



**GUNA**  
FOUNDATION



*Guna Foundation presents*

## **PRAYERS OF THE ANCIENT ONES**

**A feature-length documentary film**

71 Minutes

### **Contact Information**

Barry Schieber, Producer

[contact@gunafoundationorg](mailto:contact@gunafoundationorg)

510-517-5230

Guna Foundation

2018 Allston Way, Berkeley CA 94704

510-809-1543

**Guna Foundation, 2018 Allston Way, Berkeley, CA 94704**

**Contact:** 510.809.1543 | [contact@gunafoundation.org](mailto:contact@gunafoundation.org) | [www.gunafoundation.org](http://www.gunafoundation.org)



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## **Film Info**

***View the trailer at [www.gunafoundation.org](http://www.gunafoundation.org)***

**Country of Origin:** United States

**Date of Completion:** June 2013

**Production Format:** HD Video

**Exhibition Format:** Blu Ray or DVD, Color

**Aspect Ratio:** 16:9

**Sound format:** Stereo

## **Film Synopsis**

***Prayers of the Ancient Ones*** takes us on a journey to Bodh Gaya, India, the holiest site of Buddhism where the Buddha attained supreme enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Each year, over 10,000 Tibetan monks, nuns and lay pilgrims travel here from all across the Himalayan region to pray for world peace and affirm their heritage in the face of overwhelming challenge and loss.

The film chronicles the story of the World Peace Ceremony founded by Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche in 1989, an annual event that has united the Tibetan Nyingma community, the most ancient of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Here at the ceremony, Tarthang Tulku has led one of the world's largest efforts to preserve the Tibetan culture through his monumental offerings of Tibetan sacred texts and art. And through their unceasing prayers for peace at the very source of their spiritual tradition, the Tibetans have helped revitalize a long dormant place of worship and reinvigorated their culture in the most critical time of their history.

This is the story of a sacred place, an exiled people and a Tibetan lama's immense efforts to restore Tibetan culture. ***Prayers of the Ancient Ones*** is a majestic testament to the beauty and power of working from one's highest aspirations for the benefit of all beings.

## **About Guna Foundation**

Guna Foundation is a non-profit, volunteer-based film studio located in Berkeley, California. Its mission is to present a window into the beauty, spirit, and knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. Guna Foundation's work supports the preservation of this wisdom tradition so that it may become the heritage of all humanity.

***Prayers of the Ancient Ones*** is Guna Foundation's second film. Guna Foundation's first film endeavor ***Light of the Valley: the 15th Renovation of Swayambhu*** was completed in 2011, screened in 6 countries and has been accepted to the Jaipur Film Festival and Ladakh Film Festival.



## **Filmmaker Bios**

### **Pema Gellek, Director**

Pema Gellek is the Co-Director of the Guna Foundation, a faculty member at Dharma College, and Director of the Prajna Light Foundation. She holds a M.A. in International Politics from American University and a B.A. in Asian Studies from Mary Baldwin College, and studied with Buddhist masters in Nepal for three years. She is the second of the three daughters of Tarthang Tulku, all of whom work for the preservation of the Buddhist culture. This is her second film.

### **Barry Schieber, Producer**

Barry Schieber received his B.A. and M.A. in Business from the University of California, Berkeley. He began his professional life as an investment analyst before becoming a student of Tarthang Tulku at the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center in the early '70s. Since, he has served as a Kum Nye (Tibetan relaxation yoga) Instructor and Dean of the Nyingma Institute, from 1988-1993. Barry also founded Silent Moon Books, which publishes his stories about Moritz, his therapy dog, and the lives Moritz has touched. In 2009, Barry became the Co-Director of the Guna Foundation. This is Barry's second 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 a network of Tibetan Buddhist organizations in Berkeley, through which he actualized a vision of preserving Tibetan Buddhist culture and transmitting Buddhism to the modern world. In 2009, he founded the Guna Foundation to document these accomplishments and share the wisdom tradition of Tibet with the world.



## **The World Peace Ceremony**

The Mahabodhi Temple, which marks the site of the Buddha's enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, India, is the holiest site of the Buddhist world. For centuries, pilgrims inspired by that sacred power have journeyed across Asia to make profound prayers and offerings beneath the Bodhi tree. And yet, this holiest site of one of the world's great religions faded into obscurity and was virtually abandoned for a period of 700 years.

Tibetans have returned to Bodh Gaya as pilgrims on a remarkable scale, starting in 1959 as refugees fleeing the sweeping destruction of their own ancient Buddhist civilization. Tibetan lama Tarthang Tulku was one of those refugee-pilgrims who came seeking blessings and solace at the site exalted in both the texts and collective imagination of Tibet.

In 1959, deeply moved by the stark and unattended state of the temple, Tarthang Tulku made a vow at the Bodhi tree to do whatever he could to revitalize the temple for the sake of all of Buddhist civilization. In 1989, he founded the World Peace Ceremony, an annual ceremony known as the Nyingma Monlam Chenmo, which is held for ten days at the Mahabodhi Temple. Over the last 24 years, it has become one of the most beloved and widely attended events by Tibetans in exile.

Seizing this opportunity to reach the entire range of Tibetan Buddhist communities in exile, Tarthang Tulku and his small community of dedicated students and volunteers at the Yeshe De Project in northern California would work tirelessly to print the vast corpus of Tibet's sacred literature and art. To date, over 3.7 million texts have been given away beneath the Bodhi tree.

Freely distributed at the ceremony beneath the Bodhi tree, this effort has become one of the world's largest on-going efforts to preserve the Tibetan culture. The impact of these preservation efforts over the last twenty-five years has already been broad and deep, but their true flowering will continue to unfold in the decades to come.

As the largest provider of educational books for the Tibetan community-in-exile, the Yeshe De Project has already played a defining role in their education: advancing the literacy of the Tibetan language, supporting a rich and comprehensive education for both monasteries and nunneries, stimulating the growth of scores of new learning institutes in exile, and ensuring the transmission of traditional Tibetan culture from master to disciple, across the generations of Tibetans in exile.



## **Director's Statement**

I knew we had an opportunity to tell a deeply inspiring and yet untold story about the Tibetan culture. It would be a great challenge to capture the abstract theme of the saving of a wisdom tradition and the re-awakening of one of the most sacred sites on the planet. How would I be able to convey what lay at the heart of the film - grand narratives of profound cultural loss and renewal reaching their powerful confluence here at the temple?

Above all, I wanted to provide at a minimum, a faithful chronicle of my father's work to preserve the Tibetan culture and support the World Peace Ceremony. I decided to take a broad, "macro" approach to telling this complex story and treat my father's text preservation work, Bodh Gaya and the endangered Tibetan Buddhist culture as the central actors.

I was very fortunate to be able to work with talented cinematographer Allen Moore, who has worked extensively with documentarian Ken Burns, and meet with him in Berkeley to outline the vision for filming the World Peace Ceremony on the ground. He traveled twice to Bodh Gaya to film the ceremony and book distribution, the second time with professional jib operators hired from New Delhi. These jib shots, I believe, show the majesty of the temple in a way that has never before been presented to the world, and I feel, if anything, this is one of the unique cinematic achievements of our film.

I emphasized a theme of "streams" to guide the shooting - streams of pilgrims, offerings, devotional acts - and wanted to give the viewer a sense of the incredibly vital faith of the Tibetan people. Equally, I wanted to highlight a different picture of contemporary Tibetan culture, shifting away from typical presentations of its being a tragic victim or the inheritors of an inscrutable, arcane ritualistic tradition. I wanted to show a fresh perspective of the Tibetan culture, alive and flourishing, animated by the immense beauty, generosity and abundance of spirit that is so evident at the ceremony.

Here, beneath the Bodhi tree, these vast offerings not only have helped save the Tibetan culture in the most critical time of its history, but also revived the splendor and majesty of Bodh Gaya as a place of dynamic worship. The force of my father's aspirations stimulated the vast prayers needed to reawaken the power of the temple, releasing its blessings and activating the renewal of the Tibetan people at the very source of their spiritual tradition. All of this was possible due to the great aspirations of one individual, and his ability to inspire a small group of dedicated individuals in the West to undertake an epic preservation of an ancient wisdom tradition struggling to survive, halfway around the world.

The original score by Dusty Michaels greatly helped to enhance the film's emotional undercurrents, highlighting the themes of loss, renewal and awakening that lie at its heart. We were also fortunate to be granted the rights to use songs from some highly acclaimed musicians, including the singer, Ani Choying Drolma and flutist, Suzanne Teng.

All things considered, if the viewer can leave convinced that this immense and on-going preservation effort of Tibet's ancient wisdom tradition is worthwhile, and even better, feels inspired to join, then I feel the film's purpose would have been accomplished.

- Pema Gellek





### **Production Notes**

In February of 2010 and 2011, our crew landed in India to capture stunning new footage of the World Peace Ceremony to add to this collection. Among its members was Allen Moore, a highly respected cinematographer whose extensive experience with Ken Burns speaks to the quality and level of his work. On the 2011 trip, Guna hired a jib operator capable of executing dramatic panning and angles from above the ceremony with its thousands of chanting monks and nuns. These aerial shots revealed the sheer magnitude of the event.

At the outset of post-production in November 2011, Guna had about 50 hours of excellent footage of the ceremony from Allen that would serve as the backbone of the film, and roughly 500 hours of archival footage of the ceremony. Editor Chelsi Bullard worked closely with Director Pema Gellek and Assistant Director Hugh Joswick to refine the narrative of the film.

They were fortunate to have film of several compelling interviews with Tibetan lamas and nuns who spoke about the value and impact of the books as recipients of our book distribution. To these were added interviews with key members of the text preservation project in California to provide perspective on the ceremony and goals and impact of the text preservation effort.



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### **Associated Links**

#### **Yeshe De Text Project**

[www.ratnalingworkstudy.com](http://www.ratnalingworkstudy.com)

#### **Allen Moore**

[www.mica.edu/About\\_MICA/People/Faculty/Faculty\\_List\\_by\\_Last\\_Name/Allen\\_Moore.html](http://www.mica.edu/About_MICA/People/Faculty/Faculty_List_by_Last_Name/Allen_Moore.html)

#### **Dusty Micale**

[www.reverbnation.com/dustymicale](http://www.reverbnation.com/dustymicale)

#### **Miller Video and Film**

[www.millerpostproductionservices.com](http://www.millerpostproductionservices.com)

#### **Disher Music and Sound**

[www.dishermusic.com](http://www.dishermusic.com)