

POV

Community
Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

My Reincarnation

A Film by Jennifer Fox



www.pbs.org/pov

NEW YORK, 2012

I met Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche in 1985 when I was 25 years old. At age 28, I took a much needed hiatus from filmmaking to travel with him on and off for four years as his secretary. During that time, I began to film his everyday life—his family and his teaching—from an insider’s perspective. In 1992, I went back to work to make my next film and put aside the early footage of Rinpoche. Even though I kept filming him over the years, I didn’t feel I had enough of a story to make a film, and I questioned how to convey the spiritual on film. After many requests from the Dutch Buddhist Film Foundation to continue this film, I finally agreed to face making something out of the film again years later, in the new millennium. At his age, I knew there weren’t many years left to tell Namkhai Norbu’s story, nor would he allow another filmmaker inside his private life and family. It was clear I was the only one who could make a film about him.

There was also another change on the horizon. When I filmed Rinpoche starting in 1988, I also began filming his son Yeshi, starting from age 18. Although it was common knowledge that Yeshi was the reincarnation of Namkhai Norbu’s uncle, a great Buddhist master, he adamantly resisted the idea, and wanted to be left alone to live a normal life. I remember in 1989, I was so excited by the natural drama of Yeshi’s story that one day when we were walking together in Rome, I discussed the potential of filming him returning to Tibet to the monastery of his reincarnation and the people waiting for him since his birth. He was emphatic: “You can film as long as you like but it will never happen. I will never go back to the monastery in Tibet.” I believed him. The years passed, and I continued to film Yeshi, with his growing family and business career, as he intersected with his father’s life, never expecting that anything would change. But in the millennium, his story took an amazing new turn.

With the developments and changes in this father-son relationship, a unique narrative developed about cultural survival in exile that demonstrates the value of this rare spiritual tradition. My aim is not to show Namkhai Norbu’s saintliness (nor his son’s) but both men’s essential, profound humanity and irreplaceable tradition that they embody as one man inches towards maturity and the other inches towards his inevitable old age. Now is a crucial moment for Tibet, as the last of the great non-monastic Tibetan trained reincarnate teachers (called “Rinpoche”) remain alive. If we don’t pass on some of their spiritual heritage and traditions now—it will be lost forever.

Religion and spirituality is a hot button issue in America and around the world today; all one needs do is to watch the nightly news to see how this is true. In such challenging times, however, it is imperative that a safe space be provided for interfaith discourse, in which the emphasis is placed on unifying those of varying faiths and spiritual paths, rather than dividing them. While **My Reincarnation** is about a Tibetan Buddhist family, it also explores universal, non-sectarian issues of father-son relationships; the meaning of dreams; death and dying; and the importance of our time on Earth. Buddhism, widely accepted in the West and considered by many to be a spiritual practice or philosophy rather than a religion, is an ideal place from which to start asking the big questions.

I invite all to use this film and this guide to explore the many gifts that the protagonists—Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his son, Yeshi—offer through the film and their story. Please use the film and guide to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism and Dzogchen; to investigate a relationship between a father and a son; to open up a dialogue about the value of spirituality in a modern world; to reflect upon one’s own religious beliefs; and on....



Filmmaker Jennifer Fox

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

Jennifer Fox

Filmmaker, **My Reincarnation**

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Filed over twenty years, **My Reincarnation** follows Tibetan spiritual master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu as he rises to prominence as a Buddhist teacher in the West, while his son, Yeshe, recognized at birth as the reincarnation of a famous spiritual master, breaks away from his father's tradition to embrace the modern world in which he was raised. With unprecedented access to the family's private life, the film explores the father-son drama that results from a leader's attempt to keep his threatened spiritual legacy alive through a son who is equally determined to establish an independent identity of his own.

Though **My Reincarnation** is about a Buddhist leader, the film explores universal themes of family, heritage, cultural

Khyentse Yeshe, originally known as Yeshe, son of Dzogchen master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, teaching in Massachusetts.

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

survival, growing old and growing up. It will appeal to a very broad range of the community. Anyone open to spiritual journeys will be interested in the film's depiction of everyday lives in which the sacred and the mundane routinely intersect.

My Reincarnation is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- **Your local PBS station**
- **Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to spirituality, Buddhism, Tibet or father-son relationships, including *The Buddha* or *The Betrayal (Nerakhoon)***
- **Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section**
- **High school students**
- **Faith-based organizations and inter-faith communities and institutions**
- **Cultural, art or historical organizations, institutions or museums**
- **Civic, fraternal and community groups**
- **Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools.**
- **Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries**

My Reincarnation is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

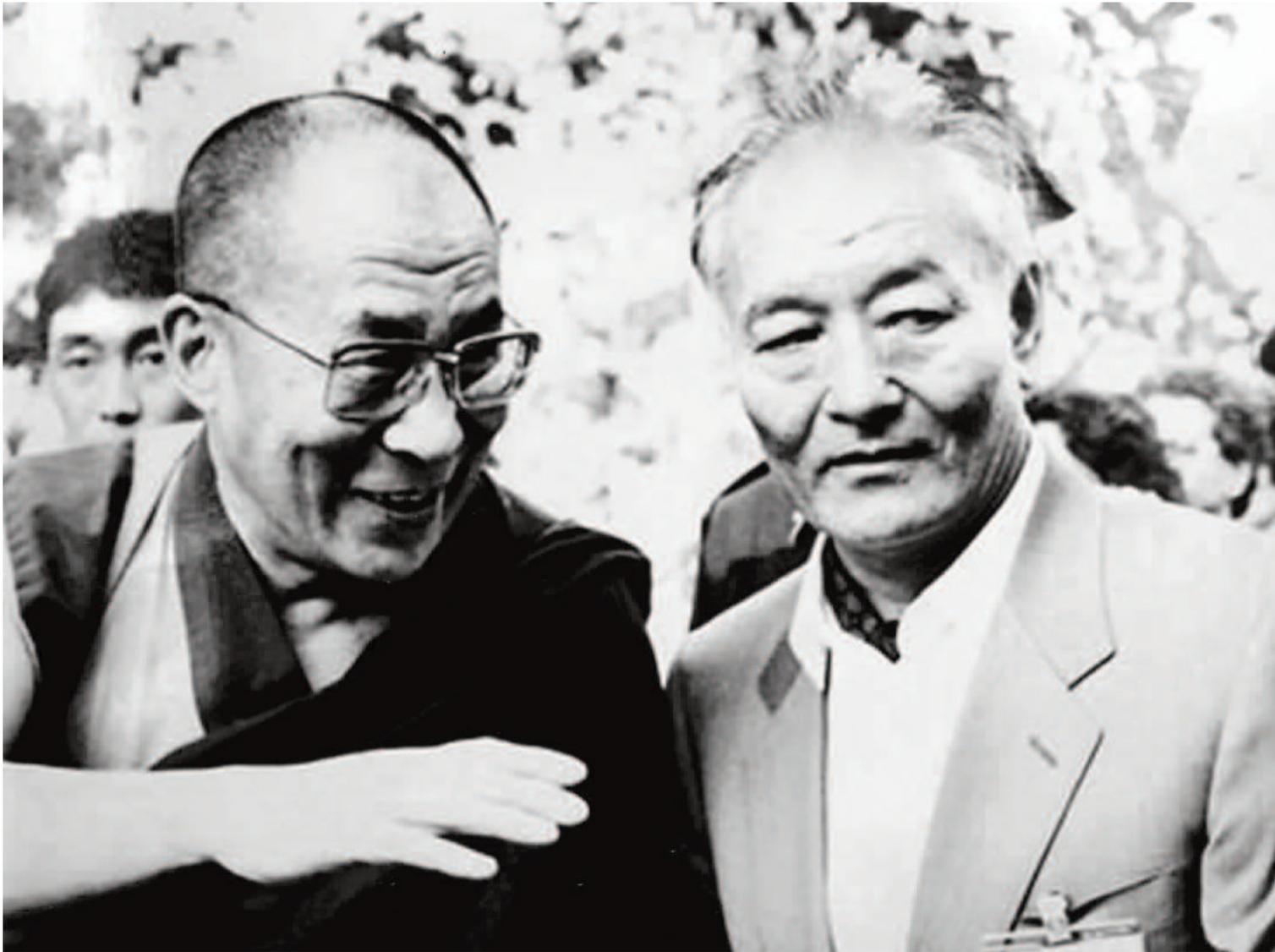
- **Aging**
- **Buddhism**
- **Cultural and religious identity**
- **Cultural preservation**
- **Dream interpretation**
- **Family dynamics**
- **Father/son relationships**
- **Reincarnation**
- **Religion**
- **Sociology**
- **Spirituality**
- **Theology**
- **Tibet**
- **Yantra yoga**

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use **My Reincarnation** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pbs.org/pov/outreach



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his Holiness, the Dalai Lama during the inauguration of the Shang Shung Institute, Italy, 1990.

Photo courtesy of Yeshe Namkhai

Buddhism is a major global religion with a history that dates back more than 2,500 years. The following information is meant only to introduce the religion and not to cover it exhaustively. To learn more about Buddhism, please refer to the Resources section.

Introduction to Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion and philosophy that originated in India around the sixth century B.C.E. It derived largely from the teachings of Shakyamuni (Siddhartha Gautama). Shakyamuni dedicated his life to finding the means to liberate people from the universal sufferings of life and de-

velop spiritual strength. His teachings were later compiled into scriptures (often called “sutras”) and numerous schools of Buddhism were founded to teach those sutras. After Shakyamuni’s death, his teachings spread from Northern Asia through Central and Southeast Asia and to China, Korea and Japan. The religion has played a significant role in Asian culture ever since. In the 20th century, Buddhism spread to the West. Today, an estimated 350 million people practice Buddhism around the world. It is the world’s fourth largest religion.



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu talks to a student during a teaching in Japan

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

The Basic Teachings

Buddhism includes a variety of beliefs and encompasses different schools. The major schools of Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana and Tibetan Buddhism. While each of these schools has its own distinct set of practices, some also incorporate teachings from other schools and branches. Tibetan Buddhism (sometimes called Lamaism) developed in Tibet and the surrounding Himalayas in the 7th century C.E. Tibetan Buddhism incorporates various philosophies (Madhyamika, Yogacara, Tantra, Theravadin and shamanistic elements from indigenous religions) and is distinguished by its vast number of deities and reincarnated lamas, who continue to teach and interpret the scriptures

Theravada Buddhists strive to become arhats, or perfected saints who have attained enlightenment and nirvana. Mahayana Buddhists, on the other hand, hope to become bodhisattvas, saints who have become enlightened but who unselfishly delay nirvana to help others at-

tain it as well, as the Buddha did. Mahayana Buddhists teach that enlightenment can be attained in a single lifetime, and this can be accomplished even by a layperson.

No matter the school, Buddhism involves three main paths (sometimes called practices): renunciation, transformation and self-liberation. In Buddhist terminology, the path of renunciation is called Sutra; transformation is called Tantra; and self-liberation is called Dzogchen. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, featured in the film, teaches all three paths and considers them to be alternative and compatible approaches rather than conflicting methods.



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu explains the meaning of the *Purba* (ritual knife) to his son, Yeshi.

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

Sources:

Brown, Waka Takahashi. "Introduction to Buddhism." Stanford Program on International and Cross-cultural Education.
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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/18/AR2009021803201.html>

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<http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/blog/2010/mar/17/how-buddhism-came-west-maia-duerr/>

Slate. "Who are the Tibetan Lamas?"
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2000/01/who_are_the_tibetan_lamas.html

Tricycle.
<http://www.tricycle.com>

Dzogchen

Part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Dzogchen is an ancient set of teachings and meditation practices intended to help participants achieve consciousness of the true nature of all beings. The teachings are known in English as "the great perfection" or "the path of self-liberation." Dzogchen is considered the most difficult path in Tibetan Buddhism. Dzogchen was traditionally kept secret in Tibet, and practiced only by the most advanced practitioners. When the Chinese invaded Tibet, many of the high masters of Dzogchen fled into exile and brought this secret tradition with them. The protagonist of the film **My Reincarnation**, Chögyal

Namkhai Norbu, fled Tibet in 1959, eventually ending up in Italy, where he worked as a professor at the University of Naples.

My Reincarnation offers a glimpse into the life of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, who is a master of the Dzogchen tradition. When he began teaching Dzogchen openly in the West in the mid-1970s, he was the first Buddhist teacher to do so. In 1981, he founded the first Dzogchen center in Italy's Tuscany region. Over the years, thousands of people from all over the world have become members of the Dzogchen community. Centers have been created in the United States, in various parts of Europe, in Latin America, in Russia and in Australia.

For more information on Dzogchen, please visit <http://myreincarnationfilm.com/resources/what-is-dzogchen>

Sources:

An Oral Commentary to the text "The Precious Lamp: A Brief Explanation of the Three Paths of Liberation"
Tashigar Norte, January 27 - February 4, 2006



Reincarnation

The wheel of life, or *samsara*, is an important symbol in Buddhism, because it represents the cycle of birth, life and death. According to Buddhism, the human soul never dies. Instead, it is reborn or reincarnated in a new form. This new form may be a human, animal or supernatural being. Many Buddhists believe this endless cycle of life and death, called reincarnation, is a domain of suffering and reflects the impermanence of existence. The ultimate goal is to escape from that suffering.

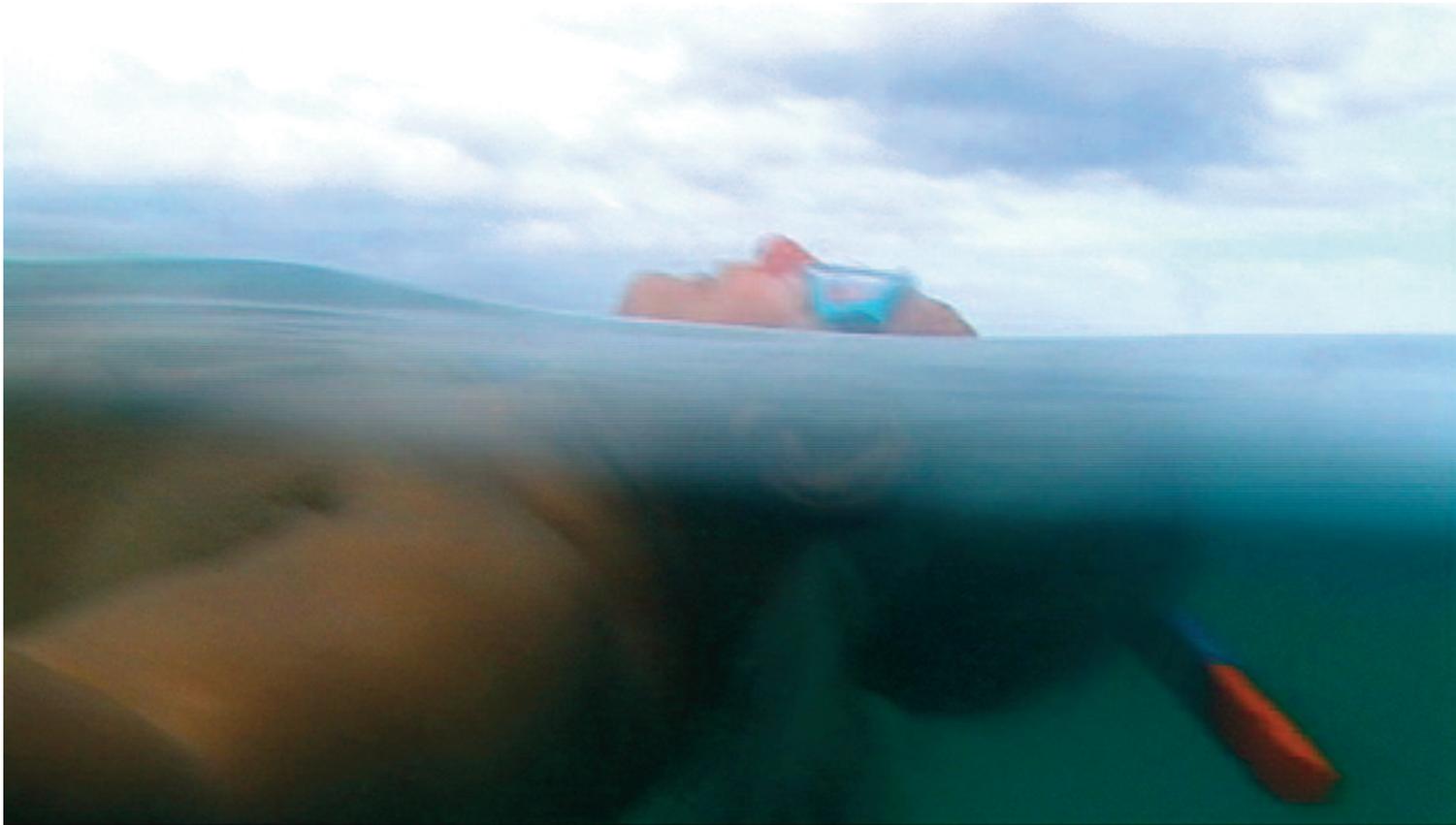
Buddhists also believe that good karma (a tendency toward positive thoughts and actions) may result in rebirth in a higher form. The consequences of bad karma (negative deeds) may lead to rebirth in a lower form. Buddhists believe that only through good karma and by overcoming greed, hatred and ignorance can they free themselves from the perpetual cycle of death and rebirth. At

Yeshe Namkhai sitting on the throne of his previous reincarnation during his enthronement ceremony in Eastern Tibet.

Photo courtesy of Luigi Ottaviani

that point, they will become truly enlightened and reach the state of nirvana, which literally means “to extinguish.”

In **My Reincarnation**, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu (the father, also known as Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche—rinpoche, “precious one” in Tibetan, is a title of respect reserved for Tibetan Buddhist masters) is recognized as the reincarnation of several renowned masters, including the Dharmaraja of Bhutan and Adzom Drukpa. Khyentse Yeshe (the son, originally known as Yeshe) is recognized as the reincarnation of his father’s uncle, a famous Dzogchen master who died after the Chinese invaded Tibet.



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu in his favorite pastime,
swimming in the water

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

Sources:

Brown, Waka Takahashi. "Introduction to Buddhism." Stanford Program on International and Cross-cultural Education. <http://spice.stanford.edu/docs/116>

Dong Hung Temple. <http://www.buddhistedu.org/en/buddhist-study/basic-buddhism>

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PBS. *The Buddha* Blog. <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/blog/2010/mar/17/how-buddhism-came-west-maia-duerr/>

Slate. "Who are the Tibetan Lamas?" http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2000/01/who_are_the_tibetan_lamas.html

Tricycle. <http://www.tricycle.com>.

Reincarnation in Five Major World Religions

Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhists believe in the awareness of death and impermanence. This awareness leads to a life guided by the pursuit of value rather than impermanent pleasures.

Christianity

Most mainstream Christians do not believe in reincarnation.

Hinduism

Hindus believe in a life cycle that includes many rebirths based on karma, which is the law of cause and effect.

The next life is always based on the karma—good or bad—created in this life.





Yeshe Namkhai being brought to the monastery of his previous reincarnation where he will be enthroned during a large ceremony in Eastern Tibet.

Photo courtesy of Luigi Ottaviani

Islam

Muslims do not believe in reincarnation; instead they believe that heaven or hell is a final destination.

Judaism

Traditional Judaism believes that the dead will be resurrected.

Olam Ha-Ba (the World to Come) refers to the spiritual afterlife. The messiah will come to create a peaceful and prosperous world, where the righteous dead will resurrect and the wicked dead will not.

Sources:

BBC. Religion.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/>

Beliefnet. "Reincarnation in Your Religion."

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2002/10/Reincarnation-In-Your-Religion.aspx?p=2#islam>

Judaism 101.

<http://www.jewfaq.org/beliefs.htm>

Religion Facts. "The Big Religion Chart."

http://www.religionfacts.com/big_religion_chart.htm

The Spread of Buddhism

Buddhism has followers around the world and has been adapted to fit different societies. Merchants, traders and missionaries first brought Buddhism from North India to the rest of Asia. They also brought the religion to China via the Silk Road, and from China it spread to Korea, Japan and Tibet.

China's invasion of Tibet in 1950 led to a diaspora of the Tibetan people, which caused Tibetan Buddhism to spread quite widely. A number of prominent Buddhist teachers established centers of worship in Europe and North America. In **My Reincarnation**, Namkhai Norbu settles in Italy at the invitation of well-known professor of Eastern cultures Giuseppe Tucci. There, Norbu becomes a professor of Eastern studies at the University of Naples and does much to promote the spread of Tibetan culture in the West. He has written more than 100 books on Tibetan culture, history and spiritual practice, making him one of the world's foremost scholars on the subject and prompting the Dalai Lama to give him a gold pen to encourage him to write.



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his family. 1957.

Top Row: His two sisters, his mother.

**Bottom row: His brother, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu,
his father. 1957.**

Photo courtesy of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

Chinese immigrants first brought Buddhism to the United States in the mid-19th century, but the religion gained a higher profile in the 1960s and 1970s, due to the Tibetan diaspora and growing interest in Eastern religions. Writers of the Beat Generation, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, brought Buddhism to the attention of a wider audience. Many contemporary celebrities and artists, including Leonard Cohen, Richard Gere, Herbie Hancock, Tina Turner and Alice Walker, have shared publicly the influence that Buddhism has had on their lives and work.

There are presently about 60,000 Buddhists in Italy (0.1% of the country's population). Estimates of the number of Buddhists in the United States range from 2,450,000 to 4 million.

Sources:

Garfinkel, Perry. "Buddha Rising: Out of the Monastery, Into the Living Room" (excerpt). *National Geographic*, December 2005.
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0512/feature4/index.html>

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Stone, Linda and Paul F. Lurquin. *Genes, Culture and Human Evolution: A Synthesis*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

Selected People Featured in **My Reincarnation**



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu was born in Derge in eastern Tibet in 1938. As a child, he was recognized as the reincarnation of Dzogchen master Adzom Drukpa (1842-1924) and later by the sixteenth Karmapa as a reincarnation of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), the first Dharmaraja of Bhutan.

While still a teenager, he completed a rigorous program of traditional studies, receiving teachings from some of the greatest masters of the time. In 1955 he met Changchub Dorje (1826-1961), his main Dzogchen teacher, whose lifestyle and way of teaching deeply inspired him.

In 1960, following the deterioration of the social and political situation in Tibet, he moved to Italy at the invitation of the well-known Eastern studies professor Giuseppe Tucci. There, he helped spread knowledge and awareness of Tibetan culture in the West.

After teaching Yantra Yoga in Naples for several years, in the mid-1970s Namkhai Norbu started giving Dzogchen teachings. In 1981,

he founded the first Dzogchen center in Arcidosso, in Italy's Tuscany region. Since then, thousands of people from all over the world have become members of the Dzogchen community. Centers have been created in the United States, in various parts of Europe, in Latin America, in Russia and in Australia.

In 1989, Namkhai Norbu founded the Shang Shung Institute, whose mission is to safeguard Tibetan culture by promoting it. Namkhai Norbu continues to travel all over the world, giving talks and holding retreats attended by thousands of people.



Khyentse Yeshe, originally known as Yeshe, son of Dzogchen master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, was born in Rome in 1970. At a very early age he was recognized as the reincarnation of Khyentse Rinpoche Chökyi Wangchuk, an important Dzogchen master and maternal uncle of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. After receiving both a Western and a Buddhist education, Yeshe studied philosophy at Rome University and engineering at Bologna University, subsequently working as a manager and information technology business consultant.

In 2007, Yeshe visited central Tibet, where he received a rapturous welcome at the monastery of Khyentse Rinpoche Chökyi Wangchuk. He determined that his life's work lay in keeping the Dzogchen teaching and Dzogchen community alive. Since then, he has traveled extensively, giving Dzogchen teachings worldwide and bringing fresh insight into the Dzogchen tradition with a contemporary style influenced by his Western upbringing.

Sources:

Khyentse Yeshe — <http://www.khyentseyeshe.com>

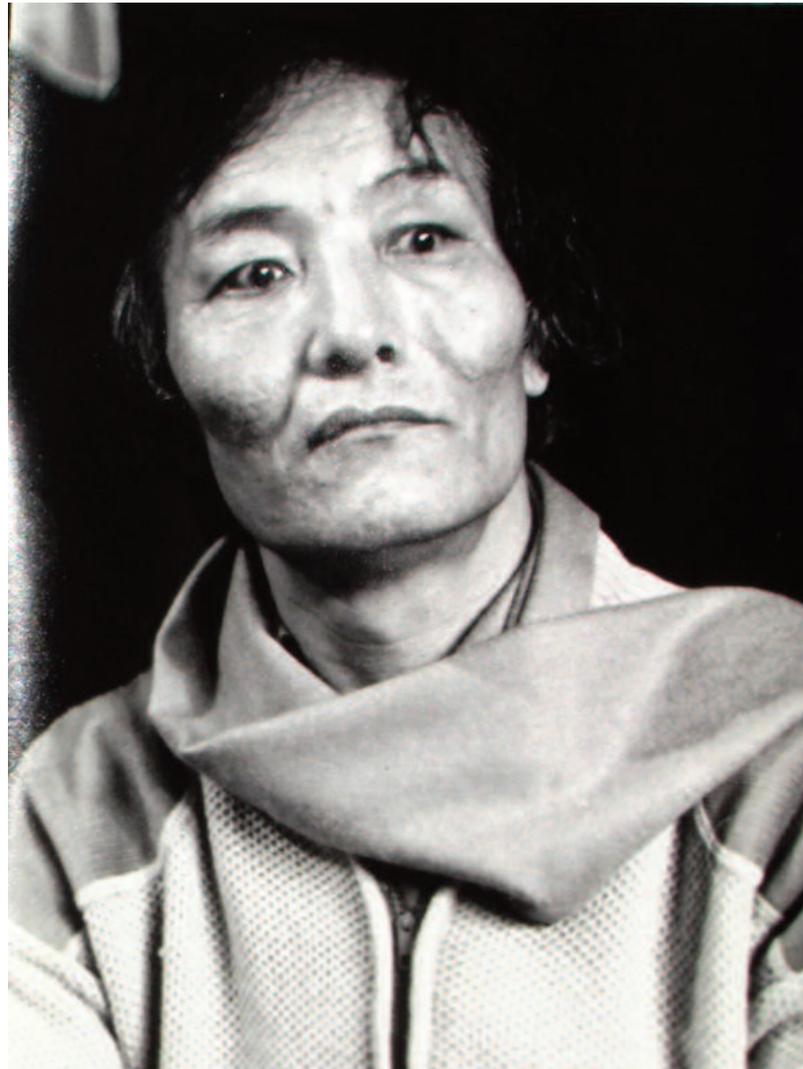
My Reincarnation Film Website — <http://myreincarnationfilm.com/film/chogyal-namkhai-norbu>

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. If the mood seems tense, you can pose a general question and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion.

Unless you think participants are so uncomfortable that they can't engage until they have had a break, don't encourage people to leave the room between the film and the discussion. If you save your break for an appropriate moment during the discussion, you won't lose the feeling of the film as you begin your dialogue.

One way to get a discussion going is to pose a general question such as:

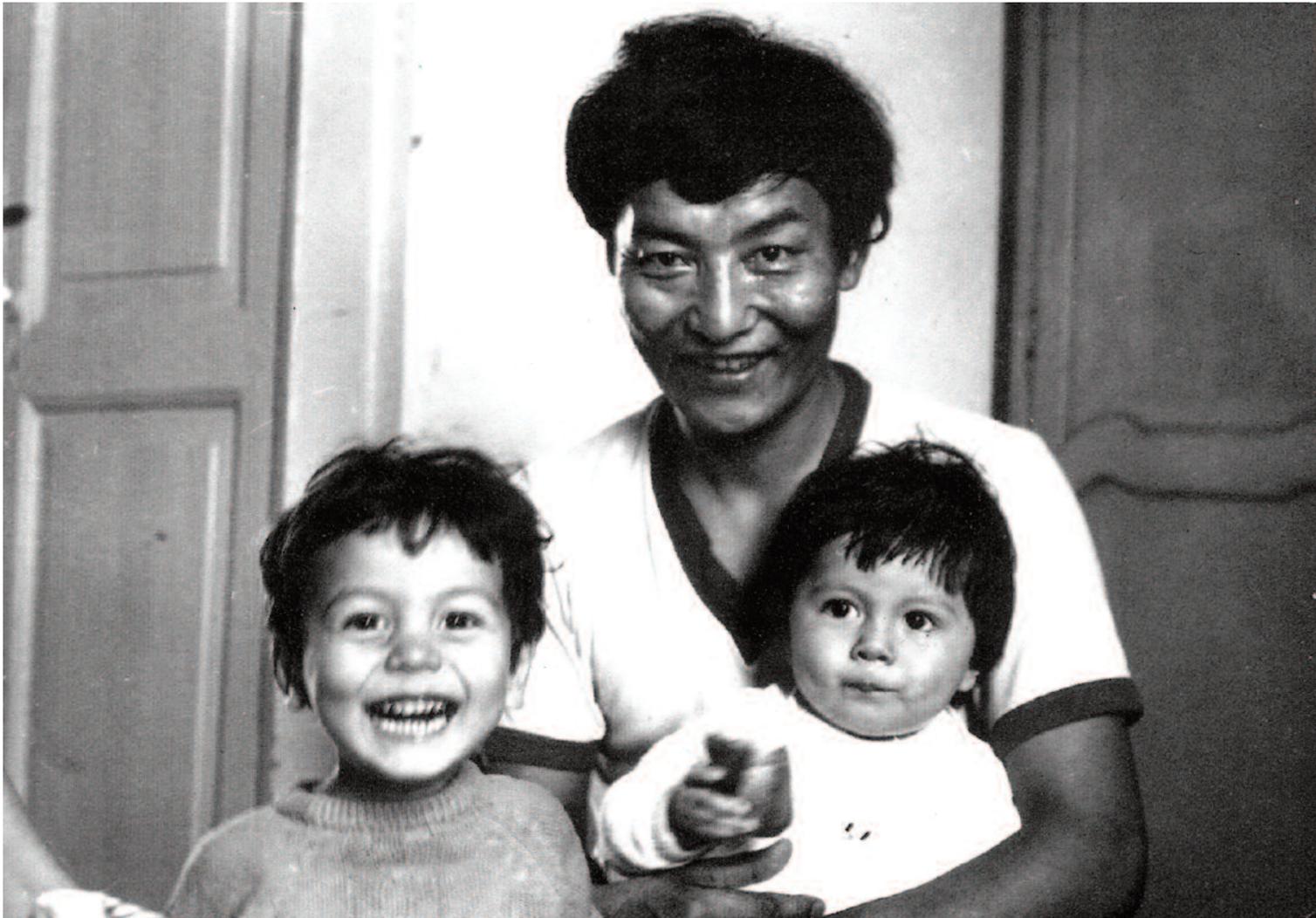
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, who would you ask and what would you ask him or her?
- What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. 1980

Photo courtesy of Fabio Andrico





Chögyal Namkhai Norbu with his two children, Yeshe (3 years old) and Yuchen (18 months old). 1973

Photo courtesy of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

Interfaith Dialogue

Do you think it is important to have a spiritual practice in life? Why or why not? What value does spiritual practice have in the lives of the father and son in **My Reincarnation**?

Did the film make you reflect on your own faith? How?

Is your spiritual practice similar to or different from the practice of Dzogchen in the film? If so, how?

Today, religions sometimes borrow practices from each other. Do you think there is a danger of homogenizing all religions and losing the distinct differences between them? Or can all faiths learn and incorporate positive things from each other?

How do the faiths of Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists and Muslims differ? What do people

know about each other's religions? What are core concepts that all religions share?

Father-Son Relationships

Yeshe says, "My father doesn't understand the concept of being father and son. He always treats me like the son of a master, not like a father and son of any Italian family." How would you characterize the attributes of a father-son relationship? Which of those attributes describe the father-son relationship in the film? Which are missing?



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his son, Yeshe, during the inauguration of the Shang Shung Institute, Italy. 1990.

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

How is the relationship between Namkhai Norbu and Yeshe similar to or different from your relationship with your own father? Do you see yourself in either of these men?

Yeshe says, “We don’t have a real emotional relationship, me and my father,” and he describes the relationship as distant. In your view, what creates that sense of distance?

Namkhai Norbu’s followers think Yeshe is lucky to live with a man that they hold in such high esteem. But Yeshe says, “It’s not like he is the same way with other people as he is with me.” How does the father-son relationship differ from a master-student relationship?

Namkhai Norbu says, “My family, they feel very often that I don’t take much care of our family and myself. I am taking more care of my students and the community. It is not so very easy. If I am being a teacher for many people, I must also take care of many people... So I couldn’t

be an ordinary father to my family.” How is his situation like or unlike that of other fathers whose professions place them in frequent demand from others (e.g., doctors)?

As a child, Namkhai Norbu did not remain with his own family, but was raised in a monastery. How might this have affected the way he parents his son?

Namkhai Norbu says, “In general, when someone is recognized as a reincarnation, then they do publicity, and also send them to India to a monastery for training. I didn’t do that.” Why do you think that he opted not to send Yeshe to a monastery?

Yeshe says, “Having your own family changes your life. It’s a big responsibility.” For Yeshe, how did becoming a father in-



Director Jennifer Fox films Chögyal Namkhai Norbu teaching to thousands of students in Moscow.

Photo courtesy of Kurmanguzhina Ainar

fluence his attitudes towards work? How about his feelings about following in his father's footsteps? If you are a parent, how did having a child or children change your life?

How would you describe the role that Rosa plays in her husband's life and her son's life? How do the roles of wife and son change as Namkhai Norbu ages?

How did Namkhai Norbu's illness challenge or change Yeshi's perception of his father? In your own experience, what has been the impact of serious illness on the relationships between children and parents?

Yeshi observes, "We know that we have problems with our father. Then, when we become fathers, we have the same problem. Because we are men, so we are stupid. Because we repeat always the same errors." What have you seen that confirms or contradicts the notion that generations of families repeat patterns and problems?

Yeshi is frustrated that when he tries to talk with his father he never knows if he is understood because, according to Yeshi, his father "doesn't answer. He just listens." Yeshi is also frustrated by the fact that when the commu-

nity was in trouble, he says, "My father couldn't say he needed help." To what degree is Yeshi's frustration common to father-son relationships and how much do you think is unique to being the son of a Dzogchen master?

Buddhist Teachings

What do you come to understand about Buddhism from the film? In what ways does what you see and hear confirm or contradict your previous ideas about Buddhism?

Consider the following teachings shared by Chögyal Namkhai Norbu in the film. What do you understand them to mean? What do they tell you about Buddhist values?

- "Buddha never said, 'You need to have devotion and your realization depends on me. I make you realized.' Buddha said, 'I give you the teaching, the path, and the realization depends on you.'"



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

- “The real nature of existence is impermanence.”
- “The nature of mind does not derive from effort.”
- “Practice is not for changing. Practice is for getting inside your knowledge, understanding.”
- “Knowledge you receive and you discover; not to change something. There is nothing very much to change. You must understand a little how the mind is playing, how we are distracted with mind, etc. Not thinking, ‘I can change and tomorrow I become someone else.’ That is not the principle.”
- “If you have a goat, you have goat problems. If you have money, you will have money problems. If you have a car, you will have car problems.”
- “What dies is the body. The conscience doesn’t die. The conscience gets reborn. Then it manifests with a new body.”

Namkhai Norbu tells an HIV-positive student who is seeking guidance to see a doctor. He follows that recommendation with this advice: “Buddha said, ‘Everything is unreal. Just like a big dream.’ So even though there are many problems, do not concentrate on the problems. Problems are relative. So you do your best. Relax. Don’t give im-

portance [to your problems]. And then you can enjoy more life.” What was your reaction to this advice? If you were the HIV-positive man, what messages might you have taken away from that encounter?

Namkhai Norbu gently mocks Westerners who think they can find answers by sitting passively and listening to a teacher (“feel a strong vibration”). He acknowledges that “vibration is sometimes useful, but it’s not the main thing.” Rather, in his words, the main principle in Dzogchen teaching is “You open your eyes. You open your senses. You observe... Because that way you can discover your real condition.” How would you characterize the difference between the two approaches to teaching and learning that Rinpoche describes?

Namkhai Norbu says that, “The knowledge of Dzogchen teaching is not only explanation with a book, but also being



A meditation altar featuring a statue of Padmasambhava, who is considered to have brought Buddhism from India to Tibet in the 8th Century.

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

with a teacher, talking, doing something.” How does this compare to the way(s) that you have been taught?

Yeshi says that he is afraid of the responsibility of becoming a Buddhist teacher. From observing his father, what did Yeshi learn about what it means to be a Buddhist master and what that position requires?

How would you square tales of children at monasteries being beaten with the teachings of Buddhism? What other tensions do you see between the religious ideal and the reality of life?

How did Namkhai Norbu handle his illness? What role did Buddhist teachings and spirituality play in his response?

What was the importance of Yeshi’s trip to Tibet to him, to those who knew his uncle and to those who shared the experience with him?

Death And Reincarnation

What did you learn from the film about reincarnation? What do your faith, traditions and belief systems teach about death and what happens after death? How do beliefs about death influence the way you live your life?

Namkhai Norbu says, “Even if I die today, I am not afraid at all.” What is it about his faith that keeps him from being afraid of death?

Yeshi says, “I don’t remember really the story of my reincarnation... Anyway, you are nothing now if you always think about what you were.” He also says, “Everyone has had a past life, so you may remember something. However, it doesn’t change much. If you were rich or poor, it doesn’t



Yeshi Namkhai swimming in the water

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

change anything. If you were a teacher or not, it doesn't change anything. If you get back your knowledge, this is something." What do you learn from these comments about the role that reincarnation plays in Yeshi's life? What role does reincarnation play in the formation of his identity and his relationships to his family and members of his father's community?

As a young man, Yeshi questions the evidence that others (including his father) rely on to conclude that he is the reincarnation of his uncle. Eventually, he comes to accept that evidence and reports, "I had memories of my death." Which Yeshi (younger or older) do you find most credible or most insightful and why?

Namkhai Norbu says, "Our life is just like a candle lighted in an open place. One day we arrive at the end of our life. Then we notice, surprise, this is the end of life! What do I do now? What I did? Being present of time is very, very important. Time is passing and it is impermanence." What message(s) about death do you take away from this teaching?

The Role Of Dreams

The film begins with Yeshi saying, "I always had dreams since I was five years old. Strange visions." In your experience, is there a difference between a dream and a vision? Do you remember dreams or visions from your early childhood? What were they about? What do you make of their meaning now?

Namkhai Norbu understands that people learn to see dreams as illusion. He learns that dreams can function as a way to become more aware of reality, so that when he is thinking about something important, he "can get, easily, the reply in a dream." What have you learned about the function and reality of dreams? What are the sources of your ideas?

Namkhai Norbu's decision to leave Tibet is guided by his bad dreams. What role do dreams play in your life?

Dreams indicate to both father and son that Yeshi is the reincarnation of his uncle, Khyentse Rinpoche. On a scale ranging from "completely convincing" to "irrelevant," how would you rank the role of these dreams as evidence?



A dance performed in Yeshe Namkhai's honor during his enthronement ceremony (as the reincarnation of Khyentse Rinpoche) in Eastern Tibet.

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

Cultural Preservation

Yeshe recognizes that his father, who had to flee Tibet, “knows that the Tibetan culture has great value. The problem is that I don’t know this.” How does this difference in experience create conflict between father and son?

What are the sources of a sense of duty to preserve the culture of one’s parents? What were Namkhai Norbu’s strategies for instilling this sense of duty in his son and what was effective or ineffective about those strategies?

Namkhai Norbu says, “I am Tibetan and my culture is important to me. And I must save my culture and Dzogchen teaching. So, I have such a responsibility.” How does the desire to preserve Tibetan Buddhism and culture in the face of possible annihilation influence his expectations for his son? How is this family’s experience similar to and different from those of other peoples who have been forced into diaspora or whose culture is in danger of disappearing?

In your view, is it possible for Yeshe, who thinks of Italy as his “homeland,” to also think of Tibet as a “homeland”? What might facilitate or hinder that process?

What are all the things that changed Yeshe’s mind about following in his father’s footsteps? What do you learn from those things about how children become engaged in preserving their parents’ heritage?

Seekers

In what ways did the film affirm or challenge the teachings of your own faith or belief system?

In his younger years, Yeshe asks why those who “look for a myth, look for legends, look for saints, for very powerful people” or who “like all these colors and stuff... and visions” don’t just “go to the cinema.” In your experience, what are spiritual seekers hoping to find? What do you think Namkhai Norbu’s students find in him?



Yeshi Namkhai doing a meditation practice.

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

Trace Yeshi's spiritual journey as he transforms from a modern man who rejects his ancient heritage to a believer who feels that he needs that heritage. What are the key moments? What leads him to take his dreams seriously and invest his visions with religious and cultural meaning? What are the lessons of his story for you?

Yeshi observes, "I'm not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of living." What do you think he means? Is that a fear you share, and if so, how do you address it?

Compare and contrast these two teachings:

"When I meet someone, I always think, 'This is a man like me.' Then I never think of being in front of a stranger. Therefore, I always feel happy." —Dalai Lama

and

"Who is more important, you or the Dalai Lama? If you feel hungry, for example, who eats? You or the Dalai Lama?" So you feel more important. Everybody feels more important, right? It's natural." —Namkhai Norbu

In what ways might your life or your community change if people followed these teachings?

Yeshi says of his father's students, "Everybody knows about me and nobody knows me at all." Why is being seen for who we are important to us?

Yeshi identifies his dilemma, saying, "When I think about myself, I say, 'But I didn't want to be the son of a master.' So what am I, a mistake? A person who doesn't want to be what he is. And who ought to be something that he doesn't like to be. Obviously, for my father, I'm not a mistake." How would you describe a person who doesn't want to be what he is? What would you say to such a person?

What are the pros and cons of Namkhai Norbu's success as a teacher and the growth of his community of students?

To prevent Namkhai Norbu's community from disintegrating into conflict, Yeshi suggests a hierarchical business



model. In your view, what are the strengths and weaknesses of this model? What other models might the community use?

At the end of the film, both father and son joke about messing up as young people, and one says, "For the mistakes of your youth, you pay your whole life." Why do you think the filmmaker decided to end with that exchange? What does it say about the journey in search of identity and purpose?

Think about the film's opening and closing music. What tone does it suggest?

A dance performed in Yeshi Namkhai's honor during his enthronement ceremony (as the reincarnation of Khyentse Rinpoche) in Eastern Tibet.

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

**Additional media literacy questions are available at:
www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php**



Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and Yeshi Namkhai

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

Taking Action

- **Host a screening for your faith community. Follow up with a discussion about the commonalities and distinctions between your own traditions and the Buddhist teachings shared in the film.**
- **Choose a single message or teaching from the film and, together with your faith community, meditation group or another group, discuss how to actualize that teaching in your lives. Commit to taking specific action steps based on your discussion.**
- **Investigate the ways in which the survival of Tibetan culture is threatened and select a way to support its preservation. See the films or other websites in the Resources section for possible opportunities, or visit <http://myreincarnationfilm.com/participate/support-tibet/>.**
- **Host a screening as part of a special father-son gathering. Use the film to facilitate conversations between parents and their children.**

Interact with My Reincarnation at PBS.org

POV's Webby Award-winning website offers a broad range of exclusive online content to enhance the broadcast of **My Reincarnation**. Watch the full film online for free for a limited time following the broadcast (June 22, 2012 to Sept. 20, 2012), download this discussion guide, lesson plans and other viewing resources, view photos from the film, and interact with the filmmaker through video interviews and an online Q&A soon after the documentary airs on POV.

What's Your POV?

Share your thoughts about **My Reincarnation** by posting a comment at <http://www.pbs.org/pov/myreincarnation>

FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

<http://www.myreincarnationfilm.com>

The film's official website includes a chance to share and read comments from others who have screened the film. The site encourages people to share the stories of their own spiritual journeys.

Dzogchen

TSEGYALGAR: THE INTERNATIONAL DZOGCHEN COMMUNITY IN NORTH AMERICA

<http://tsegyalgar.org>

This website offers general information and opportunities to get involved. The international community's website is www.dzogchen.it.

YOUTUBE DZOGCHEN CHANNEL

<http://www.youtube.com/DzogchenTV>

A collection of videos on Dzogchen teachings.

KHYENTSE YESHE

www.khyentseyeshe.com

Yeshe's official website provides an opportunity to follow his activities and contact him.

Tibet

ASIA (ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY IN ASIA)

<http://www.asia-ngo.org>

This non-governmental organization was founded by Namkhai Norbu in 1988. It provides aid to Tibetans and focuses on meeting the educational and medical needs of the Tibetan population.

TIBETAN GOVERNMENT IN EXILE

www.tibet.org

The official website of the Tibetan government in exile includes links to a variety of sites that support independence for Tibet, as well as news reports of current events.

FREE TIBET

www.freetibet.org

This activist organization supports independence for Tibet. The website includes a history of the conflict, reports on human rights, environmental concerns, cultural preservation and a list of current action campaigns. A similar site specifically for students is www.studentsforafreetibet.org.

CHINESE EMBASSY**www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zgxz**

Visit the website of the Chinese embassy for the official Chinese version of the status of Tibet.

SHANG SHUNG INSTITUTE OF AMERICA**www.shangshung.org**

This non-profit organization was created by Chögyal Namkhai Norbu to preserve Tibetan culture in the West through various cultural and humanistic activities.

Interfaith organizations**THE INTERFAITH ALLIANCE OF NEW YORK STATE****<http://www.tianys.org>**

This group seeks to revive a spirit of compassion in communities and among political leaders

INTERFAITH WORKING GROUP ONLINE**<http://www.iwgonline.org>**

This group aims to inform the public of the diversity of religious opinion on social issues where it is not widely recognized.

THE INTERDEPENDENCE PROJECT**<http://theidproject.org>**

The Interdependence Project employs a secular and accessible approach to studying and practicing Buddhist meditation, psychology, and philosophy.

Buddhism**RIGPA SHEDRA****www.rigpawiki.org**

This Wiki offers details on Tibetan Buddhism.

THE BUDDHA**<http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha>**

The website for the PBS documentary The Buddha provides a general history of Buddhism and describes its basic philosophy and teachings.

TRICYCLE**www.tricycle.com**

This is a leading public forum for exploring Buddhist teachings, practices and encouraging dialogue.

SHAMBALA SUN**<http://www.shambhalasun.com>**

This is a leading organization and magazine for exploring Buddhist teachings, Tibetan culture and practice.

THE MIRROR**<http://www.melong.com>**

This is the newspaper of the Dzogchen Community, where Dzogchen and the teachings and activities of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and his son, Khyentse Yeshe, are published.

Meet the film's protagonist and Tibetan Buddhist Master - Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche - in-person during his 2012 U.S. Summer Teaching Tour! For more information: www.tsegyalgar.org. Read more: *The Crystal and the Way of Light* by Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (Snow Lion Publications www.snowlionpub.com).

HOW TO BUY THE FILM

To order **My Reincarnation** for home use, visit www.myreincarnationfilm.com



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POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov

POV's award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, as well as listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

POV Community Engagement and Education www.pbs.org/pov/outreach

POV films can be seen at more than 450 events across the country every year. Together with schools, organizations and local PBS stations, POV facilitates free community screenings and produces free resources to accompany our films, including discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

Front cover: Chögyal Namkhai Norbu teaches while his son, Yeshi, looks on as Rinpoche gives teachings to thousands of local Kalmyks

Photo courtesy of Zohe Film Productions

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American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc develops collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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www.amdoc.org/outreach/events

Learn about new lesson plans, facilitation guides and our other free educational resources and find out about screenings near you. Joining our network is also the first step towards hosting your own POV screening.

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