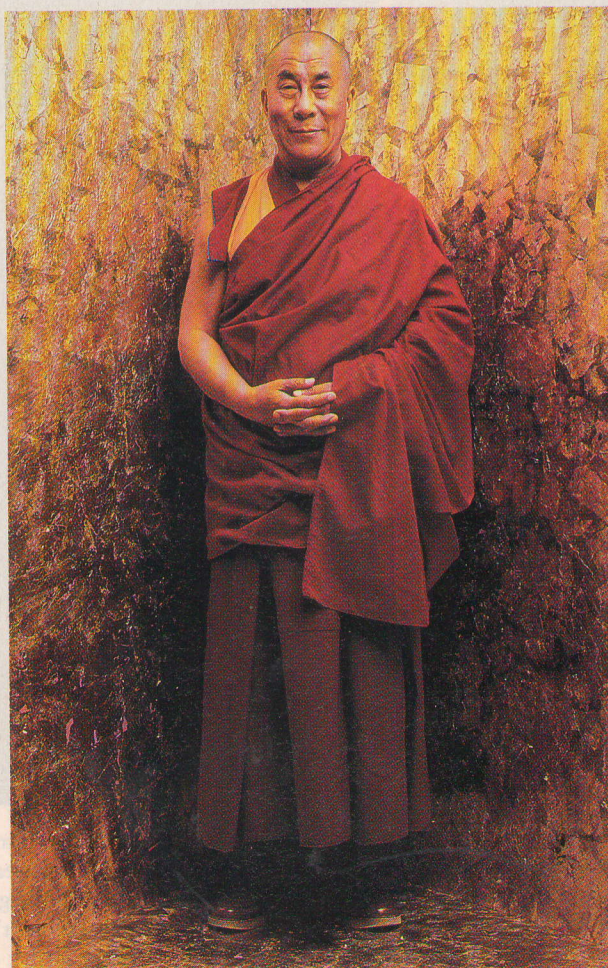


STARRING IN EVERY MEDIUM FROM MOVIES TO MUSIC, TIBETAN BUDDHISM HAS BECOME HOLLYWOOD'S HOTTEST PET PROJECT. BUT CAN THE MOVEMENT'S CORE VALUES BEAR THE WEIGHT OF FAME AND PUBLICITY?

HOLLYWOOD GOES TIBET

ON A HILLTOP OVERLOOKING THE Pacific Ocean, 45 miles south of San Francisco, a Tibetan high lama sits on a pillow in the master bedroom of a house at which he is the guest of honor and, for the first time, discusses with a journalist his decision to recognize action-movie star Steven Seagal as a *tulku*, or reincarnated holy man. Penor Rinpoche, the high lama (the Buddhist equivalent of a cardinal), is the supreme head of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, the oldest and most mystical of the four lineages over which the Dalai Lama, the exiled leader of Tibet, presides. Today, Penor Rinpoche speaks through two translators: Khenpo, a Buddhist abbot who interprets the questions, and Sangye, a young American woman and friend of Seagal's, who translates the answers. At the palatial home where Penor Rinpoche is staying during a three-day stopover on a teaching tour of the United States, it is Sangye who greets me with the prophetic words "Steven called twice this morning and tried to talk His Holiness [Penor Rinpoche] out of meeting you."

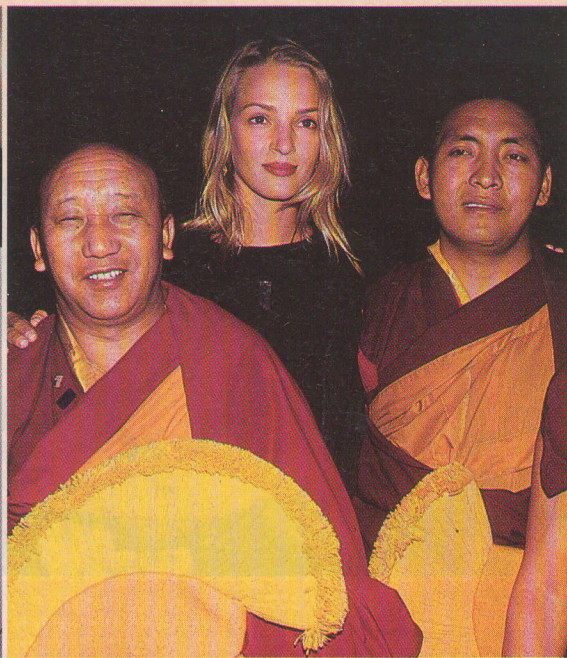
Since Seagal was revealed to be a *tulku* by Penor Rinpoche last February, the already wary action star — who, although he denies the claims, has been accused in the past of sexual harassment, spousal abuse, bigamy, creating false histories and looking to hire a hit man — has kept himself even further removed from the press. His recent elevation has made him no more compassionate when it comes to the media. His Holiness is not to be dissuaded, however, and against Seagal's advice the interview commences.



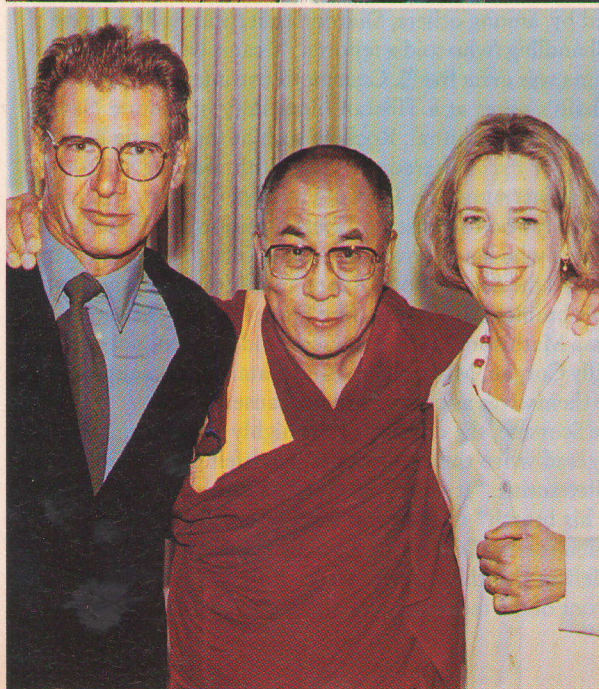
Asked how it was that he decided Seagal is the reincarnation of a 17th-century lama and, as such, entitled to wear lama's robes, open a temple and reveal hidden Buddhist teachings in inanimate objects, Penor Rinpoche replies that the actor approached him after he and his entourage of a dozen or so monks had been guests at Seagal's Beverly Hills home for 11 days. The actor asked if Penor Rinpoche would clarify who Seagal had been in his past lives. It seems Seagal, a long-time student of various Asian philosophies (he lived in Japan for 15 years before arriving in Hollywood and becoming a movie star), had been told by many lamas he encountered in the past that he was the reincarnation of some deity or other — nobody really knew which one. Penor Rinpoche, one of the few lamas in the world imbued with the power and authority to confer such a declaration (which Seagal must have known before inviting him), agreed to meditate about it when he returned to India and then "clarify the situation" for Seagal, which in short order he did. After consulting other lamas, who he says con-

firmed his recognition, Penor Rinpoche invited the actor to his monastery in India earlier this year for a ceremony at which, in front of 1,500 monks and nuns, Seagal was designated a holy *tulku*.

When Penor Rinpoche is confronted with the most serious questions about his unusual choice — notwithstanding Seagal's stormy past, individuals over the age of 5 are rarely identified as *tulkus* — some comical answers are provided, revealing what seems to be a

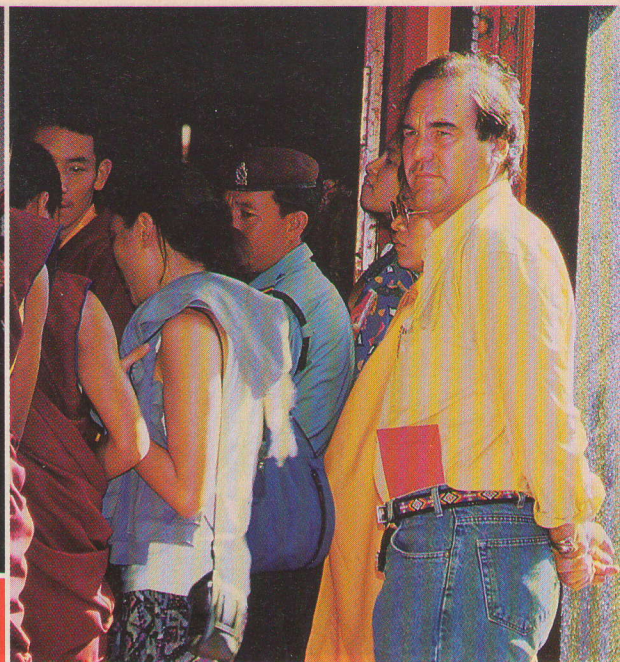


BUDDHIST CHIC: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) RICHARD GERE AND THE DALAI LAMA IN ITALY; LONGTIME SUPPORTER UMA THURMAN IN 1994; PENOR RINPOCHE BLESSING STEVEN SEAGAL; MARTIN SCORSESE AT THE CANNES PREMIERE OF 'KUNDUN'; HARRISON FORD AND MELISSA MATHISON WITH THE DALAI LAMA LAST YEAR; ADAM YAUCH AT THE 1996 TIBETAN FREEDOM CONCERT; (OPPOSITE) THE DALAI LAMA





CAUSE CELEB: (ABOVE) TIBETAN REFUGEES HONOR BRAD PITT BY ADORNING HIM WITH SILK SCARVES AT THE L.A. PREMIERE OF 'SEVEN YEARS IN TIBET'; (RIGHT) OLIVER STONE ATTENDING A BUDDHIST CEREMONY IN NEPAL FOUR YEARS AGO.



communication problem. Regarding the charge made in various media outlets, and even whispered in the Buddhist community, that the revered Penor Rinpoche, a renunciant by ordination, was bought off, he giggles and is translated as saying, "The truth of the matter is I wouldn't name a *tulku* for \$100." As for Seagal's violent image, both off and on the screen, Penor Rinpoche responds, "He's just acting; he probably hasn't killed anyone in his whole life." Interestingly enough, though, it is Penor Rinpoche's repeated references (three times) to the actor's enormous "level of pride" ("It is his greatest shortcoming; I always tell him he must reduce his pride"), relayed to Seagal immediately afterward by Sangye, that sends the actor into frenzied spin control.

"Steven wanted me to call you and make sure you don't turn the word *pride* into the word *ego*," says Sangye on the phone two days later. "It's his experience that any little thing gets turned into the negative, and he's very paranoid about this." When asked if she has persuaded Seagal to talk to *US* on the record for this article, which he has refused to do thus far, she says she tried but can't promise anything because he "has been burned in the past." At that moment she gets another call and returns two minutes later.

"That was him," she says firmly. "He asked me to tell you that anything you print that goes off what His Holiness said in any way is something you're not going to be able to forget. And he wants you to know, very clearly, that you're getting yourself involved in something here that you've got to be straight with, or you're really going to suffer. *You're really going to be sorry.*"

And so, as the embattled Tibetan community finally starts to get some attention, much of it generated by the interest of Hollywood, its members are discovering that when movie stars enter the temple there is often a price to be paid. But after enduring almost 50 years of nearly total global apathy, the small, historically remote country of Tibet, called the "roof of the world" by early explorers for its breathtaking Himalayan vistas, is gonna take whatever it can get, thank you.

SINCE THE ARMIES OF MAO TSE-TUNG BRUTALLY ANNEXED THEIR nation in 1950, forcing the 14th (and present-day) Dalai Lama to flee nine years later and set up an exile government in India, the people of Tibet have watched helplessly as China has slaughtered more than 1.2 million of their compatriots, razed their

monasteries and virtually wiped their culture off the map.

Thanks to the charisma and dedication of Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, who in 1989 won the Nobel Peace Prize, and the efforts of longtime activists such as Richard Gere, the cause of Tibetan freedom has come a long, hard-fought way, most recently witnessed in this fall's backlash against Chinese President Jiang Zemin during his U.S. visit. Orchestrated in part by Gere, the protest showed that even such wild-card conservative politicians as Newt Gingrich, Pat Buchanan and Jesse Helms have their reasons for coming down hard on China. And while there is evidence that Buddhism has slowly made its way to the hinterlands (dharma centers, at which Buddhism is studied and practiced, have opened in Michigan, New Mexico and North Carolina, and recent national estimates of American adherents top 100,000), the efforts of those accustomed to the spotlight are what is really bringing Tibetan Buddhism into the mainstream.

Witness the spectacle. Major studios have bankrolled two films about the Dalai Lama's early life (*Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*). Last year, the Dalai Lama was feted at the Regent Beverly Wilshire Hotel in an event co-hosted by Gere and Harrison Ford and attended by, among others, Sharon Stone, Shirley MacLaine and Garry Shandling (who told a reporter, "I came because I heard the Dalai Lama was great live"). Courtney Love interred a portion of Kurt Cobain's ashes at a Tibetan monastery in upstate New York for a consecration ritual. Rockers such as the Beastie Boys, U2 and Porno for Pyros shared the stage with dancing saffron-robed monks at last summer's Tibetan Freedom Concert.

Not every Hollywood activist for Tibetan freedom is a Buddhist, but among those who have converted, besides Gere and Seagal, are Oliver Stone and the Beastie Boys' Adam Yauch (the freedom concerts were his brainchild). Others, like Ford, his wife the screenwriter Melissa Mathison, Martin Scorsese, and a host of pop stars including Billy Corgan, Michael Stipe and Natalie Merchant, simply describe themselves as converts to the cause.

Some, like Scorsese, the director of the highly anticipated *Kundun*, are angered when their colleagues' heartfelt efforts are dismissed as dilettantish. "It's disrespectful," says the director (who is "holding his breath" to see what kind of release his film gets from the China-fearing Disney), "especially to people like Richard Gere and Melissa [Mathison, who wrote *Kundun*], who've been in the forefront of the movement for so long."

Mathison, a soft-spoken mother of four who usually leaves the spotlight to her husband, is more concerned with the diminishing effects of glitz and glamour on the cause. "The only time Tibet gets any attention is when a few movie stars show up, and then it's a Catch-22," she complains. "It would be tragic if at this moment when people's attention can be focused on some action, it's dismissed as this cheap 'Hello, Dalai' bulls---. It's insulting."

While devotees such as former Columbia Pictures president Lisa Henson, Goldie Hawn and Uma Thurman quietly donate large amounts of money to Tibetan-refugee causes and institutions like New York's Tibet House (dedicated to preserving the rapidly disappearing culture of Tibet), it's the flashier antics of some stars that bring into question the very purpose of a religion for which the main spiritual tenet is selflessness.

Stone, who converted to Tibetan Buddhism after stints in other brands of the 2,500-year-old religion left him wanting, sees the dismissals, perhaps not too surprisingly, as some sort of conspiracy. "It's typical of the judgmental Anglo mentality of the cultural state we live in," says the director. "One of the things I love about the [Far] East is [that] they're more concerned about getting their own act together before ripping down someone else's spirituality."

Which is exactly the point, according to *Newsweek* religion editor Kenneth Woodward. "It's the religion du jour for people who don't really want one," says Woodward, who has written about spirituality for more than 30 years and interviewed the Dalai Lama several times. He adds that Westerners raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition mistakenly believe that Buddhism comes without rules or judgments, but if they were to study the doctrine closely, they would find it "even more conservative than Christianity" (no sex during the day; no oral sex or masturbation, period).

Nevertheless, through the vigilant efforts of actors like Gere and the tireless travels of the Dalai Lama, the town has become enraptured with everything Tibetan. The upside is that Hollywood can focus attention on an indisputably worthy cause; the downside, as Woodward notes, is that "the danger of squeezing the toothpaste of Buddhism through the tube of American culture is you might end up with something on your brush that in no way resembles Buddhism."

"IT'S REALLY KIND OF FUNNY," SAYS GERE. "FIFTEEN YEARS AGO IT was like 'Springtime for Hitler': I would bring Tibet up, and no one knew what I was talking about. When I first started going on television talking about this stuff, no one believed me; they had to check with the State Department. Now I just finished press junkets for two movies, and I swear, 90 percent of what I was asked was about Tibet."

Which is exactly how the 48-year-old actor wants it. Since becoming a Buddhist more than 20 years ago and working the cause into his agenda five years later, Gere has done more to raise awareness about the embattled country and its more than 6 million natives than anyone besides the Dalai Lama himself. And in the process of doing so, according to those who know Gere, he has become a better person.

Observes longtime friend Robert Thurman, a Buddhist scholar and professor, and co-founder, with Gere, of New York's Tibet House: "I watched Richard develop and mature. He became deeper and self-resilient, more self-restrained. It wasn't just an aging process; it was him trying to work through his emotions in a positive way, which is what you're supposed to do when you're trying to become a Buddhist."

"I was deeply angry, explosive and hot," says Gere of his personality prior to his conversion to Tibetan Buddhism in 1982, "and then it all just started to go away." The actor, who pushed the Dalai

Lama into American consciousness by invoking his name at nearly every opportunity (most memorably at the 1993 Academy Awards, in a speech that got Gere banned from future telecasts), says his job is far from over but made much easier by the release of such films as *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*. In fact, even some of his friends are starting to "get it," he says with a laugh. "They've heard me do this over and over again," he says, "but it didn't strike them until they saw it in the movies. Storytelling impacts deeper than a documentary or hearing a litany of human-rights abuses."

Does he think that Hollywood's involvement could taint the movement? "It comes down to quality," Gere says. "If it's quality work by quality people, of course it's positive. But if it becomes action-movie kind of territory, I don't think it's particularly helpful."

IN HIS NEW YORK CITY TOWN HOUSE, JUST BLOCKS FROM WHERE HE is editing *Kundun*, Martin Scorsese contemplates the suggestion that all this Tibet stuff is just a fad. The acclaimed director, who as a result of the film spent the past two years looking at Buddhism

but who still identifies himself as a Catholic, finally decides it's the real deal. "It's too facile to call it a fad," he says. "It's indicative of something much deeper."

As for why Hollywood denizens as well as everyday Americans are drawn to Buddhism, he has a theory: "Because of where we are in the world today and all the madness of modern society."

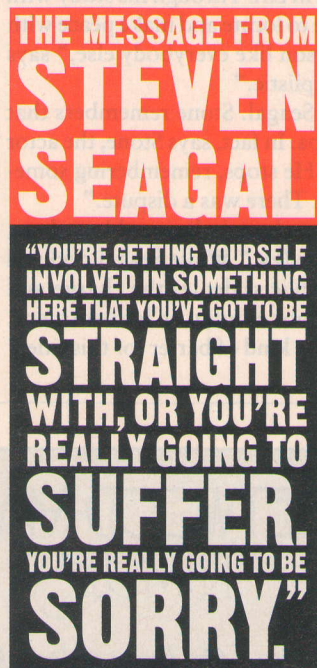
"There's so much confusion," he continues, sipping from a cup of coffee, near a table laden with framed photos of his mother, father and dog, all of them recently deceased. "Established religions are not working for people. They're finding it harder and harder to survive in our culture, and I think that anything that helps them find a little peace of mind is going to be embraced just out

of desperation. And I think Buddhism has a lot of that to offer."

The notoriously private Scorsese admits that meeting the subject of his film was a life-altering experience. "Something happened," he says quietly of his first encounter with the Dalai Lama, which occurred before he decided to make the film. "I became totally aware of existing — of existing in the moment. It was like you could feel your heart beat; and as I left, he looked at me. I don't know, but there was something about the look, something sweet... I just knew I had to make the movie."

"MY WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN CRACKED, TORTURED AND CONTRADICTORY," sighs Oliver Stone. The Oscar-winning director of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* is explaining why he, a man associated with sex, drugs and violence, was attracted to a religion like Tibetan Buddhism. "I think it was for its nonjudgmental acceptance," he finally says. "That's a very important thing, because I grew up in a pressure cooker of a life."

In fact, Stone says, he was "fleeing from judgment my whole life" and that he first encountered the religion as a soldier in Vietnam but didn't become a bona fide Buddhist until five years ago, while



US REPORT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 79

making *Heaven and Earth*, the third film in his Vietnam trilogy.

"I was inducted into the Vietnamese Buddhist church over there by Le Ly Hayslip, the woman on whom the movie was based," he says. "It was through working with her and understanding her beliefs that inspired me. She changed my life." But soon after returning to Los Angeles to edit the film, Stone quit because he didn't know what was going on during the services. "I couldn't learn Vietnamese," he says with a laugh. The director eventually gravitated toward his friend and co-producer Richard Rutowski's brand of Tibetan Buddhism, which Stone had previously found "eccentric and bizarre."

Stone and Rutowski later drove for six days through rural Northern Tibet to the monastery of Kusum Lingpa, a 70-year-old monk who had spent 16 years in Chinese prisons. "He's a feisty old motherf---er," says Stone admiringly. The director immediately adopted the lama as his personal guru and, upon returning to the States, established a temple for him in L.A. Through his study with Lingpa, Stone says, he has been able to locate and make peace with his demons. "I'm a 360-degree person like everybody else," says Stone. "I'm a paradox. I'm not simplistic."

Which brings us back to Steven Seagal. Stone remembers that Seagal also used to study with Lingpa. In fact, says Stone, the actor "helped Lingpa get a green card." He stops, remembering something else. "Oh, but then they split. There was a dispute."

About what? According to Stone, though disputed by others, Lingpa wouldn't "make [Seagal] a *tulku*." While Seagal declined an on-the-record interview, his publicist denies the charge and adds: "Mr. Seagal has earned the honor of *tulku* on his own merit. He in no way purchased or made any kind of barter for this title."

"I BEGGED [SEAGAL] NOT TO GO PUBLIC WITH THIS," SAYS THURMAN in his office at Columbia University, where he heads the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies department. "I said, 'It will only bring ridicule upon you and the Tibetans in the long run.'"

In fact, the recognition of Seagal as a *tulku* has rocked the Tibetan Buddhist community. To some, it's bad timing for a group of people who have finally begun to receive the world's long-overdue attention.

Helen Tworok, editor of *Tricycle*, the country's most respected Buddhist magazine, says, "It's a difficult situation, because no one who knows Steven Seagal, who's been around him, seems to think he demonstrates any elevated spiritual wisdom."

Woodward of *Newsweek* calls it a "black eye for Buddhism."

Drukpa Yongzin Rinpoche is a 35-year-old *tulku* who was raised in India and now makes Colorado his home. He was discovered to be a reincarnated lama at age 4. He expresses astonishment when informed that Penor Rinpoche was approached by Steven Seagal — and not the other way around. "A lama send people," says Drukpa Rinpoche, recalling the mystical circumstances of his recognition as a boy in India. "A *tulku* is recognized that way. Nobody request that I be *tulku*." But he is more disturbed by Seagal's carefully worded warning to this reporter. He points out that if the warning is only karmic, and not physical, it is even more serious, because it affects all the lives to come. "That is bad," he says, sounding alarmed. "He's a *tulku*. He should be compassionate. That means he know nothing."

There are some in the Buddhist community, like producer Alex Rose (*Norma Rae*), who say that Seagal's new status came as no surprise. "We've always seen him as a spiritual being," says Rose, who has known the actor for four years. "Steven's overriding interest is to help other people whenever, wherever and however he can."

Whatever the intentions of Penor Rinpoche, it is unclear how much he or anyone reporting to the Dalai Lama knows about Seagal's history. Seagal has been accused of various misdeeds, all of which he denies: sexual harassment (by four women, three of whom were compensated by Warner Bros. in an out-of-court settlement), bigamy (by his second wife) and spousal abuse (by his first), among others. Actress Jenny McCarthy has accused Seagal of trying to get her to disrobe during an audition. ("He followed me back to my car and said, 'You better never tell a soul,'" she writes in her recent memoir.)

According to some within the activist community, Seagal has hardly taken great measures to reassure fellow Buddhists that at least his "pride" has diminished since the recognition. Those who attended a teaching by the Dalai Lama in L.A. last summer would have seen Seagal seated prominently in the front row, standing longer than anyone else and turning to face the room as if to be seen. Gere, seated a few rows back, at first seemed amused by the whole thing; later, according to witnesses, there was noticeable tension between the two.

But if Gere has any opinion about



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Seagal and his *tulku* status, he's not sharing it. "Frankly, I don't know anything about it," says the actor curtly. When pressed, he adds, "If the Dalai Lama were to say that anyone was an enlightened being, I would believe him. Probably, short of that, I wouldn't believe anybody."

In his office at New York's Tibet House, Dawa Tsering, the official representative of the Dalai Lama in the United States, looks down at his hands and fumbles with papers when Seagal's name is brought up. "We haven't had any communication," says Tsering. "I don't know whether His Holiness is going to make some announcement or not."

For his part, Penor Rinpoche maintains that "when I recognize a *tulku*, I don't need to consult His Holiness; but because [I needed] to clarify the situation, I issued a statement [to him]. He responded in the affirmative."

Professor Thurman, father of actress Uma, says the subject came up during a talk with the Dalai Lama recently, "but His Holiness didn't make any comment to me about it. And I didn't ask him."

Admitting that he is "horrified by the whole thing," Thurman requests copies of articles detailing Seagal's bad behavior so he can "advise" certain lamas accordingly. He is clearly worried about the long-term effects on the Tibetan people. "You have to remember that these are people who are under genocide," he says gravely. "This interest, which they've never had before, is their lifeline to world recognition. They see it as a way to save their lives."

"YO, AD MAN!" A HISPANIC TEEN ON A BIKE SCREECHES TO A HALT IN front of Adam Yauch, who is standing outside his apartment building in Manhattan's Little Italy. "Saw your movie's coming out, man, but you ain't in it! What's up with that?" Yauch smiles shyly, knowing full well the kid is referring to *Seven Years in Tibet*. After explaining that just because it's about Tibet doesn't mean he's in it, he reassures the skeptical kid that despite its matinee-idol star, Brad Pitt, the film is historically accurate, and he urges him to see it.

Later, at a Vietnamese restaurant, the 33-year-old Beastie Boy launches into a mournful recounting of the atrocities that have been visited upon the Tibetan people in the past 40 years, from "forced abortions and sterilizations of women" to "monks and nuns who are in prison right now being horribly tortured for refusing to sign a piece of paper renouncing the Dalai Lama as their leader."

The soft-spoken rapper admits that transplanting his spirituality from the meditation room to the rock & roll stage isn't always easy. Since Yauch became a committed activist (in 1993, he co-founded the nonprofit Milarepa Fund, which supports human-rights causes in Tibet), he has become a kind of Richard Gere for Gen X-ers. His annual Tibetan Freedom Concerts in New York and San Francisco (recently documented on a three-CD set and in an upcoming feature film) have raised more than \$1.5 million to date and brought the cause to a young audience.

Yauch acknowledges that the mixing of rap and religion can get a little hairy sometimes, especially when you take a dozen monks on a Lollapalooza tour featuring the likes of A Tribe Called Quest, Green Day and Smashing Pumpkins. "We were careful with that stuff as much as possible," he says, referring to the monks' exposure to the excesses of backstage life. "But they knew what they were doing there, and their intentions were very strong." The monks would open each concert with a blessing, perform native dances on an additional stage and operate information booths.

As for himself, Yauch says that it was simple to let go of accoutrements of the rock & roll lifestyle, such as groupies: "You can see that that stuff can bring a person a lot more unhappiness on a long-term basis than happiness on a short term."

"Look, I still have a good time," adds Yauch, who says he'll probably become a monk one day. "I still like to joke around and laugh and stuff, but I just try to be aware of where it may be destructive to other people. And I think I still have a huge ego to get over—I think everyone does. That's what we need to come to grips with in society: the fact that we're all egomaniacs."

CAUSING NO SMALL AMOUNT OF CONFUSION AND CONSTERNATION IN a community that has embraced nonviolence and compassion as a way of life is Hollywood's predilection for violent films. Stone, Seagal and, to a lesser extent, Gere all churn out movies that often include scenes depicting extreme physical violence.

"How these Buddhists can make these amazingly violent movies and still follow the Dalai Lama astounds me," says Gail Cottman, the former head of publicity for MGM TV and a longtime supporter of L.A.'s Buddhist community. "There's an amazing hypocrisy there. The Dalai Lama is very clear on his belief that there is no excuse *ever* for violence."

Jean-Jacques Annaud, the director of *Seven Years in Tibet*, is also offended by colleagues who "produce and act in the most violent films ever" while claiming to be Buddhists. "It's very much like someone who makes a war and then gives a little money to build hospitals to cure people who have been burned by the bombs," he says. "It's a way to buy good conscience. But I believe people who are true Buddhists should refuse to make movies that present violence in a positive way."

Stone defends the violence in his own films as "a reflection of reality." The director of such aggressive fare as *Natural Born Killers* and the recent *U-Turn*

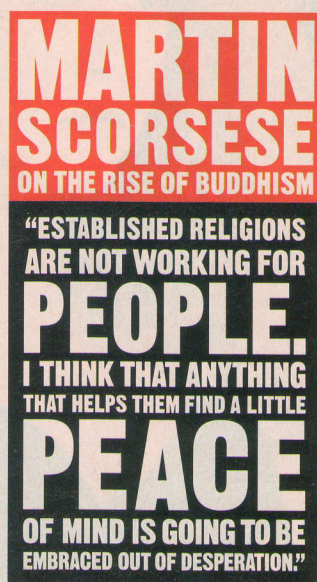
adds: "I have a contract with myself to pursue the integrity of the action and not cut away from it. A lot of people are turned off by the violence in my films. Those of us who are honest admit that we have demons in ourselves and that we are wrestling with them. And we do it publicly, because that's what filmmakers do. To put a muzzle on myself and not be myself is not the solution to my problems. The solution to my problems is to embrace myself and guide myself toward the positive."

Scorsese, well-acquainted himself with violence in films, made *Kundun* without bloody shootouts, baseball bats or bad language. But he doesn't want people to get the wrong idea.

"This is an angry movie, because of what happened with Tibet," insists the director, who shot the film in Morocco with a cast of entirely unknown and mostly Tibetan actors. "But I had to go around that anger and diffuse it and make it become something positive."

Not all filmmakers or stars bother to try that tactic. "The problem with [Seagal's] films is that he doesn't just throw the bad guys out the window," says Professor Thurman. "He breaks their bones one by one first. It undermines his claims that he's nonviolent. He seems to like showing us demolishing them piece by piece."

"It's not really important," Penor Rinpoche says in dismissing the violence of Seagal's movies. "A movie's a movie. By the mere name of it, it's an illusory thing that you [Continued on page 87]



US REPORT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 81

watch but is not real." Penor Rinpoche adds that Seagal "would like to [stop making violent films], but he can't just suddenly completely stop. He has commitments to keep. It's something he will do slowly."

Days later, *The Hollywood Reporter* reveals that the actor's next project will be *Blood on the Moon*, "the story of a man who seeks revenge on modern-day pirates when his family is killed during a pleasure cruise off the Hong Kong coast."

AT A GIRL'S SWEET-16 PARTY IN L.A.'S predominantly Asian suburb of Westminster, a small community of exiled Tibetans (there are fewer than 200 in Southern California) has gathered to celebrate. The mix of two cultures — the girl's father is American, her mother Tibetan — is striking in its contrasts. In the backyard, Tibetan and Western teens dance on the patio to Puff Daddy and Lil' Kim under a rented strobe light, while in the front yard, Tibetan adults sit around card tables set up in a garage converted into a rec room. Replete with shag carpeting and wood paneling, the space suddenly takes on a very different tone when a klatch of youthful Tibetan-

Americans, many of whom have never set foot in their parents' country, start to sing native songs. The adults fall mostly silent and gather around the wide-open entrance, pulling their chairs closer to listen and join in. The music, enhanced by traditional instruments, overtakes the blaring hip-hop in the backyard, and the party's hostess gets up to perform a dance she learned years ago as a child in Tibet.

The issue of Hollywood's involvement in the cause and religion of Tibet would seem to be far removed from this setting. One can't imagine that these people would have much, if anything, in common with wealthy American movie stars and directors. When 70-year-old Dawa Choytsang, who can remember watching the current Dalai Lama's predecessor being paraded through Lhasa, Tibet, is asked to describe her feelings about Hollywood's embracing her culture, she ignores the question. Her daughter, head of pathology at St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, who is translating, apologizes as her mother talks instead about the more important issue of Tibetan sovereignty. "She wants me to emphasize," the daughter sighs for the third time, "that we Tibetans are totally different from the Chinese, and even though they claim that we are part of China, we share absolutely nothing with

them. Our language, our religion, our culture, our forms of currency, everything about us is totally different from China."

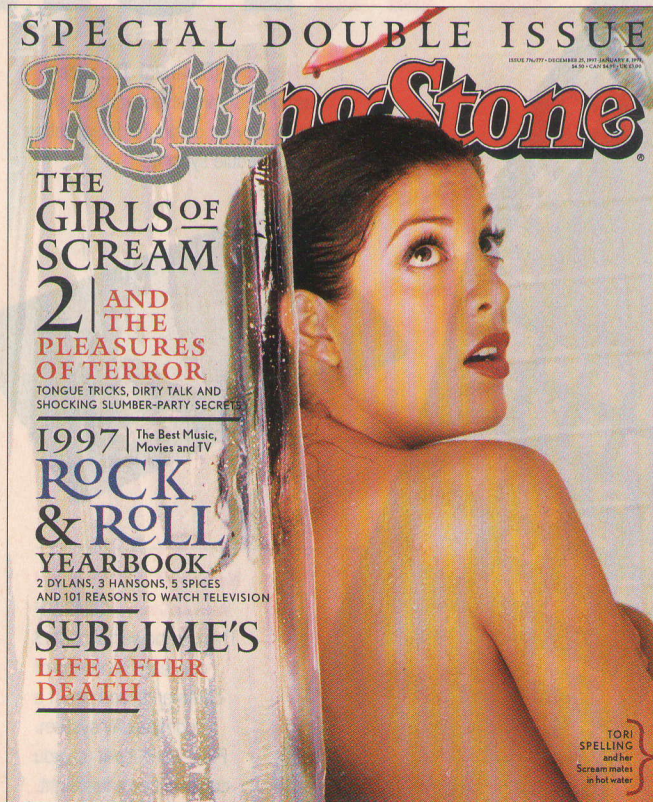
Suddenly, the elder woman's expression warms and she speaks quietly and seriously. She has decided, in her own way, to answer the original question.

"She says she prays for Richard Gere every day," her daughter translates. "She says, even though she can't understand what he says in his interviews, she sees him on TV and senses how he feels and that he lets his own personal business go aside in order to talk about Tibet."

"She says," the daughter continues, "that a thousand Tibetans making the same effort won't have the same effect as Richard Gere."

Tom O'Neill wrote about Rupert Everett for the August 1997 issue of 'US.'

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