

Interdependence in action

The idea of interdependence is central to Buddhism, which holds that all things come into being through mutual interactions of various causes and conditions. American Filmmaker **Aine Carey** talks to Bhutanese Filmmaker **Jamyang Wangchuk** about his “karmic” film Career.

Aine Carey founded the Bhutan Culture Company to provide support to the Bhutanese Film Industry. For more information www.bhutanculturecompany.com



▲ Jamyang Wangchuk with Brad Pitt in *Seven Years in Tibet*

IT was December 1994, eleven-year-old Jamyang Wangchuk was on a family trip visiting close friends in Hong Kong. They had spent a joyful evening together watching *Ace Ventura*, hearing there were possible sequels the young Jamyang went along with his host to hunt them down. When they arrived at a friend’s flat, the door opened and a short Asian woman looked down at Jamyang and blurted out, “Would you like to act in a movie?” Four months later, Jamyang was in Delhi meeting with academy award winning director Jean Jacques Annaud and just six months after that he was in Argentina co-starring with Hollywood Legend, Brad Pitt in *Seven Years in Tibet* portraying one of the most significant spiritual leaders in modern history. It was the role of a lifetime and Jamyang was only 13 years old.

Q: What was it like to portray someone as important as the Dalai Lama?

A: I did not understand the significance of the character I was playing. As a Buddhist, I have so much respect and faith for His Holiness that I could never imagine that I was playing him, or could be anything like him, so I didn’t really think of it that way.

Q: Why did it take you 18 years to make your first film?

A: I never thought I would make films after *Seven Years in Tibet*, because that just kind of “happened”. I didn’t plan it. I went to law school and planned to be a lawyer. When I returned from law school, the Bhutanese



▲ Still from *Seven Years in Tibet*

film industry was beginning to grow. I started to watch the Bhutanese films and wondered if I could make a contribution. After much deliberation, I decided to give it a try.

Q: Do you think your experience playing the Dalai Lama, who is the embodiment of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of perfect compassion, influenced the theme of your movie *Gyalsey: Legacy of a Prince*?

A: I haven't thought of it that way. When I was a child, my parents told me stories and I was very influenced by the story of Drimed Kundun who was also a Bodhisattva. I wanted to use that as my theme but make it into a modern story.

Q: You wrote, produced, directed and starred in your film. Tell me about that experience.

A: Well that is kind of how we do it here; we are all just learning as we go along. Our film industry is really only 15 years old. So even though it was really difficult, I think I learned a lot.

Q: So tell me about your experience with *Gyalsey*.

A: It was my first movie and I wanted to do something different than what I was seeing being made in Bhutan. I took a risk, but when the film opened to a theatre of only 20 people I was kind of devastated. Little by little, people started to trickle into the theatre. The film started to get some nice reviews, I broke even on the rental of the theatre so at least I didn't lose money but I didn't make any of my production costs back so I was pretty discouraged. Then, I was asked to screen *Gyalsey* for The King and Queen of



▲ *Jamyang in Gyalsey*



▲ A scene from Gyalsey



Jamyang and Aine at filmmaking class ▲

Bhutan. This was the highest honour I could imagine for my film.

Q: That must have been affirming! Then what?

A: I heard about the filmmaking class you were giving in Thimphu and I decided to sign up for it. It was a really great experience, so I worked up the courage to ask if you would come and watch my film. I was hoping to get some professional feedback to see how I could do it better next time. So I was pretty surprised by your response when you said...

“Jamyang, there is a really good film somewhere in here and I would like to help you bring it out.”

Yes, exactly! I thought you were just being polite. I never imagined the journey I was about to embark on. *Gyalsey* was my baby. I was really attached to it so it was a

challenge for me to trust your point of view. But little by little as we began to re-edit, I began to see what you saw in the film. I was pretty discouraged at that point so the faith and passion you had for my film reignited my own passion. It was really exciting for me and it gave me a lot of confidence that I had made a good film.

Q: Then you got an offer to act in a film.

A: Yes, while we were re-editing the *Gyalsey*, I got a call from Karma Deki who asked if I would like to play a role in her film *Kushuthara - a pattern of love*. She had engaged a Hollywood actor Em Cooper and wanted me to play



▲ Jamyang in Kushuthara



▲ Aine and Jamyang

a supporting role. A few weeks later I was off in Bumthang shooting, I had a lot of fun playing the role. I really enjoyed only having to act and not worry about the rest of the process. It was a really good experience.

Q: Then you came back to Thimphu and got back to work on *Gyalsey*.

A: Yes, it felt good to get back to work on it. I began to see it unfolding it was really exciting. Then I got a call from Dechen Roder, a Bhutanese film director that I really admire. She asked me if I would play the leading role in her first feature film, *Honey giver among the dogs*. I read the script and I was excited and scared at the same time. The character was different from me. In *Gyalsey* and *Kushuthara*, I basically played myself, aspects of my personality that were comfortable for me. Penjor was different, he is intense and

brooding. But I was up for it and it was a really great experience.

Q: So now, three years later, the re-edit of *Gyalsey Legacy of a Prince* is finished and you are about to premiere it in Thimphu. How do you feel about the film now?

A: I am really humbled by this whole process. I couldn't believe that top Hollywood professionals would take their time to help make my film

better for "no reason". It was hard to get my mind around this. People *donated* their time but more importantly their *passion* to my film and it really gave me confidence but also a sense of responsibility that this process is so much bigger than just me. That filmmaking is this incredible interconnected web of people who share a passion for stories and for bringing those stories to life and sharing these stories. It is an honour and a blessing to play my small part. I look forward to sharing it with the Bhutanese audience and hopefully one day an international audience, but I guess this time I am not as attached to the outcome. I know I did my best and I know I have a lot to learn. I just hope I keep getting opportunities to practice and get better.

Q: So, do you think you can imagine yourself as a filmmaker now?

A: (deep thought) I'm intimidated but... I'm in. ■



▲ Aine Carey with the crew