

Did I know you in a past life?

Gesar Mukpo is a tulku, the reincarnation of a Tibetan teacher. He is also the son of an English mother and Chögyam Trungpa, who brought Buddhism to the west by means of cigars, heavy drinking and affairs with students. By John-Paul Flintoff

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In 1900, a child was born in Tibet. He would become a great Buddhist master. In 1960, he died while imprisoned by the Chinese government. And then? "In 1973, he was reborn in America ... as me," says Gesar Mukpo. The tradition of reincarnation arose in 16th-century Tibet. When an enlightened teacher died, a young child would be recognised as their reincarnation, and assume leadership of the monastery and surrounding villages.

The children were called tulkus. Some became great teachers, like the present Dalai Lama, and for hundreds of years the tradition remained unchanged. But in the 1970s, as Tibetans fled from Chinese occupation, tulkus began to be discovered in the west. Gesar was one of them, recognised at the age of three by a Tibetan master visiting California in 1976. "He informed my family that I should be enthroned immediately." And so he was.

Gesar's father, Chögyam Trungpa, was himself a famous Buddhist teacher and author. But there was to be no monastery for Gesar, who was 13 when his father died, 25 years ago.

Now Gesar has made a film, *Tulku*, examining the bewildering plight of the western tulku. It is one of the main features at the International Buddhist Film Festival in London (11-15 April), - along with another film, *Crazy Wisdom*, about his extraordinary father.

Chögyam was born in Tibet and recognised as a tulku at 13 months old. As a young man, he fled the brutal Chinese occupation of Tibet, on a hazardous journey to India that cost many of his companions their lives. Soon after, he came to the UK, won a scholarship to study at Oxford, and eloped with a 16-year-old barrister's daughter, Diana Pybus. Her mother, on learning that Diana had married a Tibetan guru nearly twice her age, fainted. The story ended up on the front pages of national newspapers, including the *Sunday Mirror* under the headline "Diana, 16, runs away to marry a monk".

Chögyam made it his life's mission to bring Buddhism to the west. He moved to Scotland and people came in droves to learn from him. And in 1970 the show moved to America, where he immersed himself in American culture. It was here that he fully elaborated his hallmark "crazy wisdom".

He wore western clothes ("When you talk to people with robes on, they don't listen to you, they just look at the robes"). He smoked cigars, drank heavily, and had relationships with his students. His teachings were unpredictable. Once, he made his hippy followers cut their hair and wear suits and ties. Later, he founded a non-violent military force, and made them

drill for hours in uniform. His talks were often very funny. In 1974, he opened the first western Buddhist university, Naropa Institute in Colorado. Visitors included religious figures from other traditions, and celebrated writers and performers such as Allen Ginsberg, William S Burroughs and Joni Mitchell. "It was a really odd, crazy life," says Gesar.

Chögyam already had two sons when Gesar was born in 1973, one of them by another mother. Diana subsequently had two more sons, by another man, and adopted a daughter. (There is a 25-year age difference between Gesar's eldest and youngest brothers.)

Many people have families as interesting as this. Some also have charismatic fathers. But it is rare to be told, aged three, that you are the reincarnation of your own father's dead teacher. But for Gesar this provided a powerful connection to a father who was much in demand. "My father respected me," he says fondly, "and would listen to what I had to say. He treated me like a reincarnated lama - like the king of another country."

As a child, it seemed normal to be a tulku. Indeed, Chögyam's students would sometimes ask Gesar for advice. But increasingly, as he got older, it troubled him. "On the superficial level you think, is this person's soul real or not? But the purpose is to continue the teachings of specific teachers. When a tulku is recognised, you make this a part of his life and it's a self-fulfilling prophecy."

At least, that's how it worked for the Dalai Lama, the son of a poor farmer. But Gesar was born in the west, far from anybody other than his father who could pass on the teachings. And Chögyam was away a lot. The whole family moved around, and Gesar went to 17 schools in several countries. (In the early 80s, he attended a school in Sussex. "You had to wear a blazer, shorts, socks and cap. I liked it, but it was weird, I was one of the only foreigners - just me and an African kid.") He now lives in Canada.

Did his father, who had long ago renounced his monastic vows, provide a useful model? Or was the wisdom too crazy?

Gesar says he was aware that his father had lovers. "It would need six months in therapy to tell you how I felt in regard to that. But at the time I thought it was normal that my dad had, like, seven wives."

The Buddhist teacher and author Pema Chodron, herself a student of Chögyam, says he didn't hide anything. Indeed, he told Diana shortly after they married: "It's not that I don't love you. I'm never going to be a conventional husband but you can completely rely on me." She was distraught, but came to accept it. He even brought round her mother. "He worked hard to build a relationship," Gesar recalls. "He wrote her a lot of letters, and they became close." Eventually Diana's mother moved to live near them.

People tried to get Chögyam to stop drinking. They took petitions, wrote letters and tried watering down his wine. But the heavy drinking contributed to his premature death, aged 47. Thousands of people attended the open-air cremation, in Canada, with the body in plain sight. "It was very sad, very intense," says Gesar. "There are amazing, powerful, magnetic people who have a profound impact: how do you deal with not having them around?"

Aged 15, he went to Nepal to study Tibetan. He was welcomed at the monastery, but after a year felt homesick and decided he didn't want to stay there for the rest of his life. "I've often

wondered if I made the right decision."

For a while after that, he rejected Buddhism. "I didn't want to be a part of it any more," he says. But being a tulku is not easily forgotten, because it's as much about other people's expectations as your own.

Gesar's brother, Ashoka, is also a western Tulku. (In Tibet it was not unusual for more than one Tulku to be born into the same family.) When Ashoka was enthroned, in Tibet, the younger brother of the previous incarnation approached him - a very old man, with tears streaming down his face.

Ashoka had no idea what to say. He recalls the awkwardness in Gesar's film: "I don't know. I don't know ... what the fuck. Oh, God."

Ashoka concluded that he was not cut out to be a teacher. "But I still think I can be of benefit to somebody, and that's what being a Buddhist is about." (He works at Human Rights Watch.)

Gesar, too, calls himself a Buddhist, these days, and remains close to the teacher he met in Nepal. (Dzongsar Hyentse Rinpoche teases him: "We are waiting for him [Gesar] to do what he has to do".) And now Gesar has a child of his own - a daughter, aged seven - but he wants her to find out later about her family's special place in Tibetan Buddhism.

"Whether I'm a tulku or not is insignificant," he concludes. "I have a tremendous connection with my father, and his heritage. They will always be a part of my life whatever I do. I will never know for sure what my father had in mind for me. But there is no certain path for any of us, other than the path of self-discovery."

Tulku and Crazy Wisdom are showing at the Apollo Piccadilly Circus, London, at 3pm and 6.30pm respectively

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