



# A Rebel's Tale

American Hindu Richard Brown recounts his younger years, from fronting a rock band and dodging the military draft to becoming a monk in India and venturing into the gem business. **BY AMITHA AMRANAND**

Standing by the squeaky-clean display cases in his tiny and brightly lit jewellery and talisman shop in Villa Aree, **Richard Brown**, dressed in a simple short-sleeved shirt, trousers, and a *rudraksha* seed necklace, looked every bit a friendly, down-to-earth, nearly all-American man.

A few minutes into our interview, however, Richard began the amazing story of his unconventional path and, at 66 years of age, the rebellious and principled streaks he still retains. He peppered his story with Thai and Hindu spiritual terms and spoke with vibrant indignation of certain episodes of his youth.

The long-time gemologist, who studied at Gemology Institute of America, had been doing business in Thailand long before he settled in the country, travelling here to buy gems. Although Thailand is a hub for gems and jewellery, it was only part of the reason why Richard decided to make it his permanent home.

“I saw that I was really happy in Thailand. When I’m in America, I’m never really happy. And so I decided I would rather live here because it’s the perfect blend of Western comfort and Asian philosophy and culture,” he said.

Richard’s interest in gems has always been infused with spirituality. His business, Astral Gemstone Talismans, now with five shops across Bangkok and an online store, sells pieces with attention paid not only to aesthetics, but more importantly, to the sacred power of gemstones and their relationship with the planets. The business, both online and in-store, offers computerised Rasi chart readings based on the North Indian system to guide clients in choosing gemstones auspicious for their star signs.

Richard is especially proud of his *navaratna* designs, comprising emerald, diamond, pearl, sapphire, ruby, coral, cat’s eye, blue sapphire, and zircon. In 1993, he designed and presented a *navaratna* gold necklace to Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand. He has also come out with a *navaratna* collection of pendants featuring Hindu deities and the nine monarchs of the Chakri Dynasty.

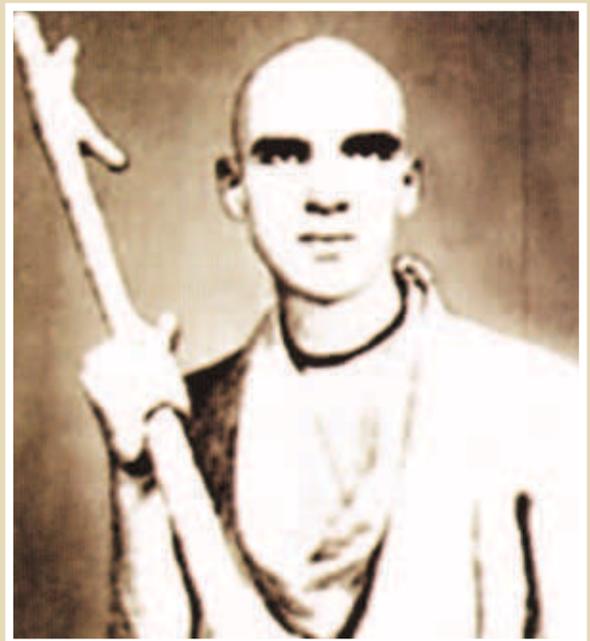
Richard also likes to include in his designs other objects believed to have sacred or divine properties, like Rudraksha seeds (literally meaning the eye of Shiva) and *bhasma* (sacred ashes made from herbs representing the nine planets in Vedic astrology), ordered annually from Nepal and sealed in golden tubes.

He has translated his passion for and knowledge of gemology and Hindu astrology into nine books, featuring his designs, his personal encounters with the sacred power of precious stones, and informative guide to selecting high-quality gemstones.

The gemologist’s spirituality goes much deeper than the alignment of planets and star signs. In fact, his interest in spirituality precedes his interest in gem. Born in Florida, Richard grew up in Riverside, Southern California, and was raised by parents who were, according to Richard,



▲ The members of The Misunderstood. Richard is on the extreme left.



▲ Richard as a young sadhu

“agnostic”. When he was 16, Richard began fronting, playing harmonica, and writing songs for psychedelic rock band The Misunderstood.

“Our band wasn’t just singing about boys, girls, holding hands. We were singing about the meaning of life and the war in Vietnam,” he recalled.

With a sound inspired by British rock bands, most notably The Yardbirds, of the British Invasion era, The Misunderstood found an audience in the US but not a single record deal. So the boys sold all their equipment and headed to London in 1966 to try their luck. There, they signed a record deal and became more famous than they ever were in their home country. The band was later credited for being a pioneer in the acid rock genre and continues to have a cult following today.

“Being an American band in London, you were the only one in town,” Richard explained their success in London.

And it was in this city that Richard found Hinduism.

“We were just hanging around people who were reading *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and all these books. And people were talking about soul. My parents’ generation never thought about these things. Our generation, we thought about *phra jao* [gods] and the soul. *If I’m not this body, then what am I, who am I?*”

In 1967, at the age of 19, Richard became a vegetarian and declared himself a Hindu. It was the same year he received the Vietnam War draft notice, which forced the split of the band and his return to the US.

Richard spent three months in the military before he ran away.

“I told them, ‘I can’t. I’m a vegetarian. I don’t believe in killing people. America is not under attack. This is ridiculous. I’m not going to go because Big Brother tells me to go,’” he recounted, a faint indignation in his voice.

Richard then went to San Francisco, where he met Swami Prabhupad who advised him to go to India, where Richard ended up at a monastery in Vrindavan for seven years, living as a sadhu.

“[The monkhood] gave me a belief in the unseen power of *thevada* [deities], *jitsomneuk* [the conscience], *duang winyan* [spirits]...the difference between the body, the mind, the soul. These are the things that you can

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▲ A navaratra Necklace presented to Her Majesty The Queen of Thailand.

never forget...at some point, I had expected to stay there forever,” he said. But when a friend wrote to him asking for his help after having discovered a ruby mine in South India, Richard left the monastery. The ruby turned out not to be of gem-quality, but it ignited the young Richard’s interest in precious stones. He went on to start developing his own jewellery design and help people set up gem businesses and cutting factories in India. In 1975, after having found a good goldsmith in Bali, Indonesia, Richard started Astral Gemstone Talismans, which began as a shop-less venture, selling jewellery to mostly tourists in Nepal and India.

After 12 years in India and two years after amnesty was granted to draft dodgers and conscientious objectors, Richard went back home to clear his status and reunite with his family, who thought that he was dead as he had lost touch with them since his departure from the US.

“I didn’t know how to use the telephone or anything. I didn’t know how to drive...it was a little a bit difficult [to see my family again] because I had become a Hindu,” he said.

Richard described the relationship with his family in the years following as “wonderful”. Just a year after he left the US once again to settle permanently in Thailand in 1986, Richard married Kannitha Suriwongse, who, at Richard’s urging, took up gemology at the Asian Institute of Gemological Sciences and played an instrumental role in the growth of Astral Gemstone Talismans in Thailand. They have a son together, who is now 16. Far from dead, Richard is the only one among his four siblings to have given his parents a grandchild.

Although Richard feels he has never been able to connect spiritually to the people in the US, he still returns every year to visit his mother, who is now 87. And every day, he meditates and does his pooja, and remains a vegetarian, teetotaling Hindu gemologist through and through.