

What does it take to keep a culture's sacred knowledge from being lost to history?

THE GREAT TRANSMISSION

A feature-length documentary film

Running time: 56 minutes

Year: 2015

Languages: English, Tibetan (subtitled)

Countries of Production: US, Tibet, India

Producer: Guna Foundation

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Short Synopsis

Imagine that you are one of a handful of survivors of a disaster that has virtually erased your culture. Now you must recover the knowledge that was lost and find ways to ensure that it continues into the future.

Witnessing the disintegration of his heritage, Tibetan refugee and Buddhist lama Tarthang Tulku dedicated his life to restoring a text tradition that was nearly lost during the turbulence of the 20th century. Working with a handful of volunteers, he would eventually deliver over four and a quarter million books into Tibetan hands, in one of the largest free book distributions in history.

The Great Transmission is the story of one Tibetan refugee lama and his efforts to preserve the sacred texts of his tradition. But more than that, it is the story of the epic journey of a precious

inheritance of human knowledge from its origins in Ancient India to the present day, and the celebration of the valiant efforts of those devoted to its survival.

Long Synopsis

Imagine that you are one of a handful of survivors of an event that has virtually erased your culture. Now you must start from scratch—locating the lost knowledge and finding ways to ensure that it continues into the future. This is the position Tibetans have been forced into by the events of the 20th century.

For 1,200 years Tibet has played a major role in Buddhism's survival. *The Great Transmission* depicts the sacrifices made by generations of Tibetans to keep this knowledge alive, delving into the story of Buddhism's arrival in the Land of Snow, and the flowering of art and culture that followed as Tibet became the inheritor of an ancient tradition. Over the centuries, a long chain of Tibetan masters carefully cultivated this Buddhist heritage, creating a civilization of extraordinary spiritual depth. But in the 20th century, history delivered Tibetan culture a nearly fatal blow.

In 1959, Tibet was invaded by Communist China. In the upheaval that followed, Tibet's sacred texts were almost completely destroyed, and with them, Tibetan culture. Without the texts and the teachers who understood them, how could this ancient knowledge survive?

Witnessing the disintegration of his culture, Tibetan refugee and Buddhist lama Tarchang Tulku decided to dedicate his life to restoring the knowledge of his tradition. For the next forty years, he worked tirelessly to find, edit, print, and distribute Tibet's irreplaceable texts. Working with a handful of volunteers, he would eventually deliver over four million books into Tibetan hands, in one of the largest free book distributions in history.

The Great Transmission illuminates the deep love Tibetans have for their endangered culture, and tells the story of the efforts of countless generations of Buddhist practitioners who made great sacrifices for the sake of knowledge—even risking their lives.

The Great Transmission traces this heroic activity of knowledge preservation as it unfolds through history to the present day. It is a story of the universal value of a tradition that without careful nurturing could easily be lost to humankind.

Who We Are

Guna Foundation is a small, all-volunteer 501(c)3 non-profit documentary film studio with a strong educational mission to open up the treasures of Tibetan Buddhist culture to the general public. *The Great Transmission* is our third film.

Our prior two films, *Light of the Valley: the 15th Renovation of Swayambhu* (2011) and *Prayers of the Ancient Ones* (2013) have earned us a reputation for intelligent, engaging films on Buddhist topics. Both films have been picked up for national distribution by NETA (National Educational Television Association); *Light of the Valley* has been shown on 65 public television stations across the U.S, including PBS stations in five of the six largest markets in the country.

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Key Crew Biographies

Pema Gellek, Director

Pema Gellek is the Co-Director of the Guna Foundation, a faculty member at Dharma College, and Director of the Prajna Light Foundation. She holds an M.A. in International Politics from American University and a B.A. in Asian Studies from Mary Baldwin College, and studied with Buddhist masters in Nepal for three years. She is the second of the three daughters of Tarthang Tulku, all of whom work for the preservation of the Buddhist culture.

This is her third film.

Filmography:

- Director, *The Great Transmission* (2015)
- Director, *Prayers of the Ancient Ones* (2013)
- Director, *Light of the Valley* (2011)

Barry Schieber, Producer

Barry Schieber received his B.A. and M.A. in Business from the University of California, Berkeley. He began his professional life as an investment analyst before becoming a student of

Tarthang Tulku at the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center in the early '70s. Barry also founded Silent Moon Books, which publishes his stories about Moritz, his therapy dog, and the lives Moritz has touched. Barry served as Co-Director of Guna Foundation from 2009-2015. This is his third film.

Filmography:

- Producer, *The Great Transmission* (2015)
- Producer, *Prayers of the Ancient Ones* (2013)
- Producer, *Light of the Valley* (2011)

Michael Nouri, Narrator

This beloved actor has had a long and storied career in both film and television, ranging from *Flashdance* (1983) to "NCIS" (2008-2013) and beyond. Michael generously donated his time to create the voiceover narration for *The Great Transmission*.

Please see Michael's IMDB page for his complete filmography:

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0636694/>

Hugh Joswick, Assistant Director

Hugh studied film history and film theory as part of his graduate program at Yale University, and has worked on and off in documentary film for over 25 years. This is his third film with Guna Foundation.

Julia Witwer, Writer

Julia has a PhD in Comparative Literature (UC Irvine) and has worked as a writer and editor since 2009. This is her first film.

Phanuthep Suttithethamrong, Animation Director/Cinematographer

Phanu worked for sixteen years as a professional animator in Thailand, and then spent four years as a forest monk before coming to the U.S. to continue his studies in Buddhism. His professional and personal background have made him a powerful addition to the Guna Team.

Co-founder, Anya Animation Studio in Bangkok, Thailand
CG Designer for Sony Playstation game *Marby Baby Story* (1999)
Co-director, *King Vikram and Vetan the Vampire* (2003)
Production Director/Art Director of *The Lady of Badal* (2010)
Director of *World's End* (2013), a short film officially selected for the International Film Festival of Cinematic Arts; Philip K Dick Science Fiction Film Festival; and Athens International Film and Video Festival

Yann Tribolle, DoP

Yann is a Paris-based cinematographer -

See Yann's IMDB page for a full filmography:

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2435910>

Yann's showreel can be found at his website:

www.yanntribolle.com

Albert Behar, Composer

New-York-based Albert Behar is a professional composer of classical, experimental and film music. He has collaborated with the Kronos Quartet and other well-known international ensembles, and has received numerous grants supporting his work.

See Albert's IMDB page for a full filmography:

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm4703645/>

Albert's professional website:

<http://albertbehar.com>

About the Director

Our Director, Pema Gellek, is Tarthang Tulku's middle daughter. Educated informally in Buddhism for years by her father, she also studied for three years at an international Buddhist Studies institute in Kathmandu, Nepal. For the last fifteen years, Pema has been extensively

involved in the distribution of sacred texts to Tibetan refugees. Pema's experiences working with the monks and nuns who receive the texts have made an indelible impact, and the sense of urgency these practitioners feel has deeply informed her approach to the subject matter of the film.

Notes from the Director

Knowledge is alive in people's hearts and minds; it manifests in how they live their lives, their values, and what they create.

Tibet was a peaceful society for 1,400 years, a society in which people were engaged in a living philosophy. It wasn't just a tradition of people reading philosophy from dusty texts--people were engaging it at every level.

There are always a few key players in the transmission of knowledge, and it always comes from a few moments in which that person, who is empowered to act, realizes that there is something of great intrinsic value in that knowledge. Sometimes it's a handful of people who have the power to change the course of an entire civilization. This happened in Tibet in the 8th century. Perhaps it can happen again today.

There are so many stories of incredible selflessness and sacrifice that we have had the chance to uncover through our research for this film, through our attempts at finding a way to tell this story. We are very honored to share these stories with a larger audience.

-Pema Gellek

Film FAQ

What is the Tibetan text tradition?

Tibetan Buddhism is famous for its vast collection of sacred texts, gathered and translated over several centuries.

Tibetans began practicing Buddhism as early as the seventh century AD, when King Srongsten Gampo sent his trusted minister to India to learn Sanskrit and devise a writing system for Tibet, allowing Buddhist texts to be translated into Tibetan for the first time. In the eighth century, 20-year-old King Trisong Detsen became determined that the Tibetan Empire would follow the Dharma. He dispatched a host of young Tibetan translators to India, birthplace of Buddhism.

They returned to Tibet with more than a thousand texts. These works formed the basis for a sacred text tradition that would, in time, constitute tens of thousands of texts, painstakingly gathered from across Buddhist India and translated into Tibetan.

The tradition safeguarded in Tibet is of critical importance, for it holds a wider range of Buddhist texts than was collected by any other Buddhist culture. If these texts were to disappear, the damage to Buddhism worldwide would be incalculable.

What happened in Tibet in 1959?

In 1959, the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibet, was forced to flee into exile. Over 80,000 Tibetans left Tibet in 1959 and 1960; eventually the numbers of refugees would swell to 100,000. Vast numbers of lamas, monks and nuns were among the refugees as Tibet's indigenous religious traditions were systematically dismantled. In the chaos, almost all the monasteries were destroyed, and their libraries were burned to the ground.

In exile, the Dalai Lama and other important Tibetan Buddhist teachers made mighty efforts to re-establish their schools and monasteries. But their text tradition was in grave jeopardy. It has taken many years of selfless work to restore even a portion of what was lost to the Tibetan people.

But the strife and problems in Tibet happened a long time ago. So why did you decide to make the film now?

Today, over 50 years after being forced to flee their homeland, the bearers of Tibet's ancient Buddhist traditions stand upon a precipice. The last generation to have been fully educated within Tibet before 1959 has almost disappeared, leaving a scant handful of leaders and teachers to ensure, along with their students and heirs, that Tibetan Buddhist knowledge continues into the future, not as a "museum piece" or historical curiosity, but as a vital, living tradition that has a part to play in the modern world.

The younger generations are confronted with the awesome task of upholding their sacred heritage. In exile, the leaders of Tibetan Buddhism have struggled to provide stability, establishing monasteries and teaching tirelessly. But the next generations desperately need access to their sacred texts in order to ensure the accurate and complete transmission of Tibetan Buddhist knowledge.

This moment is the turning point for Tibetan Buddhist culture. Will it survive as its "greatest generation" passes on? Will the new lamas, monks and nuns have a strong enough educational basis to ensure the survival of their traditions in a contemporary world that moves almost too quickly for comprehension?

Where did you get the funding to make the film?

The Great Transmission was 100% funded by donations. The vast majority of our donors contributed \$100 or less. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Barry Schieber, whose tireless fundraising efforts made our film possible.