

**PROFILE: Marc Lieberman**

**Doctor gives Tibetans gift of sight**

**He's working to end cataract blindness in their country**

- [Patricia Yollin, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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The rug is as white as a Himalayan peak. There are Buddhas all over the place, rare Tibetan hangings on the wall, a model of an eyeball on the floor and absolutely no furniture.

This is Marc Lieberman's living room.

"People who can't sit on the floor go home," Lieberman said blithely.

His brown-shingle house in San Francisco's Glen Park neighborhood is both soothing and eclectic -- not unlike its owner, a 55-year-old ophthalmologist and clinical professor at UCSF.

A Jewish Buddhist, Lieberman decided in 1990 -- after a long conversation with the Dalai Lama -- to help blind Tibetans see again.

His quest turned into the Tibet Vision Project, which he founded in 1995 and has been praised by the Dalai Lama as "a great act of kindness." Ten years later, Lieberman has trained 20 Tibetan surgeons and restored sight to more than 2,000 people.

A documentary about the project premieres Saturday in Berkeley at the Buddhist International Film Festival. It includes unprecedented glimpses of rural Tibet, a country under Chinese political control since 1951.

"It's amazing the amount of struggle Marc has in order to keep this work going," said Isaac Solotaroff, the film's producer.

The struggle takes place on many fronts: raising money for a nonprofit with a budget of

\$50,000 a year, setting up eye camps in the middle of nowhere, driving through ravines and over washed-out roads in vehicles that continually break down, dealing with the Chinese medical system.

"It's like visiting an Indian reservation run by Gen. Custer's family," Lieberman said.

In the Bay Area, Lieberman specializes in treating glaucoma and divides his time among offices in San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Cruz. In Tibet, he concentrates on cataracts, the leading cause of preventable blindness there, partly from the sheer amount of UV radiation that exists on "the roof of the world."

"It's a profound irony," Lieberman said. "These Tibetans are blind in this majestic land. They are blinded by the light that so delights us."

Tibetans come by foot, on the backs of yaks, however they can get there and however long it takes -- days, in some cases.

For them, Lieberman said, "the experience of an eye camp is like grandma has been abducted by a UFO."

Twice a year, he visits Tibet for a month, training Tibetan medical teams to remove cataracts and install lens implants. He wants to triple his time there and eliminate cataract blindness by 2020.

It's ambitious, but then so is Lieberman.

He grew up in a Reform Jewish household in the "balkanized" Baltimore of the 1950s, where neighborhoods were defined by race, religion and ethnicity. His brother and uncle became rabbis.

Healing also ran in the family.

"My father was an ear-nose-and-throat doctor," he said. "The eye was the only organ left."

He's still fond of Baltimore and quickly mentions that filmmaker John Waters, musician David Byrne and the late singer Mama Cass also were born there.

"There aren't that many people from Baltimore to be proud of," he said.

At Reed College in Portland, Ore., Lieberman majored in religion.

"I studied pre-Biblical Canaanite languages," he said. "But I had a glimmer that it wouldn't be a good career choice."

He also took up calligraphy, something he still pursues.

"It's one of the few things I learned in my psychedelic haze," he said.

After college, Lieberman moved to Israel, married an Israeli woman and had a son who's now 25. He got his medical training at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and arrived in San Francisco for specialty training in glaucoma in 1980.

He met his second wife in a yoga class. She introduced him to meditation, which led to Buddhism. In 1989, after a mutual friend said the Dalai Lama wanted to learn about Judaism, Lieberman organized a meeting with rabbis and scholars in New Jersey. The following year, they went to Dharamsala in northern India, where the Dalai Lama lives.

Buddhism reshaped Lieberman's life.

In "The Jew in the Lotus," a book about the trip to Dharamsala, author Rodger Kamenetz recounted how his childhood friend had changed.

"Buddhism had gotten him somewhere spiritually in a way Judaism never had, " he wrote. "In the years since he'd begun meditating, he seemed to have become calmer, less neurotic, more at ease."

On the other hand, Lieberman eats meat, has been divorced twice and suffers from road rage when he drives -- "Buddhism helps, but it's not as much fun as self-righteous hatred."

And his Type A personality hasn't gone away, because some things never change.

"I'm still an Orioles fan, too," he said.

Lieberman meditates each morning for 20 to 40 minutes and doesn't read newspapers or own a television. He lives alone, surrounded by Buddhas from Tibet, Thailand, Burma and Nepal.

They reside in rooms that are unnervingly serene and uncluttered -- except for his office, which is where he spends much of the time.

It's a total mess, and Lieberman seems almost relieved about it.

"Without this room," he said, "I would have an obsessive-compulsive disorder."

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## Details

"Visioning Tibet" will be shown at 4 p.m. Saturday in Wheeler Auditorium on the UC Berkeley campus. For more information, see [www.ibff.org](http://www.ibff.org) or call (510) 601-5111.

Also useful: [www.reelbiography.com/visioning\\_tibet/](http://www.reelbiography.com/visioning_tibet/)

To find out more about the Tibet Vision Project, go to [www.TibetVisionProject.org](http://www.TibetVisionProject.org) or call 831-427-4973.

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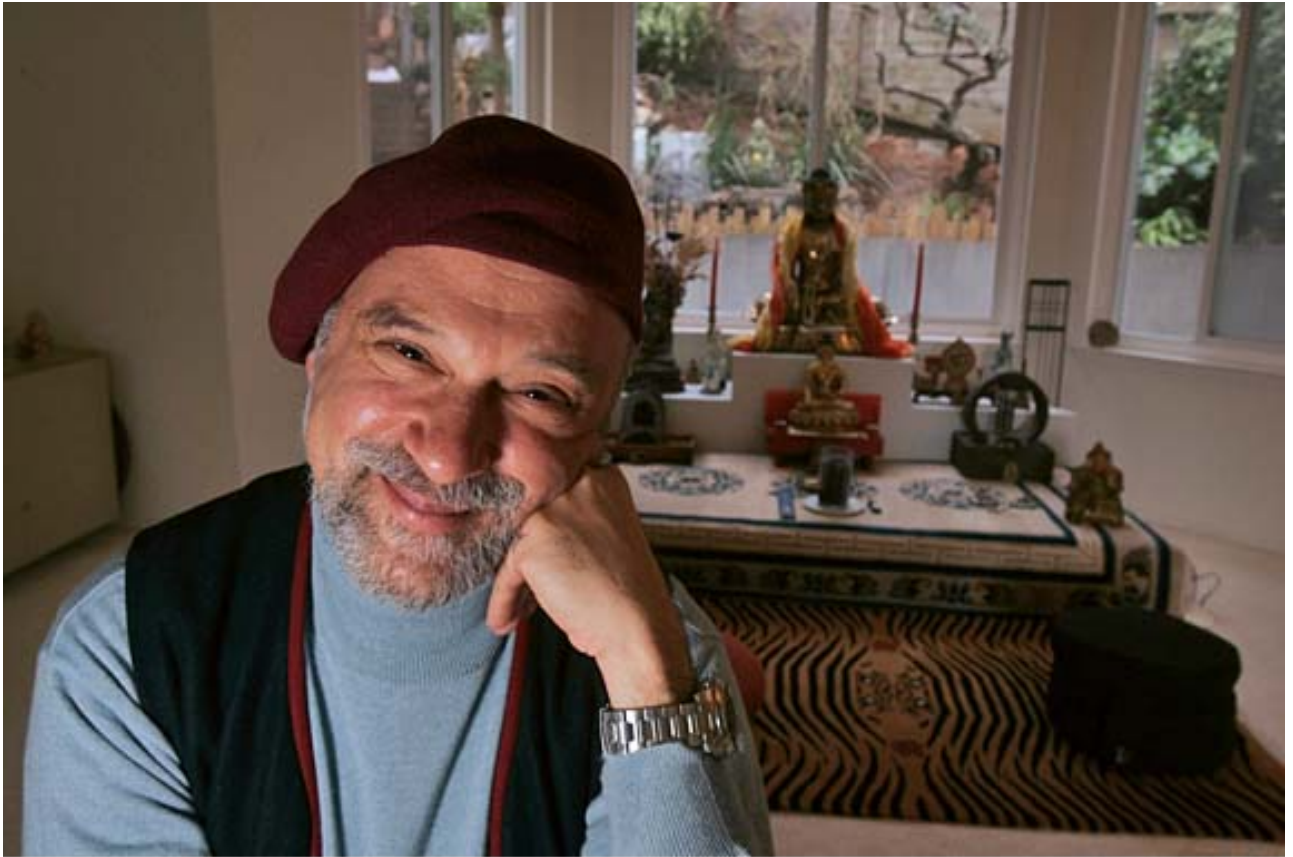
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Dr. Marc Lieberman has trained 20 Tibetan eye surgeons, in a project that's the subject of a documentary to be shown Saturday. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse



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A nomad woman in her mid 20s awaits surgery to remove the cataract from her right eye. Photo by Isaac Solotaroff



Isaac Solotaroff

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**People wearing sunglasses have had cataract surgery at the Tibet Vision Project. Photo by Kirk Schroeder**



Kirk Schroeder