



My Reincarnation

BY CHUCK BOWEN ON OCTOBER 26, 2011

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My Reincarnation, at its simplest, is another illustration of the idea that people of most walks of life have essentially the same problems. Filmmaker Jennifer Fox filmed high Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his Western-born son Yeshe over a period of 20 years, and the film that resulted is a classic story of the strict, aloof father of a pure heritage and the culturally split son with whom he can barely relate. Norbu spent his formative years studying in an intense, rigid Tibetan monastery, while Yeshe is undeniably the child of a more permissive modern society, in this case Italy, where Norbu escaped to from Tibet in the late 1950s. *My Reincarnation* follows Norbu as he speaks at various Buddhist functions, including, most notably, a gathering attended by the Dalai Lama, but it's clear that the real story is between the two men.

My Reincarnation has an effective bifurcated structure that testifies to the level of trust Fox clearly established with her subjects. Portions of the film were shot in 1988, when 18-year-old Yeshe sets out to take psychology classes despite the clear disapproval and mild ridicule of his father. The second portion of the film picks up 20 years later, with Yeshe a middle-aged family man who returns to see Norbu, now 70 and potentially dying of cancer.

That sounds like a formula for a perfectly unbearable tearjerker preaching the necessity of honoring thy father and thy mother at all expense of personal fulfillment, but *My Reincarnation* is trickier than that, a film that honors the life force, intelligence, and stubbornness of two sad, charismatic figures who clearly got off on a wrong path somewhere and are somewhat befuddled as to how to right themselves. The film's most arresting, and ambiguous, footage follows Norbu as he speaks to rapt audiences on the impermanence and intransigence of life, and you understand those wide-eyed faces. The awe has little to do with Norbu's actual sentiments (most of what we hear here will be familiar to those with even a cursory understanding of Buddhism), it's the charisma and authority with which he voices them, and Fox allows Norbu's eloquence to act as a gentle irony.

Norbu is so striking because he's a man of religion who's clearly torn; he hasn't used his belief as a means to smugly detach himself from everyday life. He's struggling with adapted

mantras that mean little, or initially little, to his son. Norbu is a voice of remote strength, a voice of a generation with differing attitudes toward legacy and familial affection, while Yeshe is a voice of a subsequent generation with differing needs of elder approval.

My Reincarnation has an appealing, poignantly casual everyday rhythm. You're allowed to catch the need in Yeshe's voice as he narrates much of the footage, just as you're allowed to detect the glimmers of regret that Norbu's deceptively poker face periodically reveal. Even a potentially clichéd visual motif of the elder Norbu floating in water is imbued with mystery and even majesty. Like [Raw Faith](#) before it, this is a quiet film with a considerable cumulative impact. It folds you, seemingly while you weren't looking, into a culture that's probably beyond your immediate realm of understanding. This trick of empathy, too often underutilized, is one of the defining wonders of the movies.

DIRECTOR(S): Jennifer Fox SCREENPLAY: CAST: DISTRIBUTOR: Long Shot Factory RUNTIME: 82
RATING: NR YEAR: 2011