

[The Globe and Mail](#)

May 19th, 2006

A DOCUMENTARY TO CHANGE YOUR MIND

GUY DIXON

Tibetan Buddhism: It's like candy to documentary filmmakers.

And each devours it differently. Some documentaries, such as the National Film Board of Canada's 2003 documentary *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, focus on the religion's emergence into the West, showing in this case Westerners following their impulsive spiritual lama around the globe.

Or they get political. In *What Remains of Us* in 2004, also from the NFB, the filmmakers smuggle a videotape of the Dalai Lama into occupied Tibet. Or there is 2005's *Refuge*, which aimed simply to spread the word of Buddhism to larger audiences by interviewing contemporary Tibetan teachers and devout Hollywood celebrities.

Then there is the restored and newly re-edited version of the daddy of them all, the 1979 masterpiece *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy*.

Made over four years by British director Graham Coleman, who was trained in theatre direction, the film is firmly rooted in an old-school, Frederick Wiseman, cinéma-vérité style, in which the director is unseen and there is no overt storytelling on the screen.

Instead, *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy* solely focuses on the spiritual essence of the religion: first, witnessing the Dalai Lama receiving and teaching his followers; in the second part of the film, following a long performance of the ancient, deeply hypnotic ceremony known as A Beautiful Ornament; and finally, offering incredible scenes of monks ceremoniously offering guidance to the soul of a dead man, followed by the man's cremation.

The film was originally exhibited in two, two-hour segments, coinciding with the Dalai Lama's 1979 visit to the United States. The two parts have now been condensed into a single two-hour version.

The director, who later spent 15 years working on Penguin Books' translation of the ancient text *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, says the aim of the film was to capture as accurately as possible the kind of epiphanies and visions that come through meditation and other Tantric practices.

"In a way, we were trying to be extremely literal," he says. For instance, in long scenes of religious ritual, highly decorative religious symbols suddenly fill the screen like luminous incarnations.

This requires a degree of patience from the viewer. Watching *Tibet: A Buddhist Trilogy* can be compared to viewing the slow-paced, hypnotically engrossing 1972 Soviet science-fiction film *Solaris*, or even, say, the final transformation sequences in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

As Coleman says, people either love the film (particularly those curious about Tibet, Buddhism and experimental filmmaking), or they have no patience for it. "I just think people have a short attention span these days," he adds with a laugh.

Which is a shame. The film's methodical approach makes for a highly sensitizing experience. You become tuned-in to the quietest muttering prayers or clattering ancient music. The images and colours become richer as the camera lingers. The whole experience is transformative.

"In Tibetan culture, there's no gap between your mind and what's outside [the body]," Coleman says. "In our culture, we think of them as separate. But in the Tibetan way of looking at things, the barriers between the environment and your mind are very porous. So depending on your own way of looking at things, you can change what is happening outside."

Some may call that mysticism and magic. But is it also the definition for the rarely tapped power of filmmaking?