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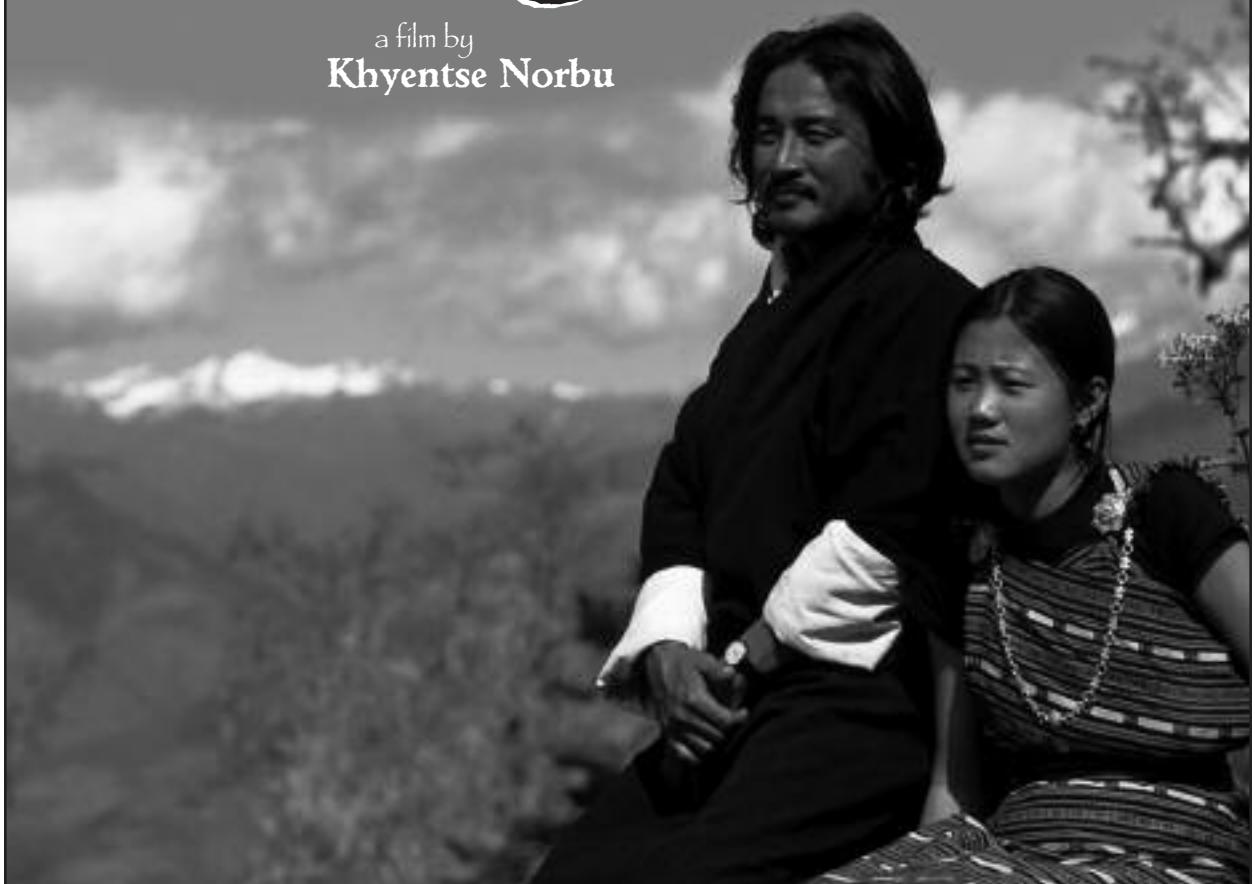
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# Travellers & Magicians

a film by  
Khyentse Norbu



A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

# Travellers & Magicians

Written and Directed by  
Khyentse Norbu

Produced by Raymond Steiner and Malcolm Watson  
Executive Producer Jeremy Thomas  
Director of Photography Alan Kozlowski  
Edited by John Scott and Lisa-Anne Morris

Bhutan, 2004  
In Dzongkha with English subtitles  
Running Time: 108 minutes  
Aspect Ratio: 1:1.85  
35mm • Color • Dolby SR/SRD

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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

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# ཆང་དྲུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འཁྲུལ་སྐྱོད། Travellers & Magicians

མཁྱེན་བརྗེ་ཉེས་བྱས་བརྗེས་མས།།

## ཆང་དྲུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འཁྲུལ་སྐྱོད། Synopsis

མཁྱེན་བརྗེ་ཉེས་བྱས་བརྗེས་མས།།

In the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan, nestled deep in the Himalayas, two men seek to escape their mundane lives. Dondup, an educated university graduate decides that he will be better off picking grapes in the US than working as a government officer in a remote rural village. Tashi, a restless farm youth studying magic, cannot bear the thought of a life consigned to his village. Through a trick of his brother, he is delivered into a dream world of seduction and intrigue.

The two men embark on parallel, if separate, journeys. Their yearning is a common one – for a better and different life.

Dondup, delayed by the timeless pace of his village, is forced to hitchhike through the beautiful wild countryside of Bhutan to reach his goal. He shares the road with a monk, an apple seller, a papermaker and his beautiful young daughter, Sonam.

Throughout the journey the perceptive, yet mischievous monk relates the story of Tashi. It is a mystical fable of lust, jealousy and murder, that holds up a mirror to the restless Dondup, and his blossoming attraction to the innocent Sonam.

The cataclysmic conclusion of the monk's tale leaves Dondup with a dilemma – is the grass truly greener on the other side?

## About the production



On September 29, 2002, the cameras started to roll on the first feature film to be made in the pristine beauty of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan.

More than 108 cast and crew came together – from Bhutan, Australia, Germany, India, Canada and the US – to work with award-winning filmmaker Khyentse Norbu on the first feature film to be made in his homeland. The writer/director of *The Cup* matched experienced international film professionals with Bhutan's own budding filmmakers, giving them experience and the inspiration to produce future Bhutanese films.

As in Khyentse Norbu's first film, *The Cup*, no professional actors were used. The cast is drawn from across the country and include the chief regulator of the country's banking and financial institutions, a colonel in the King's Bodyguard, a monk trained in pure mathematics, a senior researcher with the government strategic planning think tank, employees of the local TV broadcasting corporation, a school principal, school children, farmers and local gomchen (householder practitioners and meditators).

*Travellers & Magicians* was shot entirely in the Dzongkha

dialect, the official language of Bhutan. During shooting of *Travellers & Magicians* in the home of the casting director, the first official Dzongkha dictionary was created. As few of the cast spoke the 'new' national language, they had to be schooled by an on-set dialogue coach.

In keeping with the ways of the country, many major production decisions were determined by mo, an ancient method of divination performed by specially skilled lamas. The mo dictated principal cast, crew and even the first day of shooting.

Also in line with director Khyentse Norbu's Buddhist beliefs, special religious ceremonies known as pujas, were performed throughout the production to remove obstacles, quell local demons and increase auspiciousness.

*Travellers & Magicians* was shot on Kodak colour film using a Super 16mm camera package of an Aaton XTR Prod and an Aaton A-Minima (for steadycam). The negative was processed in Bangkok's leading laboratory which enabled telecine rushes to be available in good turnaround time for viewing in Bhutan. Post Production was undertaken in Australia and was the country's first fully digitally graded feature film.

Two men, one chasing love  
ends up in a dream.  
The other, chasing a dream,  
leaves love behind.



# ཆང་ཏུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འཁྲུལ་སྐྱོད Travellers & Magicians

མཁྱེན་བརྗེ་ལོ་རྒྱུས་བརྗེ་མས།།

## ཆང་ཏུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འཁྲུལ་སྐྱོད About Bhutan

མཁྱེན་བརྗེ་ལོ་རྒྱུས་བརྗེ་མས།།

# A

As the inspiration for the fictitious Shangrila of James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*, Bhutan has long fascinated the world. The country and people have remained delightfully unspoiled, isolated by natural geography and deliberate government policy. Roughly the size of Switzerland, but with a population of approximately 700,000, it is sandwiched between the two most populous nations on earth – India and China.

*Travellers & Magicians* opens a window for the first time in a feature film, on this tiny Buddhist kingdom nestled in the Himalayas. The Bhutanese have developed a singularly unique approach to life which is beautifully and sensitively portrayed in the film. Bhutan is a country where the King is also the head of the government, the people wear national costume by law and Gross National Happiness is, by royal decree, considered more important than Gross National Product.

Until the 1960s Bhutan had no financial currency, roads, electricity, telephones, schools, hospitals, postal service nor outside visitors. The people enjoyed their simple life, travelling everywhere by foot or on horseback, bartering goods and remaining blissfully unconnected from the technological changes sweeping the rest of the world.

Only 40 years ago, the King decided, that as part of his plan to unify the largely rural country, it would develop a national language. Of the dozen or so dialects, he chose Dzongkha, spoken by about a quarter of the population. It was, like all the country's dialects, an oral language only and the government's first step was to create a written form. Filmed in Dzongkha, *Travellers & Magicians* represents a significant ripening of the process.

The country has more Buddhist monks than soldiers, and by law holds more than 60% of the land mass under forest at any one time. In the social and environmental turmoil of today's world, Bhutan is a precious jewel.



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# ཆང་ཏུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འབྲུལ་སྒྲུང

## About Khyentse Norbu རྗེ་ཏོན་བུ་ས་བརྩུ་མས།

# ཆང་ཏུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འབྲུལ་སྒྲུང

**T**ravellers & Magicians is Khyentse Norbu's follow-up to his internationally successful 1999 feature *The Cup* (*Phörpa*). After making its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival, *The Cup* won critical acclaim and festival awards around the world, as well as being distributed in over 40 countries. The New York Times named Khyentse Norbu “a born filmmaker” and London’s Evening Standard called him “one of the hottest new directorial talents around.”

*The Cup* is Khyentse Norbu's semi-autobiographical tale of a group of monks obsessed with the World Cup soccer final. The surprise international hit helped humanise the image of Tibetan monks, too often portrayed as one dimensional saints. Shot in a Tibetan refugee colony in the Himalayan foothills of northern India, *The Cup* was made with a cast and crew of mostly monks and novices. Amazingly, the average scene required only three takes, which director Khyentse Norbu attributed to their powers of meditation.

Filmmaking credentials aside, Khyentse Norbu is also known as His Eminence Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche. He is one of the most important incarnate lamas in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and a member of one of Bhutan’s most noble families. Born in a remote area of eastern Bhutan in the Year of the Metal Ox (1961), he is the son of contemporary Buddhist master Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, and grandson of both tantric yogi Lama Sonam Zangpo and H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche.

At the age of seven, Khyentse Norbu was recognised as the third incarnation of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, the non-sectarian saint, scholar and principal lama of Tibet’s Dzongsar Monastery. Dzongsar Monastery is renowned as a centre of non-sectarian scholarship and contemplation, having produced many of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist masters, scholars and practitioners of the last century.

Raised in strict Buddhist monasteries and institutions in Bhutan and Sikkim, Khyentse Norbu was trained by some of the greatest living masters of Vajrayana Buddhism. He has

continued his non-sectarian heritage by founding retreat centres, schools of philosophy and charitable foundations around the world. When not making films, he teaches Buddhist philosophy throughout Asia, North and South America, Europe and Australia. Although his work schedule requires constant travel, he spends several months each year in strict meditative retreat.

Khyentse Norbu’s first encounter with film was as a 19-year-old monk. While travelling from his home to college, he caught a glimpse of a Bollywood epic on TV at an Indian railway station. Soon after, Raymond Steiner (then directing children’s films in India) gave him his first lesson in photography. Khyentse Norbu continued his Buddhist studies, but his interest in film never wavered. He began travelling and teaching, eventually making his way to London’s School of Oriental and African Studies. He studied during the day but it was London’s cinema halls that were his true classroom.

In the early 90s, he befriended producer Jeremy Thomas, then in pre-production for Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Little Buddha*. Inspired by their conversations, Khyentse Norbu enrolled in a four-week course at the New York Film Academy. Thomas introduced Khyentse Norbu to Bertolucci who enlisted him as a consultant on *Little Buddha* and cast him in a small role. While working on the film, Khyentse Norbu paid keen attention to Bertolucci, absorbing everything the director had to teach. “He’s almost like my film guru,” said Khyentse Norbu. Both Bertolucci and Thomas encouraged Khyentse Norbu to make his own films. As executive producer, Thomas was instrumental in raising funds for *The Cup*.

The extensive film library at Khyentse Norbu’s Paro, Bhutan home reveals his eclectic taste. *Natural Born Killers* is filed next to Chinese art film *Warm Water Under The Bridge*. *Dirty Dancing* is filed next to Kurosawa’s *Dodeskaden*. Among his favourite directors are Tarkovsky, De Sica, Ozu, Satyajit Ray and the new wave of Iranian filmmakers. He is never without the movie schedule of whichever city he finds himself in.

“When I said I was going to make a film, people were surprised. Many thought I was joking, even up to the last minute.”



# ཆང་དུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འཁྲུལ་སྐུང

## Comments from Writer-Director Khyentse Norbu མཁའ་འགྲུབ་ལྷོ་མཚོ་འཕྲུལ་སྐུང་།

### ཆང་དུབ་ཐེངས་གཅིག་གི་འཁྲུལ་སྐུང

#### Origins

Every time I travel from west to east in Bhutan, I see these people waiting for cars. That sight for me is something very sentimental and I've always thought I would write a story about them. "Izumi Odoriko", a story by Japanese author Yasunari Kawabata, also gave me some ideas. It is about a group of travellers and an infatuation between a dancer girl and a school boy. A big part of *Travellers & Magicians* is actually adapted from a Buddhist fable about two brothers, one aspiring to become a magician.

It is a story within a story. I liked this structure because it suited the characters. These kinds of travellers have a lot of time and in order to entertain themselves they tell a lot of stories. I also think it makes the film interesting.

The character of Dondup represents a certain restlessness that you can find among some Bhutanese youth.

#### Balancing Filmmaking and Buddhism

People ask "You are a Buddhist lama, why do you make film?" This question is a bit puzzling. It indicates to me that from certain standpoints working in film 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 at the same time, you can be a filmmaker.

#### The Concept of Reincarnation

I guess the concept of reincarnation and the laws of citizenship and naturalisation don't work together. I am recognised as a reincarnation of one of the great Tibetan masters — although I feel that for the first time in the history of karma, karma made a mistake. Regardless, in this life I am Bhutanese. And in many ways, I am proud of being Bhutanese. But my Buddhist training comes from the Tibetan tradition, so I feel very loyal and sympathetic to Tibetan culture and people. While I am not a Tibetan citizen, I have undertaken the responsibility of several Tibetan monasteries and schools and I've done this for a couple of reasons. First,

as a service to the Buddha dharma which, broadly speaking, Tibetans are maintaining at the moment by preserving it as a living system. And secondly, because I am a reincarnation of this Tibetan master, I am entrusted to continue his work.

#### More Emphasis on Wisdom

Between ethics, morality, and wisdom, Buddhism has always put more emphasis on wisdom. Wisdom surpasses behaviour. 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 have often heard that some people feel I am Westernised, 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.

#### A Bit of Buddhist Influence

It's not as if Buddhism, like some other religions, is against idolatry. For centuries Buddhism has adopted the method of statues and artistic representation in order to express messages of compassion, love, wisdom. Film could be seen as a modern day thangka [a traditional Buddhist painting]. Having said that, I am not claiming that either of my films are spiritual, though because of my obvious background, you might find a little bit of Buddhist influence in both works.

#### A Love of Film

I make films because I love films. I love the whole concept — telling a story with pictures, the framing, the pacing, the sound, the dialogue. I like the fact that you can present what you see in your mind's eye. You look at the whole picture, but your mind has chosen to focus only on one thing — let's say, this person's eyes — and you can demonstrate that choice, that vision within the four corners of film. Film is one of the most powerful mediums that we have today.

#### Working in Bhutan

Aside from the actual process of filmmaking, this time there was something else that I really enjoyed. For the first time I had the ►

Q What kind of music do you like? Which singers?

A Billie Holiday. Muddy Waters. John Lee Hooker.

I also like operas, especially sung by countertenors.

Lately I am into techno too.

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◀ opportunity to work with the ordinary Bhutanese people – sit together with them, eat with them, travel with them. I have experienced so many things that I have never had the opportunity to before in Bhutan like learning how women put on a kira (traditional, elaborately draped floor-length dress worn by women). This has been very important to me.

## Bhutanese Youth

We are driving our people away from the dharma using what they are trying to escape from. I see these young people who are wanting direction but no one is giving them any. All they get is symbols and blessing cords. People these days are not satisfied with it and rightfully so. Buddhism is much more than a symbol or touching the head. It's all very well having a beautiful ceremony and all that, but such things can be obstacles in disguise. They create a big gap between me and the people. With lamas like myself, apart from the usual habitual blessings (putting my hands over their heads) and audiences, there is little communication and practically no philosophical exchange.

In the West, students have less of that gap. They express what they want to express. They ask questions. They cry in front of me, they laugh in front of me, and I get close to them. They see both my bad side and my good side. And it is important for me to have that kind of relationship.

I would like to sit next to the Bhutanese young people and let them talk about anything - drugs, sex, money - whatever they want to talk about. This is why I didn't hesitate when I was invited to a nightclub in Thimphu. If it wasn't for the bad music, I would have stayed longer.

The young Bhutanese are so open and so fresh. Even though they may not have extensive Buddhist education, just the fact that they were born and raised in a Buddhist country means the energy is there.

## Changing Bhutan

Change is inevitable. Bhutanese must realise that. But Bhutan must change with its own character. Modernisation of Bhutan is fine, but what I am worried about is that Bhutanese culture could be levelled by its immediate and influential neighbours. While Bhutanese cultural preservationists might spend their time worrying about the invasion by western culture, they don't realise that the Bollywood culture has already insinuated itself into Bhutan. The arrival of ZTV, a sports channel that only shows cricket, Hindi soap operas playing in shops in Thimphu - that's

worrisome. It's easy for a tourist who comes for two weeks to get enchanted because they feel that they're in a medieval time warp, but it is very dangerous for Bhutanese to fall into that trap. The tourist doesn't have to stay there, but the Bhutanese must go on and face the 22nd century.

## Bhutanese Values

While the Bhutanese live by values which agree, on the most part, with universal systems and morals, there is also a unique set of values, particular to Bhutan that is unlike anything found in other Asian countries. For example, in many parts of Bhutan the subject of sex is not so taboo as it is in China, India or even Tibet. While a puritanical Tibetan, Chinese or Indian might think the Bhutanese are primitive upon seeing phalluses painted on walls and hanging here and there, what they don't realize is that non-existence of such inhibition can be a blessing. Other cultures have lost this sense of freedom or openness, in turn possibly making them into sexually repressed societies. So-called sophistication may have made their minds narrow and rigid, depriving them of a source of happiness. Unfortunately, Bhutanese may be learning to have that self-consciousness.

## Bhutanese Films

For a nation that doesn't have a film school or any sort of school for media arts, and no access to film equipment or even good films, I must say I am very impressed. The filmmakers in Bhutan must now remember to create and keep their own style. But they have to work very hard. In many ways there are so many bad films and the blame actually goes to the audience because that's what they want. The audience must demand better.

## Future Films

I have several more stories that I have written particularly for Bhutan. One that I hope to make is a simple love story. I notice that many Bollywood and Hollywood films over-sensationalise romance and it doesn't necessarily happen like that. It can be a very simple, very ordinary, and at times corny, but at the same time significant, like missing someone's presence.

I don't see myself changing my profession into fulltime filmmaker, but I definitely might make a few more films. Making the second film created a lot of pressure because while the first one is kind of a novelty, the second one is where one is tested. I hope people's expectations are not sky high.

*excerpts from an interview by Noa Jones*

Q Who is your favourite modern writer?

A Milan Kundera and Yukio Mishima.

Gita Mehta's River Sutra is outstanding.