, “No, no, molecules have to be straight lines.” Almost all scientific breakthroughs made in dreams have that quality of thinking outside the box.

**Amy Tan:** I had a series of dreams when I was in my twenties and a roommate of mine had been murdered. He’d come to me at night and give lessons. One had to do with self-esteem. He took me to this magical place full of flying elephants and camels and said, “Do you want to fly like these animals?” I said, “I’m not dead. I can’t do that.” He said I could rent wings at this little stand. They cost twenty-five cents, a real bargain. So I rented a pair. I was flying and it was great.

But then I thought, wait a minute, twenty-five-cent wings? And then I was plunging. I was going to die! I thought: But I was flying a second ago... And then I was flying again. I did this a number of times before I realized it was my belief that I could fly that enabled me to. Now, I don’t believe that while I’m awake and jump off buildings. But what was created was a sense of my own determination in life. I knew I had to stop thinking that I couldn’t do things. I had to just try.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL PALMA



## F-bombs and Other Sounds

Video artist Bill Viola & Buddhist teacher  
Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

**Bill Viola:** I had five works in an exhibition. They were in a continuous series of rooms, and each piece had sound. Setting up, we had to figure out how we could get people to walk through all five rooms, opening the doors, without sound coming out. We hired an acoustic engineer, and he designed a beautiful system.

All he did was make a little notch in the edge of each door so it was at an angle. He said opposites cancel, so to completely isolate rooms acoustically you just need the tiniest bit of material on opposite doors. He also said that if he took any room and put the right acoustic material around, he could guarantee that you’d want to leave within five minutes. You’d walk in, sit down, and have a nice conversation, but you’d have the feeling that you didn’t want to be there.

**Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche:** If by using sound you can make a person leave a room, it makes sense that there are sounds that can make you more awake. Sound, especially music and chanting, brings our consciousness to a different state, right on the spot. It doesn’t have to be a mantra or sacred word. It can be anything, even The Rolling Stones.

The Hindu teacher Baba Muktananda was giving a talk about mantras. One student raised his hand and said, “If you say, ‘I’m hungry’ 100,000 times, you’ll still be hungry. So how does mantra work?” Then the guru used the F word. He said, shut the “F” up and sit down. So the student sat down and the guru continued his discussion about mantra. Then the student raised his hand again and the teacher ignored him. Suddenly the student shouted, “How can you use the F word?”

See? The power of sound! It’s just a little sound, but the F word makes you so angry. It changes your mind. Sound is translated into concepts. Then our concepts become so powerful that we start believing in something that isn’t really true.

We always talk about religious persons as having blind faith, but we—as ordinary persons—sometimes have stronger blind faith than religious people. We have blind faith in our concepts and in the things parents, teachers, the government, and CNN are telling us.



## Do Memories Make Us Happy?

Buddhist teacher Shyalpa Tenzin Rinpoche  
& psychologist Marsha Lucas

**Shyalpa Tenzin Rinpoche:** First and foremost, we must relate to everything that's external. So no matter if it's visual or something that you hear or feel, you must relate to what's happening in front of you.

Yet whatever happens, we tend to project something onto it. So whatever we think is manifesting is not the way it actually exists. The moment we think, "This may be a projection," we have a chance to relate to what's happening. If we're able to integrate with what's manifesting, it cannot bother or hinder us.

When there's fear, there's insecurity. Memory is based on insecurity. If we are not insecure, we don't need memory. If we're 100 percent confident that we can handle everything at any given moment, memory will not exist.

**Marsha Lucas:** I can stay with you about not needing to have memory for facts and information at the ready so I can look smart. But what about memories that inform us about how we came to be in our life at this moment? You and I both have a history of having been born, an experience of being raised, an experience of marrying, and so forth. All of those experiences are stored within us.

**Shyalpa Tenzin Rinpoche:** Those memories are never helpful in making us happy. They make us unhappy!

**Marsha Lucas:** I'm going to challenge you on that. I think about the memory I have of the happy moment when my husband and I were wed. How does that add to my unhappiness?

**Shyalpa Tenzin Rinpoche:** When you think about that memory, you want to experience that happy moment forever.

**Marsha Lucas:** Ah, so there's a longing, an attachment to that feeling. I think about that when people are first practicing mindfulness meditation. They have that moment where it starts to feel so wonderful, then they get frustrated and unhappy because they can't have that every time they sit.

**Shyalpa Tenzin Rinpoche:** This is very common. In Tibetan we call that *nyam*, temporary experience. *Nyam* is like mist. It doesn't last. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with memory. What I'm saying is that there's something much deeper. There's nothing we cannot figure out as long as we're confident in our essence. To be present in the moment requires an incredible amount of conviction and courage. Because of our memory, we lack confidence in being in the moment.

Left: A Nepalese double-sided banner showing two Hindu mother goddesses: (top) Varahi, the female aspect of the Hindu boar god; (bottom) Varuni, goddess of water, dancing on a water monster.



This multi-artist work commissioned by the Rubin Museum is a contemporary interpretation of the Wheel of Life, a visual teaching tool that explains Buddhist ideas about the cyclical process of life, death, and rebirth.

## Meditations on Violence

Director Martin Scorsese

When I did *Mean Streets* I wanted to show what I thought we lived like, the Italian-Americans on the Lower East Side. Violence is a very serious thing, and when it's committed in that society, there are repercussions. A line is crossed. I'd been around some of it, and the shock was so strong that when I deal with stories where violence is an important part, I try not to show it in a pretty way, though maybe I've been guilty of that a couple of times—it's been thirty years.

*Taxi Driver* is about being young and disaffected. Paul Schrader wrote it and he had those feelings in him. I did too, and so did Robert De Niro. The film was something we thought we had to do because we felt it was true. We tried not to make the violence in it pretty in any way, because it's not pretty. Violence is not in slow motion with people flying in the frame and flipping up in the air and turning around. It's not a video game. It's very real and ugly. Looking back to the Gulf War in '91, when we were allowed to see smart bombs in black-and-white video, I think a cleansing was beginning. It was distancing us from the extraordinary violence that was occurring.

The issue is to deal with what part of us is violent. That's something not to be shied away from in the work. There's a kind of excitement in violence, and that's part of being human. One has to deal with that. You can't deny it. Deny it and it's going to explode! Maybe I'm just an old man talking about younger people making video games where violence becomes a game. But I am concerned about the nature in which violence is now being shown, particularly in the news. It's all cleansed. It's all distanced. We don't feel a thing—we're not meant to.

## You're a Goddess

Artist Josh Melnick & Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg

**Sharon Salzberg:** One makes oneself vulnerable through creation. Art can come from such a personal place, and yet it's often such a public expression. As an artist, can you have a sense of happiness despite the way people receive your work?

**Josh Melnick:** I have happiness if the intention of the work is aligned with my moral and ethical beliefs. It isn't about making something for the marketplace or because it's what people expect. I can't say how many projects I've started and stopped because I thought they were for the right reason but they actually weren't.

**Sharon Salzberg:** We like people to like us but I'm struck over and over again by how outside of our control that is. My most recent experience of this was in Washington, D.C., where I went to hear the speech by Congressman Tim Ryan about his book, *A Mindful Nation*. I was sitting in the auditorium and I saw a woman walking around with one of my books. Then she spotted me and came over. She knelt down in front of me to have me sign the book, which I was very happy to do. Then she said, "You're a goddess." So I felt rather delighted at that! But not ten seconds later, Ryan's communications director came over with a journalist and I don't think I've ever met anyone less interested in meeting me. The communication's director said, "This is Sharon Salzberg," and the journalist looked completely bored. The communications director asked, "Have you ever heard of her?" and he said, "Nah." Of course I liked the woman's comment rather more than the journalist's, but how deeply do we take these things to heart? Do they define us? Do they ruin our happiness?

**Josh Melnick:** I think you're a goddess.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you! ♦



Late sixteenth-century painting of the Ninth Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.



Permanent installation of a Tibetan shrine room.

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