



**GUNA**  
FOUNDATION

Guna Foundation  
*presents*

# **LIGHT OF THE VALLEY**

## **THE 15<sup>TH</sup> RENOVATION OF SWAYAMBHU**

Country of Origin: United States

Year of Production: 2011

Running time: 31 Minutes

*This is exactly the kind of work that the art history world must create in order to show that the tradition and its artwork are very much alive. The juxtaposition of exact scholarship and engagement with traditional artists and art traditions is a model for future explorations of this type. So let's just say that if I weren't inspired already, I would be now.*

- Jeff Durham, PhD, Assistant Curator of Himalayan Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

### **Long Synopsis**

*Light of the Valley: the 15<sup>th</sup> Renovation of Swayambhu* documents the inspiring story of the 15th renovation of the Swayambhu Stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal, which is recognized as one of the most important Stupas in the Buddhist world. Renowned for its great antiquity, blessings and power, this Stupa has been worshipped continuously through the centuries by the people of Nepal and Tibet. In 2008, Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche sent his daughter, Tsering Gellek to Nepal to direct the renovation, a project that is traditionally undertaken once in a century. With the help of 70 skilled artisans, in less than two years the project successfully completed.

*Light of the Valley: the 15<sup>th</sup> Renovation of Swayambhu* reawakens an appreciation for sacred sites across the world. Since time immemorial, sacred sites have served as spiritual beacons to humanity, reminding us of our true purpose and potential in life. It is vitally important to maintain and protect sacred sites, for in preserving them, the precious knowledge of our human heritage may be preserved for generations to come.

### **Short Synopsis**

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### **Film Festival Selections**

Ladakh Film Festival 2012  
Jaipur International Film Festival 2013

### **Screenings**

August 2011, The David Brower Center, Berkeley, CA (World Premiere)  
October 2011, Rubin Museum of Art, New York, NY  
October 2011, De Uitkijk, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
November 2011, Grouse Mountain Lodge, Whitefish, Montana  
March 2012, Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado  
March 2012, Portland's First United Methodist Church, Portland, Oregon  
March 2012, Oshman Family Jewish Community Center, Palo Alto  
March 2012, Crytal Theatre, Missoula, Montana  
April 2012, Crow Collection of Asian Art, Dallas, Texas  
June 2012, Reitberg Museum, Switzerland  
June 2012, Filmhaus, Germany  
July 2012, San Francisco Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, CA

### **Television Broadcast**

PBS stations nationwide, 2014

### **About the Organization**

Guna Foundation was created in 2009 to share the accomplishments of the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center and to ensure that its valuable work to save the Tibetan culture is able to continue long into the future. The Guna Foundation archives historical footage, creates media, photo exhibitions, and produces documentary films.

### **Contact Information**

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## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

For millennia, the Swayambhunath Stupa, one of the most ancient and holy monuments in the Buddhist world has been restored roughly once in a century. My father, Tarthang Tulku, a Tibetan lama based in America, sponsored the recent restoration of Swayambhunath, and in 2008, sent his daughter (my sister), Tsering Gellek to Kathmandu, Nepal to lead this massive restoration. Completed in 2010, it has been hailed as a model of restoration of a large-scale monument of world heritage and revival of ancient architectural and artistic traditions.

From a conservation standpoint alone, I knew this project was worthy of a documentary film. But more than that, I knew that the great struggles my sister faced and overcame as a young foreign woman in a traditional culture also presented a compelling and inspiring personal story. Together, these two stories provided the opportunity to pay homage to the beauty, power and majesty of what I envisaged as the real central character of the film, the Swayambhu Stupa.

The legend of the Swayambhunath Stupa, which is believed to encase a miraculous, self-arisen lotus of five colored lights, is closely associated with the mythological origins of the Kathmandu Valley. For centuries, the Stupa has been revered and cared for by not only the Newari Buddhists of Nepal, but by Tibetans who have come as pilgrims and in recent years, as refugee settlers. Through the ages, numerous Tibetan lamas have acted as patrons of the restoration of the Stupa and so, it is in that rich history the recent restoration stands.

Still, as a foreigner and a young woman, embarking on the largest re-gilding project in modern times, Tsering encountered strong opposition from the various ethnic groups of the Swayambhu community. Tsering responded to suspicions of corruption and concerns about her own as well as her team's competence by introducing a painstaking documentation process that resulted in an impressive body of over 30,000 documented articles of restoration. The transparency of this verification process helped earn the trust of the community and embrace the precious opportunity before them to support this historic moment of the restoration of their beloved Stupa.

Performing ancient, esoteric ritual ceremonies, the officiating Newari priests of Swayambhunath along with Tibetan lamas presided over the extensive process of de-consecration and re-consecration of the Stupa. Once the de-consecration, or temporary extraction of the sacred essence of the Stupa had been completed, the project could begin in earnest. Assembling a team of over seventy of the most skilled artisans of the Kathmandu valley, Tsering began to direct the daunting process of removal, repair and re-gilding of all the deteriorated parts of the giant Stupa. Highly work intensive processes of metal work such as repousse were used to re-create the artwork, along with the rare and highly dangerous process of mercury gilding (fire gilding) to re-gild all the deteriorated gold elements.

Regrettably, we did not set out to create a film from the outset, but we did have archival footage as Tsering had hired a local film crew to document the entire restoration process. A few months after the restoration had been completed, we were able to send a talented cinematographer, Allen Moore to film the Stupa and interviews of Tsering's team. The key interviews of Tsering and her colleague, Padma Maitland were filmed in Berkeley, along with that of the world's leading scholar on Swayambhu, Professor Alex von Rospatt Professor Buddhist and South Asian Studies, UC Berkeley.



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The content of the interviews served to narrate the story of this epic restoration from a personal standpoint as well as provide insights into the artistic achievements of this formidable act of conservation. *Light of the Valley* seeks to inspire viewers to recognize the extraordinary value and power of the great sacred monuments around the world and the possibility of spiritual renewal that is availed by their restoration.

--Pema Gellek



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## **KEY BIOS**

### **Pema Gellek, Director**

Pema Gellek is the Co-Director of the Guna Foundation, a faculty member at the Tibetan Nyingma Institute, and Co-Director of the Prajna Light Foundation. She holds an MA in International Politics and a BA in Asian Studies, and has studied with Buddhist masters in Nepal. This is her first film.

### **Barry Schieber, Producer**

Barry Schieber was born in St. Louis, Missouri and received his bachelors and masters in business from the University of California, Berkeley. He began his professional life as an investment banker before becoming a student of Tarthang Tulku at the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center in the early seventies. Since, he has served a Kum Nye (Tibetan relaxation yoga) Instructor and Dean of the Nyingma Institute, from 1988-1993. Barry also founded Silent Moon Books, a publishing company, which publishes his stories about Moritz, his therapy dog, and the lives Moritz has touched. Barry became the Co-Director of the Guna Foundation with the interest of documenting the successes of the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center, and his teacher, Tarthang Tulku. *Light of the Valley: the 15<sup>th</sup> Renovation of Swayambhu* is his first film endeavor.

### **Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche, Advisor**

Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche is the founder and Head Lama of the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center in California. Rinpoche was born in 1935 in eastern Tibet, where he studied with many of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist masters of the twentieth century. After leaving Tibet, Rinpoche taught from 1962 to 1968 at Sanskrit University in Varanasi, India, where he also established one of the first printing presses to print sacred Tibetan texts. The first lama of the Nyingma lineage to establish residence in the United States, Rinpoche founded the Tibetan Nyingma Institute in Berkeley, where he actualized a vision of preserving the ancient teaching of the Buddha and transmitting them to the modern world. In 2009, he founded the Guna Foundation to share these accomplishments and the wisdom tradition of Tibet with the world.



**CREDITS**

Director	Pema Gellek
Producer	Barry Schieber
Advisor	Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche
Associate Producer	FJ Leto
Creative Consultant	Hugh Joswick
Unit Production Manager	Brian T. Baker
Kathmandu Cinematographer	Allen Moore
USA Cinematographer	Zach Behar
Still Photographer	Don Nelson
Editor	Zach Behar
Assistant Editor	Brian T. Baker
Graphics Designer	Pauline Yu
Audio Engineer	Tim Geurkink
Sound Recordists	Tim Geurkink
	Pauline Yu
	Pema Sherpa
Composer	Albert Behar
Newari Translator	Mahesh Geongal
Featuring (in order of appearance)	Tsering Gellek
	Alex von Rospatt
	Hubert Decler
	Padma Maitland
	Bharat Suwal
	Mukunda Bista
	Manish Shakya



## **REVIEWS**

### ***Berkeley group restores 2,000-year old place of worship***

Publication: Berkeleyside

Author: Frances Dinkelspiel

Date of Publication: August 24, 2011

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/LOTVBerkeleyside>

Tsering Gellek was born and raised in Berkeley, but her background is somewhat unusual.

She is the daughter of Tarthang Tulka, a Tibetan lama who fled his country after the Chinese invasion in 1959 and moved to the United States ten years later to teach Buddhism and work for the preservation of Tibetan culture. He now commands a mandala of enterprises, including a block of buildings in downtown Berkeley that includes the Mangalam Research Center for Buddhist Languages, The Tibetan Aid Project, The Guna Foundation, which makes films, and Dharma College, among others.

Gellek, although raised in a Buddhist community, had “a very normal American childhood,” she told the ECS Nepal magazine. She earned a degree in International Relations and spent two years in Africa.

But Gellek, now 37, eventually returned to Berkeley and started to work with the Tibetan Nyingma Mediation Center, one of the many organizations under Tarthang Tulka’s umbrella. And in 2008, Gellek undertook a daunting task: overseeing the restoration of the Swayambhu stupa, a 2,000-year old Buddhist place of worship in Kathmandu, Nepal. Gellek, drawing on the resources of her father’s supporters, brought in 70 trained artisans to renovate this UNESCO World Heritage site, considered one of the most ancient and sacred monuments in the Buddhist World. It has been restored 15 times since its construction, roughly once every 100 years.

To re-gild the crown of the stupa, artisans used more than 40 pounds of gold, making it one of the largest restoration of gold works in the world, according to Luis Barrera, a volunteer with the Guna Foundation. The renovation was finished in 2010 and cost more than \$1 million.

Now The Guna Foundation, another of Tarthang Tulka’s organizations, has made a film of the laborious undertaking and Gellek’s role in the process. Called *Light of the Valley*, the 30-minute documentary will have its premiere Thursday August 25<sup>th</sup> at 7 pm at the David Brower Center. Gellek, along with her sister, Pema Gellek, the film’s director, and producer, Barry Scheiber, will be at the screening.

The Guna Foundation is also releasing a book by Tsering Gellek by the same name.



***Self-created, with human help***

Publication: The Kathmandu Post

Date of Publication: May 28, 2010

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/LOTVKathmanduPost>

Etymologically, two Sanskrit words collate to form Swayambhu: Swyam meaning 'self', and Bhu meaning 'emerged'. Popular belief holds that the Swayambhu stupa emerged 2,500 years ago without any human effort. But the stupa, which provided a sense of peace to hundreds of people over the years, needed human effort to restore itself to its pristine state.

Last renovated 100 years ago, the world heritage site badly awaited one, with cracks beginning to appear and paint beginning to peel off. Then, in 2008, the Nyingma Meditation Centre based in California sponsored a conservation and renovation project in cooperation with the Department of Archaeology and the Federation of Swayambhu Management and Conservation. Finally, this month, on Thursday (which was also the auspicious day of Buddha Purnima), the renovated stupa was unveiled to the public.

"Meditation doesn't just mean sitting cross-legged in a cave. We actively work and our work is meditation," says 36-year-old Californian Buddhist Tsering Gellek, who is the pivot behind this seemingly-insurmountable task. Gellek, also the director of the project, says the political turmoil and chaotic traffic of Kathmandu did not affect the work. "What we are doing at Swayambhu is not a new thing but just a continuation," Gellek says with a wide grin on her face, "It's not just about donating money. Instead, it's a homage that pilgrims paid to the stupa."

Gellek was sent to Nepal on a mission which her father could not accomplish. "My father, Tarthang Tulku Rimpoche, tried to renovate the Boudhhanath stupa but he couldn't make an agreement with the locals." Instead, she focused on the Swayambhu, and after negotiating with government agencies and local bodies, she finally succeeded.

But the renovation is not just for religious purposes; it also carries an archaeological and historical purpose, for the Swayambhu is one of the few stupas in the world that has constantly been worshipped for the last two millennia. Gellek talks of how archaeologists routinely discover buried stupas in different parts of the world, and her belief is that if the Swayambhu weren't accorded this kind of protection, it would too be reduced to the annals of history.

This current renovation of the stupa is the 15th major repair in the last 1,500 years. According to Gellek, more than 70 artists from around the country worked to return Swayambhu to its original state, using traditional Nepali techniques to recreate the beauty. "It was a comprehensive renovation where each detail—whether in wood, stone, copper, or gold—was restored to its original condition and beauty", says chief artisan Sajan Shakya. Shakya says the re-gilding of the crown was one of the largest restorations of gold works in the world. "The gold was mixed with mercury and applied to the sheets, which were then heated to burn off the mercury, leaving just a layer of gold." According to him, at least 20 kg of gold was used in the renovation. Gellek refused to divulge the costs involved, because "that would undermine the work put in by the hundreds of volunteers in the project."

Gellek believes the renovation is a spiritual as well as an artistic and cultural undertaking. She says the





craftsmen and artists exhibited an unusual aptitude to restore the stupa to its original beauty. “I personally achieved a sense of accomplishment when the project finished, and that was only possible because of the artisans.”

The finished stupa might not reveal the amount of work and craftsmanship that has gone into the renovation, but Gellek will make sure everyone who visits the stupa will get to see the work in progress. Thus, she plans to exhibit some of the 50,000 photos clicked during the renovation, telling people how difficult a job it actually was, and why it’s important to save other important cultural treasures from a similar fate.

Gellek believes culture is an important part of society, and it is only through culture that different people know each other. Her organization is ready to help Nepali artists as well, but there aren’t any more renovation projects in the pipeline for now.

Gellek seems to have imbibed the philosophies that her father imparted to her; in essence, a worldview that treated everyone equally. “The biggest project is to understand one’s own mind,” she says, even while her eyes wander off to the flowers in the Garden of Dreams, where we are meeting. Then on a more philosophical note, she adds, “This garden is renovated as well. But there are numerous buds here which should get the opportunity to bloom. Nepal is a garden of dreams like this one, and one day it should bloom to spread beauty all over the world.”

Hopefully, those who visit the new Swayambhu Stupa will imbibe that message as well.



## **PRODUCTION NOTES**

For centuries pilgrims and worshippers have made substantial sacrifices to journey to, and make offerings before, the Swayambhunath Stupa, one of the most ancient and sacred monuments in the entire Buddhist world. For over a thousand years, restorations of the great Stupa have been performed about every hundred years.

In 2008, Tarthang Tulku, a Tibetan lama living in the United States, offered to sponsor a needed full-scale renovation and sent his daughter, Tsering Gellek, to direct the renovation of this holy site.

In June 2010, after a pilgrimage in Tibet, I met Tsering in Kathmandu and invited her to dinner. She and her team of seventy artisans had just completed the two-year renovation of Swayambhunath. The stories Tsering recounted of her experiences in leading this renovation were stirring, thought provoking and deeply affecting.

My visit to the newly renovated Stupa left me convinced of how important it is to protect and restore sacred monuments. Though modern societies do not necessarily respect the wisdom, harmony and cosmological connection found in these sacred sites, I sensed how advanced traditional cultures are in cherishing the profound value of such places for the human spirit. I left Nepal knowing that I had encountered an exceptional story worth telling. It would be a challenge to express the rich dimensions and implications of the work and accomplishment. Our volunteer staff at Guna Foundation is small and this would be our first documentary film.

Upon returning to the U.S., we began researching the history of Swayambunath and the previous renovation efforts. We sought advice from professionals in the film world and as our knowledge grew, we began to focus on a time line to create the film.

In February 2011, we returned to Kathmandu with a talented cinematographer, Alan Moore, to film the Stupa and its environs and conduct interviews with the Nepalese artisans and a Western expert on Swayambhu. Capturing the majestic beauty of the newly renovated Stupa was paramount, but we also wanted to pay tribute to the ineffable sacred power of the Stupa expressed in the profound acts of devotion by its devotees. We filmed continuously for a week and departed home still unsure if we had captured the scope of the renovation.

Reviewing the footage we decided we were ready to set our completion date. We embarked on a demanding short schedule, one that required concentration, teamwork, dedication and some good fortune. The latter arrived quickly as we learned that Tsering was completing her book, *Light of the Valley*, a chronicle of the renovation process that included an impressive selection of scholarly essays, diagrams and photos. The book and the interviews with Tsering in Berkeley provided our storyline and the factual content needed to create both a historically accurate and inspiring film. Post-production involved intensive editing of the a-roll as well as of the extensive b-roll footage of the various stages of the renovation shot by a local television crew. As we edited intensively, we found a composer and music mixer who helped express the poignant journey of the Stupa as it was restored to its full beauty and splendor.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, meeting our deadline, we had a small premiere of *Light of the Valley*.