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My Reincarnation



Reviewed By: [Chris](#)

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A challenge facing any reviewer is how to present a balanced picture without letting one's own feelings sway it too much either way. The same challenge must face documentary makers. How do you present 'facts' without putting a spin on them?

The first film I saw by Jenny Fox was her [Flying: Confessions Of A Free Woman](#): a six-hour marathon about her own journey to discover what it means to be a woman. My Reincarnation is mercifully brief by comparison. She returns to more traditional cinema verité, again dissecting the psyche – this time of a high Tibetan Buddhist Monk. Both his greatness and his more earthly failings – all are part of this vivid 82 minute documentary. In making it, Fox gained unparalleled access to his private and family affairs. She had little funding for the first 18 years of what turned out to be 20 years of filming, but in spite of the title, it was all completed in a single lifetime.

The monk in question is Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. While less famous than the Dalai Lama, a quick google search shows he's right up there with revered world-famous authorities.

One reason My Reincarnation took so long to complete, Fox tells me, is that there was no 'storyline' on which to hang a commercial film. Chögyal teaches in exile, and his son (Yeshi), although also recognised as a great incarnation, prefers family life in Italy to the ascetic Buddhist path. So not a lot happens. But then, a breakthrough. The documentary has almost been abandoned when our prodigal son secretly hoofs it to Tibet to reclaim his heritage. Dad, meanwhile, is looking unwell, and a Buddhist foundation wants to preserve the teachings. So they give Fox enough funds to get things to the big screen.

Our film's unhurried pace could easily make it rather unexceptional, especially to non-Buddhists - except for three things. Firstly, access to such a reclusive life is normally impossible. Secondly, there's extraordinary tension between intelligent young Yeshi, who wants to see father as nothing special, and Dad with his hordes of adoring acolytes. By giving both characters equal weight, Fox explores Tibetan Buddhist tradition from the angles of both believers and sceptics. The third factor is Fox herself as a filmmaker. She has an unnerving ability to turn navel-gazing into something life-changing. Her daunting self-exposé, Flying, was even serialised on television. Now her mantra-laden, bell-ringing, Himalayan odyssey is disarmingly down-to-earth.

While there is, for Buddhist audiences at least, enough 'meat on the bone' as Fox puts it (a curious expression – aren't Buddhists vegetarians?), she maintains a director's crucial impartiality in the final edit. Yeshi's irritation is displayed without totally wrecking the character of the old master. But we also get to see the latter as merely human. Brief monologues are impressive. Basic Buddhist teachings include observing one's own mind and avoiding worship of a master (a point repeatedly overlooked, it seems to me from the dotting expressions of followers). The Dalai Lama makes several very informal appearances, laughing and joking charismatically. But the real emotional clout is launched in the final Tibetan footage. Is there anything in the prophecies?

These last reels were shot without Fox's knowledge – she didn't even know Yeshi was going. Miraculous intervention or an overpowering sense of duty? The whole thing can still look a bit woolly to this viewer, but it works dramatically and impressively for the community of Dzogchen Buddhists. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu might not be a divinity from on high, but he gives sound advice to people desperately in need. His practices have given him fortitude and focus. Not a bad

A documentary look at the life of esteemed Buddhist intellectual Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, his teachings and his relationship with his son.

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Director: [Jennifer Fox](#)

Cast: [Yeshi Silvano Namkhai](#), [Chögyal Namkhai Norbu](#), [The Dalai Lama](#)

Runtime: 82 minutes

Certificate: 

Year: 2011

Country: China, Tibet, Italy

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role model – even as a mere father.

For sceptics, Tibetan Buddhism’s shortcomings when running a modern-day sanctuary are highlighted. Early in the film, Yeshi introduces modern business strategy to enable many more people than would have been envisaged in the original Buddhism to get on well with each other. In this sense, the West brings something to the East. “This,” as Fox proclaims, “is the future. If they can get through it.”

Whatever your beliefs, shake yourself at the end of the movie and remember: this is real life documentary, not fiction. The chrysalis of documentary movie-making transforms itself into moving evidence.

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