

PICO IYER ON THE JOY OF WHAT'S FLEETING • AN OVERACHIEVER'S GUIDE TO PRACTICE

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Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

Not Your Ordinary Lama

He's an important Buddhist teacher and an award-winning filmmaker. He's a rebel, and he's also an impassioned defender of traditional dharma.

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Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche directing on the set of Travellers & Magicians in Bhutan.

An Uncommon Lama

DZONGSAR KHYENTSE RINPOCHE is both an important Tibetan lama and an award-winning filmmaker. Some see him as a rebel, but he's also an impassioned defender of Buddhist teachings. NOA JONES writes from the set of his new film, *Travellers & Magicians*.

DRUK AIR FLIGHT KB 121 from Bangkok landed at Bhutan's airport last fall with some very precious cargo. In addition to 578 solid-gold biscuits hidden in the shoes of several international smugglers seated in back, a number of professional filmmakers were on board, ready to make *Travellers & Magicians*, a Bhutanese road movie directed by the only known reincarnate lama-cum-auteur, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. The crew was greeted at the airport and taken to a nearby guest house, while the Royal Bhutan Police swooped in and arrested the smugglers.

The incident would seem a mere coincidence—a bit of color—had the investigation not put Paro's airport customs office at a standstill. *Travellers & Magicians*' production company, Prayer Flag Pictures, was expecting shipments containing hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of filmmaking equipment, and only a fraction of the boxes had arrived.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche had asked Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche—who acted as the menacing Gekko in Rinpoche's first film, *The Cup*—to do several *mos*, or divinations, during pre-production. One of these *mos* had established September 29 as the most auspicious date for cameras to begin rolling. Another predicted that the film would face one major obstacle.

But which of the many obstacles arising was “the one”? Only a few days before the crew arrived in Paro, the key grip and unit manager were racing around old Delhi in



C. RYAN

a rickshaw on a critical search for fog machines, fans, dimmers, skimmers, sun guns, dollies and all the necessary lighting equipment after the deal with a Calcutta company had fallen through at the last minute. The hired equipment was now making a thousand-mile drive from Delhi to Phuntsholing through the perils of Bihar State, famous for bandits and bad roads. And as if that weren't enough, on the day the last flight carrying Prayer Flag Picture crew members landed in Paro, the rain began.

It was an insistent storm. The director of photography, Alan Kozlowski, and the film's two producers, Mal Watson and Raymond Steiner, came back from a scouting mission looking sodden, shocked and worried. All the props were missing. The camp wasn't ready. It didn't match pre-production maps. So the impending move from Paro up to base camp was stalled, and the crew was left to acclimate to the altitude while Watson and Steiner huddled with first assistant director Dean Steiner to assess the ramifications of the delays. All three had worked together on *The Cup*, a film with "half the budget and a quarter the obstacles," Watson said later. When the huddle broke, call sheets were scrapped. Moods were tense. Over dinner, someone gloomily pointed out that it was an El Niño year. It was easy to imagine that this film would never get made.

And where was the mastermind of all this chaos? Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, a.k.a. Khyentse Norbu, vajra master and veteran of the international-film-festival circuit, was overseeing a *puja* (ceremony) conducted by yogis at his retreat home in Paro.

While the monks' hypnotic drumming and chanting poured from the shrine room, Rinpoche tweaked his script and coached the talent. Sitting in his video library among his favorite films—*Natural Born Killers*, Kurosawa classics, Iranian new wave—Rinpoche insisted he was not breaking conventions of his centuries-old lineage. His reputation for outrageousness and irreverence, he says, is exaggerated. "I am not unconventional at all. In fact my biggest worry is that I am too conventional," he said. "Between ethics, morality and wisdom, Buddhism has always put more emphasis on wisdom. Wisdom surpasses behavior. Some of the more conservative generations might raise their eyebrows at what I do and what I say. But what they have forgotten is that their so-called 'right thing to do' and their revered traditions were once upon a time very modern and progressive. I could dye my hair pink and wear high-heeled shoes, but that's not being unconventional at all. That's just a sign of frustration."

Rinpoche had invited the principal cast members, all Bhutanese, all first-time actors, for a rehearsal weekend at his home. The house is within walking distance of Paro Taksang, where Padmasambhava manifested his wrathful form, Dorje Trollö, and where ten centuries later Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche wrote his famous liturgy, *The Sadhana of*

Mahamudra. Designed by producer Mal Watson (who's also Rinpoche's architect), the Japanese-influenced oasis is a departure from traditional Bhutanese homes. A sign warns passersby not to enter its boundaries out of respect for a half-dozen three-year retreatants who live on the land. Few people are allowed within these gates.

"That day we entered the sacrosanct premises, I felt I had entered a Zen garden," recalls Tshewang Dendup, the film's key protagonist. "We sat on straw mats, the monks served us tea, there was a gentle dog under the pine trees. Rinpoche sat amongst us, talking about film as an art, the 'fourth wall,' French directors and Japanese art films. I knew then that this experience was indeed going to be a mix of the modern and traditional."

This get-together was necessary not only to make sure the actors knew their lines, but to dissolve the uneasiness most Bhutanese feel in the presence of such a high lama. Though Deki Yangzom, the beautiful temptress of the film, describes her religious conviction as being "halfway between hard-core and someone who doesn't even believe," she felt overwhelmed that first weekend. "I was raised in a religious household, and Rinpoche's portrait was always on the shrine," she says. "Being Bhutanese and Buddhist, you grow up with his name. The very thought that he will be so close, that he will have to deal with you, was too much. But Rinpoche made us feel at ease."

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche conceived *Travellers & Magicians* as two intertwined stories, a modern-day road movie and a timeless, magical tale. The dialogue is delivered entirely in Dzongkha, Bhutan's official national language. The film sets out to illustrate that high drama, obscurations and suffering exist even in one of the planet's last Shangri-las, the only remaining Vajrayana kingdom. Intersecting themes and two parallel characters—Dondup, played by Tehewang Dendup, and Tashi, played by Lhakpa Dorji—are woven together with the help of a story-telling monk. Both protagonists are on journeys—one sends himself, the other is sent unwillingly. It is essentially a "grass is always greener" tale, says Rinpoche. He began developing the script during the shooting of *The Cup*, but rewrote continued for three years—in retreat, on trains, at cafes, between teachings, even undercover as he sat on a throne in the midst of a *puja*.

MAKING A FILM in a land that has never seen a production of such proportion in all its history generated a storm of activity that shook the country from top to bottom. The current ran from the royal palace to the sleepiest of villages. But the storm needed a calm eye, and that was Rinpoche in Paro. When asked if he was worried four days before Orgyen Tobgyal's start date with no film, no cameras, no props, no sign of an end to the rain, the director answered, "I'm a little concerned about the last line."

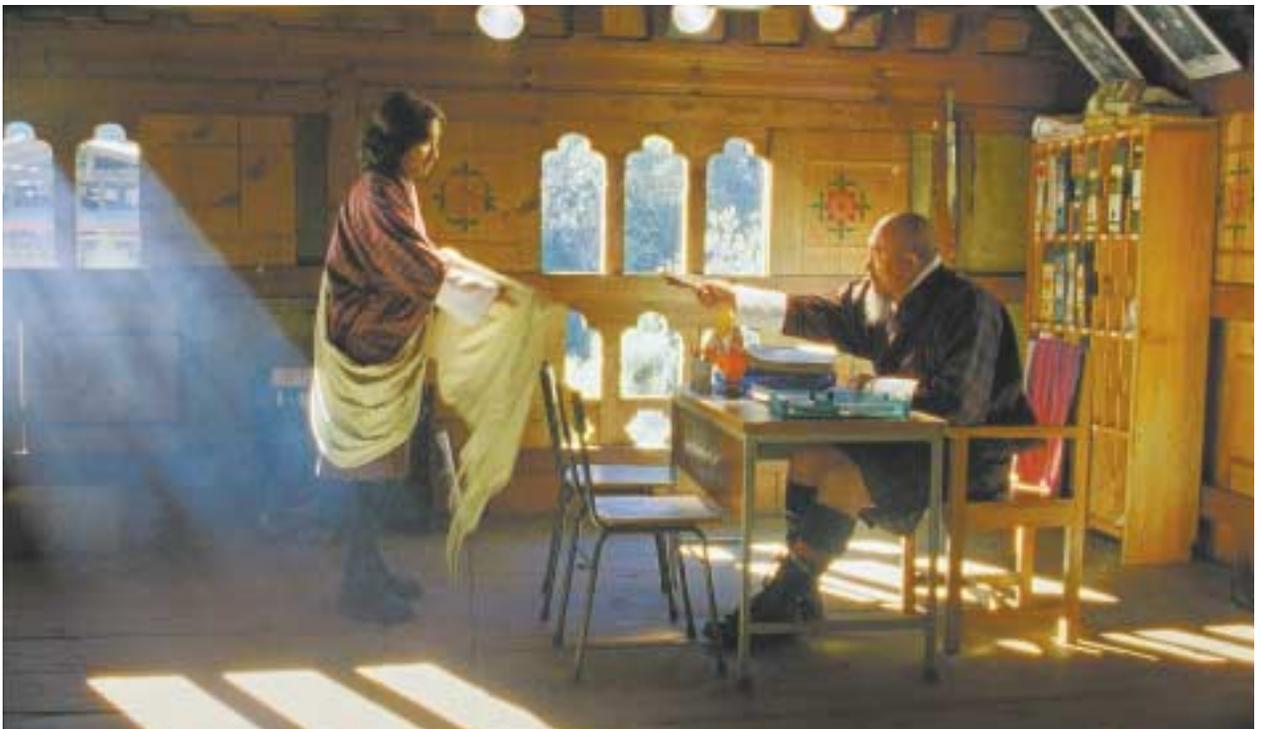
The last line? But what about the rain? What about the



Above: Dzongsar Khyentse performing a puja (ceremony) on the first day of shooting in Chelela, Bhutan. Middle, right: movie poster showing the first shot, filmed just after the puja. And other moments on the set of Travellers & Magicians.

Photos by Claudia Bahls © 2003 Prayer Flag Pictures

Photo by Catherine Ryan © 2003 Prayer Flag Pictures



Frames from Travellers & Magicians.

shipments stuck in Bangkok? He glanced out at the drizzle as if noticing for the first time. “The rain? Oh, I’m not at all worried about that,” he said brightly. For a moment all the obstacles seemed to evaporate. Maybe it would be all right after all. How could you doubt one of Buddhism’s most venerated lamas?

Even if he had never been recognized as an incarnation of the great Tibetan Buddhist master Jamyang Khyentse Chöki Lodrö (1894-1959), Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche would still hold a place in one of Bhutan’s most noble families as the son of contemporary Buddhist master Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, and grandson of both tantric yogi Lama Sonam Zangpo and His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche. He has also been recognized as a promising filmmaker after his success with *The Cup* and also his experience as Bernardo Bertolucci’s advisor on the *Little Buddha*. *The Independent* named Rinpoche “Most Inscrutable Filmmaker” at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival.

It took such credentials to dissolve the obstacles that have prevented others from making films in Bhutan. Since the shooting of *Bhutan My Love*, a propaganda film shot in 1983 by an Indian crew to encourage North/South relations, *Travellers & Magicians* is the first full-length feature made on film in the country. Filmmaking is not seen as a particularly praiseworthy occupation here. Bhutan’s Film Review Board guards the country’s reputation, reserving the right to axe any project they deem questionable. Tourist visas can be up to \$250 per day, making it impossible to import talent. Film, sound and editing equipment are nonexistent. Bhutanese filmmakers (there are 41 “briefcase” studios in the country, which produce primarily Hindi-style, soap-operatic musicals) are relegated to using second-rate video equipment.

Rinpoche’s personal relationships with members of the royal family, high-level public servants and well-connected devotees helped to remove some of these extraordinary barriers. His eminence gave him certain immunity, opened doors and cleared some uncharted territory. Everyone who helped seemed to find it an extreme honor to participate in his activities in any way, even if it was “just a film.”

But all the favors in the world couldn’t stop the rain, and with the rain, Rinpoche and his crew couldn’t make a film. On September 26, a decision was made to shift everyone up to the soggy logging camp in Chelela, regardless of weather. Rinpoche was confident. Others were hesitantly hopeful. Prayer Flag Picture’s crew and its convoy of 15 buses, cars, vans and jeeps made a pioneer voyage as a unit: the 86 Bhutanese, ten Indians and 16 Westerners finally converged as a team.

CHELELA IS NOT SO MUCH A TOWN as a point of reference. There are no shops, no phones, not even a tea stand. Just monkeys, trees and rushing streams. One hour straight up from Paro, the weather was noticeably colder, the mountain seemed to trap dampness in the crook of its neck, the trees

hoarded the sun for their leaves, leaving little for the humans struggling in the mud below. All 108 people were neatly packed into 33 cabins, rooms, tents, truck cabs and even in a lean-to off the kitchen.

Rinpoche’s quarters were no more elaborate than the rest—in fact, his room was the smallest in camp. He requested the ornate curtains to be taken down, and he slept on a mattress on the floor like everyone else. He had to step over the beds of several monks to get outside. Neten Chokling Rinpoche was just on the other side of a thin plank wall.

In the mornings, Rinpoche bathed and brushed his teeth *al fresco* standing on the cold pebbles, steam rising from his soapy head. He took meals in the mess tent—a three-sided shed with fresh pine needles for carpet. Being the director gave him one special privilege—at dawn he shook the camp awake with selections from his iPod: Bob Dylan, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Ravi Shankar blasted from the little Bose speakers on his windowsill.

These public displays of normality helped level the playing field for those who didn’t recognize him as the supreme guru (of the 16 foreigners on the crew, only seven were students of Rinpoche), while relaxing the Bhutanese who were unsure how to behave around him. They were timid at first. They covered their mouths when they spoke and kept their eyes averted. An audible gasp escaped the kitchen when one of the Westerners whacked Rinpoche on the arm in jest.

Rinpoche seemed to enjoy the casual atmosphere. “For the first time I had the opportunity to work with the ordinary Bhutanese people—sit together with them, eat with them, travel with them,” he says. “I have experienced so many things that I have never had the opportunity to before in Bhutan. This has been very important to me.”

THE AUSPICIOUS DAY for the start of filming arrived. The production’s unit manager and all of the lighting equipment were stuck in Phuntsholing. But there was a camera and there was film. Rinpoche rose early and headed up to Chelela Pass with a small group. At more than two miles above sea level, it is one of the highest passes in Bhutan. Sandwiched between two thick cloud tables—one in the valley below, one overhead—nine monks struggled against the damp to light 13 fires for a puja along the ridge. Down to the last match, the wet wood finally succumbed to flame. Rinpoche emerged from the smoke and mist wearing his favorite crushable straw hat—white with a black band—and monks’ robes. He looked happy. “No matter what we do we still have some kind of superstition necessary,” he said. “What do you think?” The puja was to appease the local deities. “We are doing something that has never been done before,” he said. “We need to make sure the spirits are O.K. with it.”

He gracefully switched hats, joined the monks on the cushions and the puja began. Eventually the rest of the film crew

began to arrive. For some, this was a first. Soon they were all joining in, carrying plates of torma offerings and dumping them in the fires, pouring whiskey on the flames and calling out like banshees to scare away the evil. The fog was still thick but for the first day in a week it was not raining. A rainbow appeared and tea was served from Chinese flasks.

A few hours later the crew—saddled with shiny black equipment, shrouded in hi-tech polar fleece, wired in walkie-talkies—stood silently watching the mountainside. Each wildflower stood out in the bright, indirect light. From around a giant boulder, Gomchen Penjor stomped into view, bare-chested, his straw hat at a tilt. As Agay, Penjor is steering the handsome hero, Tashi, away from his remote hut and sheltered wife. Tashi limped behind him, strikingly good-looking. They delivered their lines perfectly. “Cut!” called Rinpoche. The cheers echoed into the next valley. The film had begun. That very first shot is featured in the film’s poster.

Pre-production chaos paled compared to the mayhem that ensued. The set was located ten minutes from camp, deep in the forest, down a railroad-tie stairway, in a tiny house the size of a walnut. The crew swarmed in and out like ants. Monks and Hollywood professionals tangled together with wires, cables, planks. Traditional wooden phalluses used in ceremonies to ward off evil spirits lay about among plastic mugs, chili peppers, battery packs and bundles of bright, knotted, weaving thread.

For some of the professionals on the crew, Rinpoche’s style was sometimes too casual. Pandemonium between takes often left people wondering who was in charge. He was too generous, they thought—welcoming suggestions, allowing people to experiment, open to advice. “But if you watched closely,” said first assistant director Isaiah Seret, “you saw how skillfully he was in actually realizing his original view. Rinpoche was always in charge.”

Peace came only when the camera was rolling. “Quiet on the set!” the A.D. yelled. “*Kemachup*,” wheezed an asthmatic monk into his megaphone. The policemen at the ridge locked down the one-lane blacktop, the main artery between east and west Bhutan. Silence descended but for the trickling bamboo aqueduct. Magpies tiptoed in the treetops. “Speeding,” called a crewmember with her boom all balanced. “And...action!” Rinpoche said into his headset.

Although there were cameras of all kinds on the set, it seemed to some impossible to truly capture the precious moments as they fled by. There was tea break

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If I’m Lucky They Call Me

NOA JONES: How is this film different than your last film, The Cup?

DZONGSAR KHYENTSE RINPOCHE: In every aspect—scale, story, location. But I am afraid I have used the same technique. I still haven’t achieved the courage to do something different.

Some of your methods of teaching dharma are quite progressive ...

No, not at all. I am very traditional.

Well, your outward behavior is interpreted as very modern.

I may not be fulfilling some people’s expectations. If I am lucky they only go so far as to call me “unorthodox”; if I am unlucky they call me “wild and untamed.”

So some people are surprised that your method of filmmaking and storytelling are quite conventional.

Because I am not experienced yet, I dare not be too unconventional. I can’t afford to make a film that will flop—otherwise people won’t give me money to make the next film. But at times it occurs to me to do something different.

Like what?

Like showing action in real time, for instance. Ohi Imamura’s film *Warm Water Under Red Bridge* comes to mind.

Are there any filmmakers whom you would like to study or work with?

Ridley Scott, John Boorman and Abbas Kiraostami.

If money were no object, what would be the dream project for you?

Life of the Buddha, actually, with a Cinemascope. I would like to work with a crew of only Buddhists who really put heart into it—not just their artistic talent, not just as work.

Working on a film brings with it a pretty grueling schedule. Did you manage to keep up your own Buddhist practices?

Yes. It just meant I had one hour less sleep than the others.

Sometimes on the road you’d be in the middle of calling a shot and a nomad would come to prostrate at your feet. How was that for you? Did you take any measures to conceal your Rinpoche-ness?

Since it was happening in Bhutan, it came as very natural. I am sure some of the non-Buddhist crew may have thought I was

Unorthodox

An interview with Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche.



Dzongsar Khyentse with a cameraman on the set of Travellers & Magicians.

practicing tyranny, but I have to remember the Buddhist practice of not caring what people think.

One of the non-Buddhist crewmembers said he thought you were pretty groovy, but that your followers seemed kind of nuts. He thought the reason they were following you was that they needed help. Care to comment?

I would take it as a compliment. Because in Buddhism personalities like myself are considered like doctors and followers are like patients.

What's the difference between teaching and directing?

It all depends on the motivation. I could be teaching dharma purely for worldly gain. In that case I might as well ride in a limousine half-doped like some of the directors do.

In the film, one of your characters has a series of experiences that may or may not be a dream—in fact his whole storyline may not be real. Do you think we are responsible for what we dream? Can we create karma in our sleep?

Of course. In fact this life is a big sleep.

What does your father, Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, say about your filmmaking habit?

My father? I am sure he thinks it is a useless worldly pursuit, ego boosting, everything that's not right. And I honestly believe he is right.

The title of the film is Travellers & Magicians. If you didn't have to worry about marketing or posters, what would you title this film?

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Travellers & Magicians

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after tea break, but never really a break long enough to snap out of the work and appreciate the uncommonness of the situation: standing there, in Bhutan, with Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche hovering above the branches in the rusty Indian crane. Watching Chokling Rinpoche gallop away on horseback. Catching first glimpses of the film played back on video, fresh from Bangkok, in a leaky bamboo hut. Late night trance parties by the fire. Monks with megaphones. Disasters beyond comprehension.

A month into the shoot, the Aaton XTR Prod camera crashed onto a gravel road when its tripod collapsed. The filters were scratched, the housing cracked, the French flag and follow-focus bent. The internal mechanical damage could not be determined. The crew slumped back to camp, freaked.

Rinpoche didn't flinch. Instead, he was jubilant. "If we weren't doing something great, we wouldn't have obstacles," he said. He called Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche, who confirmed that this was the complication he had predicted. The camera was fine, said O.T., but get it tested to appease the skeptics. A pilot for Druk Air agreed to hand-deliver a test roll to the lab in Bangkok, but a result would take days.

The crew was only just recovering from this shock when another, even more dramatic, accident took place in Chendebji village. This ancient Bön village is the setting for the opening scene of the film, the village Dondup is seeking to escape. Chendebji is stage to a perfectly preserved Bhutanese way of life. It is beyond bucolic. The entire population lives in a cluster of seven large houses, each with its own name and history. The crew embraced the village. The cook staff flirted with peasant girls. Hemp-fed pigs rolled in the bushes.

It was here that the second camera, an Aaton A-Minima, fell from the Flo Cam, an aerial dolly which had been suspended twenty feet above the ground between

two houses. The massive roof beam at the far house snapped like a brittle chicken bone. The camera's hothead was smashed and the body was scratched. And while film could be fed through, suspicious grinding sounds had to be investigated. The house from which the beam fell is called "the Black Roost" and is known to be haunted. Locals had no doubt that spirit intervention played a role in the incident.

Then, three days before wrapping in Thimphu, Gomchen Penjor went AWOL. He was needed for an important scene. Visas were expiring, the crew needed to go home. Aside from arriving at the set wearing a long, black wig, Rinpoche appeared completely unfazed. He spontaneously wrote a new scene.

"Watching Rinpoche's reaction was the ultimate teaching," one of the actors said later.

Rinpoche quietly left Bhutan right after the wrap party in Thimphu. He spent the next several months in Australia splitting his time between overseeing a *ngöndro* retreat at his secluded Vajradhara Gumpa and overseeing the post-production at editing studios in Sydney. Meanwhile, several of his former crew back in Bhutan began seriously practicing dharma. "I am more of a practicing Buddhist than a Buddhist in principle now," said one crewmember. Two others were inspired to make a pilgrimage to Dzongsar Institute in Himachal Pradesh, India.

But Rinpoche contends *Travellers & Magicians* was purely a creative venture. He's saving the Buddhist message for his film about the life of the Buddha. "Teaching was never on my mind," he says, "as I was rather caught up with shots and camera angles. But if some people see it that way, then I have all the more reason to believe the Buddhist concept that Buddha's blessing comes from your own devotion." ♦

Travellers & Magicians premiered on August 3 in Bhutan and is set to travel the film-festival circuit before popular release in 2004.

NOA JONES is a freelance writer for The Los Angeles Times and other publications.

They Call Me Unorthodox

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An Illusion During A Sip Of Wine. That is the Bhutanese title.

Who would you like to see come to the premiere?

Boy George. Or Michael Jackson. What do you think? I love Boy George.

Why do you make films?

I make films because I love films.

But don't you do it for the money too?

First of all, I am not that keen on making money. I still consider myself a yet uncorrupted artist. Besides, if I want to make money, there are many other ways to do so. In fact, filmmaking is very risky, especially the films that I have been making, where you have no entertainment, no sex, no violence. If I really wanted to make money I would have chosen to make Hollywood-style—even Bollywood-style—films, avoiding the agony of not being accepted by festivals, not being liked by critics. Then it doesn't have to be artistic, because as long it's entertaining, you make money. Having said all that, in the future I might actually do commercial films because being artistic and commercially successful can be quite challenging.

Are you putting spiritual messages into your film? Is this a way of teaching dharma?

People say, "You are a Buddhist lama, why do you make films?" This question is a bit puzzling. It indicates to me that from certain standpoints this work is viewed as almost sacrilegious—like I am breaking some kind of holy rule. At the same time, I understand. People automatically associate film with money, sex and violence because there are so many such films coming out of Hollywood and Bollywood. But if only they had access to films by the likes of Ozu, Satyajit Ray, Antonioni, people would understand

that filmmaking doesn't have to be like that. In fact, it is a tool. Film is a medium, and Buddhism is a science. You can be a scientist and you can be a filmmaker, a salesperson and a politician at the same time.

So is this proper behavior for a Rinpoche?

I have often heard that some people feel I am Westernized, I guess partly because of my association with Westerners. But I totally disagree. I may be slightly modern, this is true. But when it comes to Buddhist teaching itself, I totally oppose people attempting to make Buddhism more adaptable to the West or to the modern world. It is not required: Buddhism has always been up-to-date. From the moment Buddha taught, the essence of the teachings hasn't changed, and it shouldn't change. Anyone who tries to modernize buddhadharma is making a grave mistake.

It's important to make a distinction between the culture and Buddhism. As the wisdom of Buddha traveled to different countries over different ages, the culture and tradition of each particular time or place became intrinsic to the teaching. Culture is indispensable because without it, there is no medium to convey the teachings. Dharma is the tea and culture is the cup. For someone who wants to drink tea, tea is more important than the cup. The cup is also necessary but it is not the most essential. Hence, you can say that I am not attached to the cup. If necessary, I am ready to change the cup, and for that reason you can say that I have a modern mind.

Will you ever direct a film set in the West with Western actors?

Yes, if I have the opportunity.

Which of the Western actors do you like?

Alec Guinness and Anthony Hopkins.

Which Western actresses do you admire?

Kate Winslet, because she has the most sexy hips. ♦

Life as Cinema

On being told this isn't really happening.

BY DZONGSAR KHYENTSE RINPOCHE

JUST SUPPOSE that we have been born in a cinema hall. We don't know that what is going on in front of us is just a projection. We don't know that it is just a film, just a movie, and that the events in the movie aren't real, that they have no true existence. Everything we see on that screen—love, hate, violence, suspense, thrills—is in fact just the effect of light projected through celluloid. But no one has ever told us this, so we just sit there watching, fixated on the film. If somebody tries to attract our attention, we say, "Shut up!" Even if we have something important to do, we don't want to do it. We are completely engrossed and blind to the fact that this projection is completely futile.

This is what the dharma practitioner needs to understand—that the whole of samsara, or nirvana, is as essenceless or untrue as that film. Until we see this, it will be very difficult for dharma to sink into our minds. We will always be carried away, seduced by the glory and beauty of this world, by all the apparent success and failure. However, once we see, even just for a second, that these appearances are not real, we will gain a certain confidence. This doesn't mean that we have to rush off to Nepal or India and become a monk or nun. We can still keep our jobs, wear a suit and tie and go with our briefcase to the office every day. We can still fall in love, offer our loved one flowers, exchange rings. But somewhere inside there is something telling us that all this is essenceless.



Now suppose that there is someone in the seat next to us who says: "Look, this is just a film. It's not real. This is not really happening. It's really just a projection." There's a chance we too might understand that what we are seeing is in fact a movie, that it is unreal and essenceless.

This doesn't automatically mean we get up and leave the cinema. We don't have to do that. We can just relax and simply watch the love affair, the crime thriller or whatever. We can experience its intensity. And if we have a certain confidence that this is just a projection, then we can rewind, fast forward or play the film again as we like. And we have the choice to leave whenever we like, and to come back at another time to watch again. Once we are certain that we can leave any time we like, we may not feel compelled to do so. We can choose to sit comfortably and watch.

Sometimes a sequence in the movie can overwhelm our emotions. A tragic moment might hit our soft spot and we are carried away. But now, something in our heart is telling us that we know it's not real, that it's not a big deal.

It is very important to have such a glimpse. If we have even one glimpse in the whole of our life, we can be happy for the rest of the time with just the memory of that glimpse.

Now, it could happen that when someone whispers to us, "Hey! This is just a film," we don't hear them because we are distracted. Perhaps just at that moment there is a big car crash in the movie, or loud music, so we just don't hear the message. Or else maybe we do hear the message, but our ego misinterprets this information, so we remain confused and believe that there is something true and real in the movie after all. Why does that happen? It happens because we lack merit. Merit is incredibly important. Of course, intelligence, or *prajna*, is important. Compassion, or *karuna*, is important. But merit is paramount. Without merit, we are like an ignorant, illiterate beggar who wins a multi-million-dollar lottery but does not know what to do with the money and loses it straightaway.

But suppose we do have a little merit and we actually get the message from the person whispering to

PHOTOS BY
DIANA CHURCH

us. Then, as Buddhists, we have different options. From the point of view of Theravada Buddhism, we get up and leave the movie hall, or we close our eyes, so we are not carried away by the movie. We put an end to suffering in that way. On the Mahayana level, we reduce our suffering through understanding that the movie is unreal, that it is all a projection and empty. We don't stop watching the movie, but we see that it has no inherent existence. Moreover, we are concerned about the others in the cinema. Finally, in the Vajrayana, we know that it is just a movie, we are not fooled, and we just enjoy the show. The more emotion the movie evokes in us, the more we appreciate the brilliance of the production. We share our insights with our fellow viewers, who, we trust, are also able to appreciate what we see.

But to implement this in real life, we need merit. In Theravada Buddhism one accumulates merit through renunciation. We see that the movie is making us suffer and we have the sense to stop watching it. In the Mahayana we accumulate merit with compassion. We have a big and open mind that is more concerned with others' suffering.

On the other hand, this transformation—from being caught up in the movie, to seeing the emptiness of the events in the film, to caring solely for the welfare of others—might take a very, very long time. This is why in the Vajrayana we move into the fast lane and accumulate merit through devotion. We trust the person who is whispering to us, and who has an understanding that has set him free. Not only do we assimilate the information he is giving us, but we also appreciate his freedom of mind and the depth of his being. We know we have the potential for such liberation too, and this makes us appreciate him even more. A single moment of such devotion, just a split second, just a little bit of such devotion, has immense merit. If we are in tune with the person whispering to us, he might help us discover the true, inner movie-lover. He might make us see how the rest of the audience is caught up, and how unnecessary it all is. So without our having to rely on our own confused struggle to understand the path, this person brings us to an understanding of what it is we are seeing. We then become someone who can sit back and enjoy the show. And maybe we might whisper to some others as well. ♦

