



Buddhism, Bhutan and Me

Preserving Bhutan's heritage, embracing Bhutan's opportunities (Bhutan)
27 minutes, Airing on public television in early 2021



Rinzin Jurmey chose to join a monastery and dedicate his life to Buddhism at the age of 11, loving its rituals and traditions. Now 18, he moves harmoniously between mountain village and city, embracing tradition and pop culture, religion and hip-hop, prayer and video games.

Tradition and progress ebb and flow in Bhutan, a small landlocked country in the Himalayas between India and China with a population (748,931) similar to Seattle and Denver. Bhutan is rich in biodiversity, with more than 360 varieties of orchids, 650 species of birds and the endangered snow leopard and red panda. Bhutan is 60 percent preserved forest and the country's largest export is hydroelectricity.

Isolated by geography, Bhutan had also opted to close itself off from the world culturally. Tourism was banned until 1974, and television and the internet were banned until 1999. Run historically as a kingdom with a monarch, Bhutan implemented a democracy at the edict of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck and held its first elections in 2008. Buddhism was integrated into the country in the seventh century and remains woven throughout its culture.

Uniquely, Bhutan does not measure the country's value in Western economic terms but in happiness: Gross National Happiness. Paradoxically, even with the serenity of Buddhism, a beautiful and largely unspoiled countryside, and the deliberate choices and implementations of democracy and land and energy conservation mandated in its constitution, the country self-ranks 95 in the world for happiness.

Bhutan's population is young, with 60 percent under 30, and eager to see what the world looks like on social media, to learn about Western dress and activities like break dancing, video games and pop culture. As tradition grounds the Bhutanese, the siren of social media pulls them forward. The country debates how to maintain tradition and embrace modernity.

Rinzin illustrates Bhutan's duality, as we move with him between a mountain village, love of prayer and ritual, and urban life, break dance and video games.

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To be broadcast on public television in early 2021 and distributed by Discovery Education, PBS LearningMedia and PenPal Schools, ***Buddhism, Bhutan and Me*** will be shared with kids and teachers with a standards-aligned School Guide and a Take Action guide to engage kids in conversations and actions around single-perspective narratives and the effects of media on culture.

***Buddhism, Bhutan and Me* key scenes:**

- Rinzin studying at the Buddhist monastery, Lhodrak Kharchu Dratshang.
- Siok Sian Pek-Dorji, Executive Director of the Bhutan Center for Media and Democracy, shares insights into Bhutan's cultural heritage and challenges.
- Rinzin returns to his home in Sakteng, a remote village in eastern Bhutan, for the first time since he entered the monastery.
- Rinzin visits Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, and meets youth who embrace a world they see on Facebook and YouTube, social media that introduces them to break dancing and skateboarding.
- Lyonpo Norbu Wangchuk, former minister of education, speaks about Bhutan's educational, cultural and spiritual values and practices.
- Rinzin shares his film with his friends at the monastery.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I am from Merak Sakteng in Bhutan. I am 18 years old and have three older siblings who work as yak herders back in my village. Raised by a single mother, we had many financial problems and it was very difficult to survive. I went to a regular school until the third grade. Deep in my heart, I knew that I wanted to become a Buddhist monk, so I quit school and joined the monastery when I was 11 years old while I was traveling in Bumthang.

The biggest challenge of my generation is the change of culture from an isolated to modernized nation. Youth face many challenges with work and career opportunities, and more distant relationships with their parents. My own purpose is to gain enlightenment during this lifetime. I was inspired by a story my mother told me about Milarepa, a great saint who lived in the tenth century. A common layman, Milarepa became one of the greatest Buddhist saints of our times—he achieved enlightenment in one lifetime. My mother is a devout Buddhist. She encouraged me to become a monk and practice Buddhism. - **Rinzin Jurmey**

MENTOR BIOS

Cat Papadimitriou is a filmmaker born and based in New York City. Her first narrative feature NIA ON VACATION won the Orpheus Award for best picture at the London Greek Film Festival in 2020 and she is currently in development on her second feature. Cat has been an integral part of the production team of past BYkids films, including MY BEAUTIFUL NICARAGUA and FIRE IN OUR HEARTS. She looks forward to many more.

Chris Rizzo is a New York based film editor, who has contributed to a variety of long form and commercial projects. Chris has worked with directors including Alex Gibney, Martin Granger and Earle Sebastian, to name a few. Chris joined Final Cut New York in 2016, and has edited campaigns for Comcast, HBO, Subaru and Amazon RED. Additionally, he was an editor on 'Stray Dolls', a narrative feature from director Sonejuhi Sinha. He lives in the Bronx with his wife and daughter.

MENTOR STATEMENTS

“It’s somewhat unusual that a teenager has a hard time talking about themselves, so helping Rinzin tell this story was uniquely challenging. That this film is set in a Buddhist country with someone like Rinzin makes it unlike any other film I have been a part of, and I’m so excited to share it with the world.” – Cat Papadimitriou

“It’s been an incredible opportunity to work with BYkids and to contribute to Rinzin’s story. Bhutan is a fascinating and beautiful country, and documenting Rinzin’s spiritual discovery has been a deeply moving and rewarding experience.” – Chris Rizzo

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS Stephanie Apt, Holly Carter and Miky Wolf

ABOUT BYKIDS. We create understanding through storytelling.

BYkids produces documentary films by kids, and partners with public television and educators to inspire conversations around global issues of human dignity and social justice. Films BYkids share the stories of kids who confront immigration, bullying, juvenile justice, climate change and child marriage. We reach kids in classrooms with teaching materials that promote empathy and understanding and make what could be foreign issues personal, relevant and actionable. Join us at BYkids.org to see and support stories that build a global citizenry.

“By giving kids from diverse backgrounds around the world tools, skills and guidance to make documentary films, this great organization provides an outlet for sharing personal stories, which in turn brings us closer together as an international community rooted in compassion and understanding.”

— Former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg

NOTE:

For the Toolkit

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-changing-face-of-bhutan-21194661/>