

More Than One Life

a feature-length documentary proposal

*“My wish is to benefit people in whatever way possible. That is what I do.
I have no idea of my work ever finishing. It is an ongoing situation.....
There is no end.”*

2nd Akong Tulku Rinpoche



Hart Knowe
Trust

More Than One Life
in association with



awareness media production

*“When the right time comes...I will try to find him...
I will try my best...to recognise his next reincarnation.”*

These are the words spoken by His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the closing remarks of the biographical film *Akong: A Remarkable Life*. This feature-length documentary told the story of Chöje Akong Tulku Rinpoche, whose extraordinary existence was devoted to the aspiration to help others and embody a mission of unconditional loving-kindness and compassion-in-action. It was a life that came to a sudden and brutal end.

Akong Rinpoche's remarkable contribution lives on through his legacy: in the spiritual, humanitarian and therapeutic projects he established which continue to thrive, and in the hearts and minds of those who met, and were inspired, by him. It also lives on in film. *Akong: A Remarkable Life* has been publicly exhibited in over two dozen countries around the world, to audiences numbering thousands, winning multiple film festival awards and, in the process, raising tens of thousands of pounds for Akong-instigated charity projects.

However, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition also understands there to be another profound sense in which Akong Rinpoche will live on. In life he was a *tulku*, recognised from an early age as the rebirth of a previous extraordinary being, the prior abbot of Dolma Lhakang monastery in Tibet. In turn, whilst Akong Rinpoche's body perished at death, it is understood that a deep continuum of consciousness – the ‘momentum’ of mind, driven by an aspiration to benefit beings – will be reborn to resume a mission of ceaseless compassion.

More Than One Life is the working title of a new feature-length documentary film, a follow up to *Akong: A Remarkable Life*. With an openness to this traditional understanding, the new film will explore Akong Rinpoche's continuing story and the preparations for his return, whilst also investigating the subject of rebirth more broadly. In doing so, a number of respected representatives from scientific, spiritual and religious spheres will be interviewed, as well as people intimately connected with Akong Rinpoche and trusted by him personally.

The human story will centre on the new *tulku* and the interim ‘bardo’ period prior to their public recognition. The film will illustrate ways that Akong Rinpoche's remarkable legacy has endured in his absence, while expectations for his return grow. In parallel, *More Than One Life* will embark upon a wide-ranging investigation into the topic of rebirth itself. It will do so from various angles, without being partisan or polemical, and represent a broad spectrum of views, including those of ‘secular’ Buddhists who avoid literal interpretations of rebirth.

It is anticipated that this story will sound strange, if not jarring, to some. Non-Buddhists and even Buddhists, particularly in the West, can struggle to relate to teachings on rebirth, and integrate the idea into prevailing materialist assumptions. However, *More Than One Life* will directly question the notion that consciousness is ‘nothing but’ brain chemistry. It will document some of the extensive scientific research regarding remembrance of past lives, where startling correlations between children's memories and the details of real-life deceased individuals are observed without satisfactory explanation, as well as other instances of past life memories and near-death experiences.

More Than One Life will examine the Buddhist tradition itself, whose rigorous, analytical approach parallels the methods of empirical science, without adopting its materialist preconceptions. It will consider the claim that meditation provides a platform for directly apprehending rebirth and it will address the phenomenon of Tibetan *tukdam* practice, occurring at the very moment of a realised practitioner's death, with remarkable consequences. Buddhism's overall

view of rebirth will also be considered: who or what 'gets' reborn, the 'wheel of life' in which the process operates and unfolds, the place of karmic cause-and-effect in driving it forward, and the role of the compassionate *bodhisattva* whose ultimate goal is the complete liberation from suffering and awakening of all sentient beings.

The various approaches to rebirth within different Buddhist traditions will be addressed as well as its place among the world's other religions and philosophies. This includes in the West: its widespread acceptance by many of the Greek fathers of Western Philosophy, during the early centuries of Christian history and by numerous celebrated Western thinkers since. In the modern day, whilst ubiquitous in the East, rebirth is also orthodox within Hasidic Judaism, in many Shamanic and Celtic traditions, and is popularly held among the general public. Experts will be quizzed on these subjects, adding depth and sophistication to the story. The benefits of a vast rebirth view versus a limited 'one life' outlook will be pondered, how this offers inspiration for personal transformation and growth, and perspective to people seeking purpose in life and death.

Against this backdrop, Akong Rinpoche's own Tibetan Buddhist tradition will remain the film's foremost focus. Rebirth underpins Tibetan Buddhist ideas of 'precious human life' and the way all sentient beings are literally considered 'mothers', strengthening its principal teachings on loving-kindness and compassion. *More Than One Life* will investigate the unique way the Tibetan tradition recognises specific individuals as intentional incarnations of previous practitioners. It will question the procedures for recognising such *tulkus*, their upbringing and education within a *labrang* and the spiritual qualities they display and the activities they undertake in adulthood. The history and role of the *tulku* system will be considered, its benefits and potential problems, and what future it has in modern times, within and outside of Tibet.

This general discussion will support the film's human focus on one particular *tulku*, that of Akong Rinpoche, these two threads juxtaposing and joining into a rich narrative. But this project is uniquely open-ended. The *tulku* may not be publicly identified for years and any young child should be protected from undue personal and political interference. So, their story will be charted in whatever ways are appropriate: direct footage if possible, otherwise through reports from reliable sources. Some of Akong Rinpoche's students will be interviewed about anticipating his rebirth and perhaps their reactions to meeting the new *tulku*. We hope to feature the child's enthronement ceremony and learn about plans for an education that will prepare the next Akong Rinpoche to continue the unending mission to help others.

As befits any Akong-inspired project, *More Than One Life* will be collaborative in spirit and voluntary contributions and participations are welcomed. Significant funds will be required to bring it to completion. It is an exciting, open adventure and who knows what serendipities may transpire along the way? Eventual proceeds will be donated to appropriate charitable projects: both the *labrang* which will support the education and welfare of the new *tulku* and select humanitarian projects that best exemplify the principle of compassion-in-action which Akong Rinpoche's last life so remarkably represented.

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