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Beneath sky, beyond stars

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Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy

Documentary

Opens Friday at the Cinema du Parc in Tibetan, with some English voice-over and subtitles.

Parents' guide: of little interest to most children.

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Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy isn't just a film. It's a cultural treasure.

Graham Coleman's recut and digitally restored 1979 documentary of Tibetan Buddhist faith in exile has been called a masterpiece, but the word hardly does justice to this four-year labour of love and quiet observation.

Early in Coleman's three-part, two-hour and 14-minute opus - distilled from an earlier four-hour cut - the Dalai Lama gathers his people together in Dharamsala, India, where they have taken refuge since the Chinese occupation of their homeland in the mid-1950s.

"What is the basis of Tibetan culture? he asks them. The answer, he says, is "basic humanity." In religious and societal terms, that means "an unbiased compassion for all sentient beings." Without compassion, the great leader claims, the essence of what it is to be Buddhist and Tibetan is lost, and any reason to return home is lost with it.

Religion, culture and country are all the same thing, the Dalai Lama insists. The practice of religion is memory.

The vast majority of Coleman's film is just that - a record of religious ritual. It begins with the rigours of debate among monks in Dharamsala. "What defines a virtuous or non-virtuous action?" a monk asks his students, hands clapping for emphasis. The students scramble for appropriate answers.

The second part follows the lamas of the Phulwary Sakya Monastery in Nepal, as they prepare for the ancient protective ritual known as "A Beautiful Ornament." The procedure involves contemplative retreats, and the elaborate construction of a symbol called a cosmogram. The artistry, as practiced at a general level, is astounding.

The ceremony itself unfolds in real time, with arcane subtitles hinting at the meaning behind the constant chanting to distinctively Tibetan musical accompaniment - the wild horns and drums sound like they're falling down cosmic stairs. Visually, the piece beggars description. "Exotic" only hints at the variations of the colours red, yellow and brown.

Part 3 takes us to Ladakh, and fascinating preparations for a funeral. Tibetans are very matter-of-fact about death, and precise in their knowledge of what happens at the moment of death, in the time after

death, and in the period leading to rebirth. This is, in many ways, the most comforting part of the trilogy, even as a body burns and the brilliant mountain light turns dark.

Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy is slow. Most of it is the Buddhist equivalent of a Christian church service, assuming the days when the church permeated every facet of society. But as a document of a culture now fighting for survival under foreign occupation, it is of incalculable value. Go in prepared for an experience unlike anything you've had in the cinema before, and you will be richly rewarded. It is, perhaps, disrespectful to award stars to religious ritual. This is documentary filmmaking of the highest order.

Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy opens tomorrow.

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