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My Reincarnation (2011) | Preview

Interview with the Director
Darrel Manson

I recently had a chance to sit down with Jennifer Fox to discuss her film, My Reincarnation. The documentary focuses on Tibetan Buddhist Master Chogyal Namkhai Norbu and his Italian-born son, Yeshi.

One of the things you mentioned last night in the Q&A is that you view filmmaking as a spiritual practice. I wonder if you could talk about that a bit.

Yeah. I wonder if I would have if I hadn't been studying Tibetan Buddhism. I feel when I'm making films that the only way to get people to show up is to show up myself first of all. So I have to become present. If I'm not present then the person in front of me isn't present. That's the first thing. So it's a real exercise in presence. If I'm distracted, the other person gets distracted. I really believe in a Unified Field, which we know from quantum physics is true. The biggest thing we're working with in filmmaking is one's own energy, one's own body, one's own consciousness. I'm constantly working with that, and showing up and being present is one of the first [concepts] in Buddhism—and most spirituality—which is let me be here now with you and not in the past or in the future or back thinking about my wife or husband who I had a fight with, my daughter or whatever. So being present is the first thing.

The second thing is I really think it's a practice in equanimity, because I'm not interested in judging people. I'm interested in allowing them to express themselves and come out into the world, and creating a loving space for them. As a filmmaker I take the point of view that I try to practice acceptance and love. Even when I do an interview I kind of put my ego on the floor mentally—like that might be my starting point—and just try to be here. What I notice is that people don't show up if they think you're judging them. People only show up when there is acceptance. So if you really want them to be present and not hide, you have to create an atmosphere of acceptance. And I actively work on that, because I'm a person with my flaws; so I try to put aside all my criticism and just be there and investigate who they are.

I also think that one of the reasons people enjoy being in films is that it's one of the rare times in their lives that actually somebody's listening to them. We spend a lot of time in our lives not being listened to even by our own family, our loved ones, our jobs, et cetera, so being in a film is a space where one can relax and be heard and investigate self. So it's a unique experience. I could go on and on.

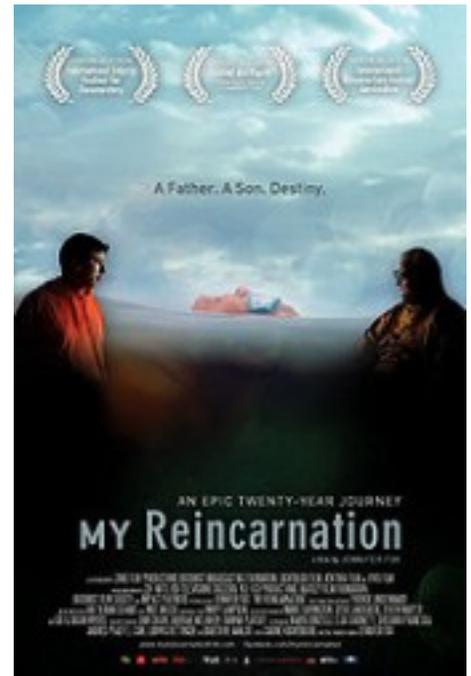
You also said last night that it's difficult to tell a spiritual story. How do you go about that?

I still don't know. The problem with spirituality is—you know that it's internal, it's personal, it's invisible. One can be in a deep state and it's something felt, not seen. So the question is how you give signs on the outside for film, which is a visual medium. I searched for that for a long time. Images with people sitting in cross-legged positions and meditating, that means nothing to a non-Buddhist. It doesn't even mean much to a Buddhist. If you see somebody meditating, you don't know what's going on. So how do we express an internal state—especially a documentary which is "reality"? It's not fiction where you can see images of the internal. I really struggled a lot. It's why I fell back on a narrative, which is a classic kind of father-son story, to allow the story of somebody leading spirituality through the son to be a vehicle to express spirituality. But, you know, since that's using classic narrative techniques—if I were making fiction I might do something quite different.

You mentioned the father and the son. Early on there are some issues between them that I think are fairly common between first and second generation immigrants. Also I noticed as Christian clergy, a lot of clergy family dynamics.

Interesting. What did you notice? I'm curious.

One time Rosa [Norbu's wife] was saying that people think she's not practicing and it's not their business. Yeshe was the "son of a Master."



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It must be very similar, because everybody's watching the person at the pulpit. Very, very similar. I think Yeshe realized it. It's similar to being the son of a king as well. I always thought of it like a king and a prince, where everything you do is examined, and you just want to be normal as a son. You just want to be an average Joe, but you can't be because you're the son of a Master or a priest or a clergyman or a king. It's really quite, quite normal.

And Rosa says very clearly, which I love, "I can't live my life by other people's expectations. I have to live my life as I see it whether they like it or not." That was beautiful because her husband, Namkhai Norbu, really does live to serve people, being Tibetan and being raised as a Tibetan Master. His service is everything in his life. He's devoted his whole life to passing on the teachings.

You have a pretty good rapport with Yeshe early on in the filming when he is expressing some of his resentments. One of those resentments is that his father spends more time with students and we get three or four days a year, and here you are, one of the students.

Yeah, it was very interesting. I think what happened, the way I met Yeshe was Namkhai Norbu asked him—he was already living in an apartment in Rome going to the university—if I could stay with him when I came to Italy. He was living with his girlfriend and another student, Fabio. And he said yes, luckily. I think because I was not far from his age—I'm only ten years older than him, but I looked very young and probably acted very young—he really took to me quite well and was always incredibly open with me and generous and just was very honest. He was honest in his criticism of his father and his criticism of the community and everything. Ironically though, he was already talking like a teacher. He was studying philosophy at the university and he had a lot of wisdom from the very beginning. We took to each other quite well, and we were good friends, and he visited me with his girlfriend in New York, stayed at my house.

What was Yeshe's reaction after he had gone to Tibet and assumed that position? Was that a difficult time for him—now to be the one who is raised up and people saying they would take a bullet for him because he is their teacher?

I don't think so; I think on the opposite. That was a spectacular time. I saw him when he came back after that he was like glowing. It was like he had finally become the man he was supposed to be. He was having enormous dreams and visions post-Tibet as well. It was pretty spectacular to be in his presence. I remember the first time I saw him after Tibet, going home and having just raging dreams—not normal dreams—from something; his energy was affecting me quite powerfully. I was having visions as well. That can happen, of course, when you're in the space of someone spiritually transforming; [it] can have a huge effect on you. I've had it in the presence of his father and other teachers. It was very, very powerful.

This is a little bit outside the scope of the film, but China is not known for being especially friendly toward Tibetan Buddhism. Were there issues with that when he went to Tibet?

You might have heard, I didn't shoot him in Tibet. His brother-in-law went with him—under the radar—with a little tiny camera. Luckily he was able to film quite well. He came back with beautiful footage. So he didn't announce it to me because he didn't want an official crew going with him. He went as an ordinary citizen and then as he approached the monastery changed into robes and all like that. In a small area he was fine. Soon after though the whole climate in the Tibetan region changed because the Chinese clamped down on Tibet during the Chinese Olympics, because there was a lot of uprising against Chinese oppression. So since then it's been horrible, and he hasn't been able to go back.

One of the elements of Buddhism is the idea of impermanence. There is a sense in which your filming is making a permanent record, but at the same time film itself is really just shadows dancing on the wall. I think that may fit in with your idea of a spiritual exercise, too. Perhaps the impermanence which is so central to the understanding of Buddhism plays out a little bit, even when you make a record. In the film there is a picture of the uncle, Yeshe's reincarnation. I think that is a powerful shot, having Yeshe looking at that and someone asking, "Isn't that your reincarnation?" and own that.

It's very interesting that now Yeshe will say "I've since had memories of many other incarnations and this is just one and he doesn't give a lot of importance to it. It is one of many and we all have been reincarnated many times. So I find that interesting also because in Tibetan Buddhism one wouldn't—it's not to make something of it. "Now because you are a reincarnation you should become something important" is not the idea. As he says in the film, it's only if you get back some of your knowledge that it means anything. If you get back your spiritual knowledge, that's something, but if it's just to make you an important figure, he's not interested. That again is part of the practice.

Coming back to what you were saying about impermanence, I think all search for spirituality is a struggle with the impermanent nature of life and death bearing down upon us and suffering, and I think that's in all religions. I think that's what human beings grapple with. I think what I have found in my practice of Tibetan Buddhism is not struggling with that, but an endeavor to practice to accept impermanence and constant change and that nothing will remain the same five minutes after it happens. We are constantly changing. I'm aging in front of your eyes, for example. I hope that the film leaves off at a place that you feel that things will keep changing. The

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dad, Namkhai Norbu, says the joke at the end, which is "Well, I should have been a musician," which is only to say, you know anything's possible. Things will keep changing. His life will turn into another life.

I also thought it was interesting early on when Yeshe was wanting to be normal that his early endeavors were photography and music. When Norbu was explaining the central idea as "opening your eyes, opening up your ears to the present, " how close Yeshe was to that at the beginning of his journey through other means.

Yeah. Absolutely. I think, as Yeshe will say, the son doesn't fall far from the father—the whole idea of the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Yeshe is multi-talented; Namkhai Norbu was multi-talented. I've seen paintings. He met Rosa when he had a painting show in Italy in the '60s. He plays many instruments. He's always creating new games. He's a very creative person, and so is Yeshe. In all universes the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.