



Nawang Khechog, photo by Bob Winsett

*Up above the thunderclouds and beyond the wildflowers, up where the air is thin, Nawang set silently in a cave occasionally playing his flute at sunset.*

*Before the notes evaporated and were transformed into an evening mist, they were heard by the mountain goats, which stopped chewing and turned their heads to listen because the god-like melodies filled them with wonderment and made them want to dance.*  
~ Singer/Activist Joan Baez

## A Spiritual Friend to the World

### Tibet Flutist Nawang Khechog Lives in Harmony with All

Kent Rautenstrauss

*May all be kind to each other.*

For many, this phrase is easier said than done! After all, “they” don’t have to live or work with the people that we have to! But for Nawang Khechog, a Grammy-nominated flutist and the youngest monk to personally study with Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth incarnated Dalai Lama, spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people, reciting “May all be kind to each other” is a key to awakening kindness within the soul.

“One beautiful wonder in humanity is that we can consciously expand our love, compassion, and kindness to our loved ones, our friends, and to all species. We can expand our heart infinitely,” says the humble former Buddhist monk, who for over twenty years has coined the phrase, “May all be kind to each other,” sharing it wherever he goes—as an opening to his kindness workshops taught in prisons, schools, and New Thought spiritual communities—or before an assembly of the United Nations. A self-described “spiritual friend to the world,” Nawang is also the author of *Awakening Kindness*, published by Beyond Words Publishing, a division of Simon and Schuster. The book is based on over one hundred Buddhist scriptures, which teach universal love and compassion. “These teachings are the treasure of Tibet, and the treasure of the world,” Nawang says quietly. His book also includes autobiographical sharing, kindness “profiles,” and simple, mindful practices, including meditation, mantra chanting, and other conscious tools to awaken kindness within the reader.

In his foreword to *Awakening Kindness*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, “In this book, Nawang Khechog explains the need for kindness in our lives....I commend him for his efforts to awaken others to the understanding that, as a source of lasting happiness and joy, kindness and compassion are among the principle things that make our lives meaningful.” The book is also endorsed by three other Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, including South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who wrote, “I hope and pray that this book will benefit many people by helping to inspire kindness and compassion in their hearts.” In less than a year of its release in December 2010, *Awakening Kindness* has made Simon and Schuster’s top recommended reading list in the category of “mind, body, and spirit.”

### **Yogi Premonitions and Musical Genius Mark Early Years**

Nawang Khechog’s life story is epic. Born into a nomadic family in Eastern Tibet in 1953, his family migrated to India in 1959 when he was six. A traveling mystic yogi warned Nawang’s family that it was unsafe to remain in Tibet due to the impending Communist Chinese invasion, so Khechog

and his family undertook a perilous journey to India, spanning thousands of miles and three years. They traveled with only the possessions that could be carried on the backs of yaks. Along the way, his two younger sisters perished in the hot climate. This family tragedy deeply affected the young Nawang. “Everyone’s life is affected by changes far outside his or her control, but it is what one does when things change that shows who we really can be and makes us live up to our true potential,” he writes in a section entitled “The Transitory Nature of Life.”

Early on, it was apparent that Khechog had compassion and wisdom and also great musical ability. He began playing the flute in primary school. “I started playing the flute for others, and people started to really take interest in my music,” he shares in his book, adding, “The nature of my flute music has always been quite peaceful, and that has made it the perfect vehicle to communicate one of my most important beliefs: universal love and compassion. As I played more and more, I realized that this was what I wanted to share with humanity...music as an art form does something to our hearts; it draws certain attention. And with that, we can include a

deeper message of love and compassion.”

Spirituality was another significant influence. He became a Buddhist monk at thirteen; at twenty, he lived as a hermit meditator in total isolation studying Buddhist scriptures under the personal sponsorship of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. “Among ordinary Tibetans, I was one of the few who had personal access to the Dalai Lama for spiritual practice. Very few could see him anytime, but I could go and ask a question of him and then go back into solitude.”

### **Life after Monkhhood**

Being a monk was a “beautiful path,” but, he says, “After eleven years as a monk and four years as a hermit meditator, I contracted tuberculosis in the mountains, and I had to leave because of it.” Khechog now feels that it was his karmic path to focus on his music, developing his workshop on awakening kindness, and writing his book by the same title. “Even if I couldn’t maintain it for my whole life, my time as a monk has laid a very good spiritual foundation for my life.”

Khechog’s next “interesting path” taught him unconditional love when in 1981, he met Australian Leslie Christianson; they married and had

two “beautiful children,” son Sangye and daughter Tenzin. “Suddenly, I became a husband and a father; all kinds of responsibilities were being showered on me, and it was unbelievable. Learning this different aspect of tenderness was a blessing in spite of how hard my new responsibilities were.” The marriage ended amicably after eight years, teaching Khechog “a lot about life and love.”

Around this time, he began playing his profoundly healing flute music throughout Australia, where Khechog and his family were living at the time. In 1991, due to a “mysterious blessing,” he was invited by Tibet House United States co-founder (and practicing Buddhist) actor Richard Gere to participate in a North American tour honoring the “International Year of Tibet Celebration.” His worldwide musical career was launched, as was a deep friendship between Khechog and the famous actor. “As a good friend of Nawang Khechog’s for many years,” Richard Gere said, “I’ve seen him transform some enormous life challenges into a solid commitment to be of service to others. His main practice, during his four years as a hermit meditator and thirty-something years as a practitioner, has been one of universal love,



Nawang Khechog and His Holiness the Dalai Lama

compassion, and Bodhicitta,” referring to doing that which benefits all.

### World Music Ambassador

In short order, Khechog became an international musical ambassador of goodwill, integrating Eastern and Western ways of being and mastering several world instruments, including Tibetan long horn, South American Mayan ocarinas Australian Aboriginal didgeridoo, Tibetan and Native America flutes, African drums, and other cymbals and bells. He also

performed Tibetan, Mongolian, and Tuvan overtone chanting. He invented the Universal Horn, a combination of Tibetan long horn, Aboriginal didgeridoo, and the American trombone. Ganden Thurman, executive director of Tibet House United States, said, “Nawang blends the traditional and the modern and thereby artfully showcases his people and culture’s potential to contribute, meaningfully and beautifully, to the world’s merging global culture. Would that all Tibetans had his freedom to share themselves with the

world...”

Khechog recorded twelve music titles and sold over a half-million CDs, performing his music in prestigious venues including the Pentagon and Carnegie Hall. He shared the world’s concert stages with musical superstars David Bowie, U2, Herbie Hancock, Pearl Jam, and Natalie Merchant—picking up a Grammy nomination along the way.

Then in 1997, he served as an assistant director, consultant, actor, and musician on the blockbuster Hollywood film *Seven Years in Tibet*, based on the true story of Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountain climber, and his experiences in Tibet between 1944 and 1951. On camera, Khechog told actor Brad Pitt, who portrayed Harrer, “We cannot kill these worms because these worms could be your mother in your past life.” *TIME* magazine took note of this stand for kindness and karma, albeit scripted, leading with Khechog’s memorable quote in their movie review.

### New Love and Purpose

The year 1997 proved to be eventful for the former monk, acclaimed musician, and “bit actor.” He married his spiritual partner, friend, and “forever sweetheart” Tsering Youdon,

the niece of one of his most beloved and revered teachers when he was a monk. This happy personal milestone gave Khechog a new resurgence of joy and purpose. He and Tsering immigrated to the United States, eventually landing in Boulder, Colorado, at the base of the Rocky Mountains. For the next ten years, they settled into their life and love, balancing a worldwide career with simple joys, including eating Happy Meals with the young daughter of friends, or enjoying an ice-cream cone while walking along an outdoor pedestrian mall.

### One of the Toughest Times of His Life

In February 2007, on the day before the Tibetan New Year, tragedy struck when Khechog was involved in a head-on car collision in a remote section of India, where he was traveling with his son and niece to visit his father. Khechog’s beloved niece was killed instantly, and Khechog was severely injured. His son sustained fewer injuries and is credited by Khechog with saving his life. Since there was significant bleeding in his brain caused by the collision, Khechog could not fly in a commercial aircraft at higher elevation. Hearing this, Richard

Gere chartered a private aircraft to fly Khechog to a hospital in New Delhi.

At the hospital, Khechog could not receive medication due to the blood collecting in his brain. Despite being in tremendous pain, his first request upon gaining consciousness was to meditate and practice Tonglin, which teaches universal love and compassion by taking in the pain of the world and giving out happiness and good will. “The more you practice universal love and kindness, the more it heals the pain you’re going through,” he said. Tsering and his children couldn’t believe that for the next forty minutes, Nawang stopped moaning. “My pain was gone,” Nawang said.

His Holiness visited his old friend in the hospital, and thousands of people all over the world prayed for Khechog’s recovery. “I am still alive and kicking because of you,” he said, referring to his fans. South Korean Buddhist television filmed a documentary about Khechog during this time, beginning in the hospital with his recovery from the accident.

After months in India, Khechog returned to Colorado for further rest and recovery when he had a heart attack brought on from the extreme trauma of the car accident. Still

other difficult interpersonal situations greeted Khechog in recent years, but through it all, he has held to the belief that it is essential to practice kindness and compassion with all sentient beings. His book was birthed during this difficult time.

### **Kindness: The Shaping of a Life**

What can one do to begin practicing kindness? Khechog says, “Start with slow, deep breathing; then meditate on, ‘May all be kind to each other.’” He suggests considering designating the next twenty-four hours a “day of kindness.” “During this day, really try to turn your heart and mind to kindness. When you’re talking to people, ask yourself, ‘Am I speaking kindly?’ When you’re walking, ask yourself, ‘Am I doing this kindly?’ When you are doing anything, ask yourself, ‘Am I doing this kindly?’”

Another practice of kindness and compassion is to practice becoming a Mahayana—one who cares for the well-being of all. In conversation, Khechog shared that in Nepal and India, music distributors made thousands of illegal copies of his music CDs without paying him a royalty. Instead of being angry, Khechog practiced Mahayana. “I can’t complain. I’m happy

that they’re making money. As a Mahayana, I’m supposed to care for all sentient beings—not only on this planet, but in the whole universe. When you develop universal kindness, when you think about the highest and best for all beings, you become a Mahayana.

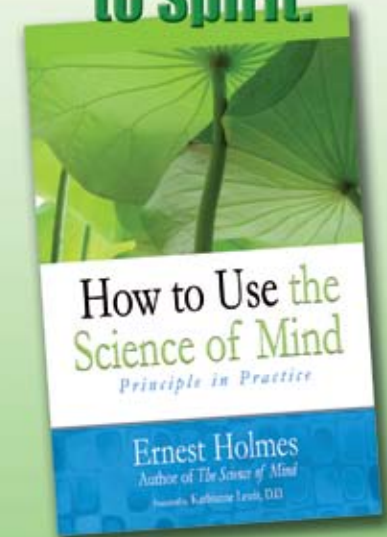
“If everyone were sympathetic and good-hearted, the world would be very different than it is now. We could enjoy all the details of any situation we experience,” Khechog said, adding, “Kindness can improve our quality of life, no matter where we are.”

To the reader of his book, he says simply, “You have had a beautiful heart since before you were born; it’s always been there, and it has always held the potential to love others....It’s just a matter of trying—making an effort to tap into compassion—every day. No matter who you are, there is a seed of goodness. We Tibetans might say it is a seed of Buddha nature.”

Nawang Khechog remains on the path with his readers. “I hope to spend the rest of my life bringing some useful service to humanity and to all the species who share this planet.” ■

For more information or to order CDs, visit [NawangKhechog.com](http://NawangKhechog.com).

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