FILM GUIDE

Tibetan Buddhism Part I:
Preserving the Monastic Tradition

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FILM GUIDE

TIBETAN BUDDHISM PART I:
PRESERVING THE MONASTIC TRADITION

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SYNOPSIS

This film focuses on the traditional monastic career preserved by Tibetan Buddhist monks of Sera Monastery in Karnataka State, southern India. The film observes a boy's decision to enter the monastery and his family's influence on that decision. It documents the boy's ordination ceremony and observes his future career through the daily lives of other younger and older monks. It observes daily manual activities of cooking, cleaning, building, farming, printing scriptures from wood blocks, painting thankas and molding food offerings. The film documents and explains the style and content of Sera's scholarly curriculum beginning with reading and writing, through attaining the degree of Geshe, up to the study and practice of the Buddhist Tantras. It focuses on the memorization, classwork and debate of six subjects: Logic, Epistemology, the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, the Middle Path and Great Compassion. The film concludes with an overview of the study and practice of the Buddhist Tantras at the nearby Gyume Monastery, including: making a mandala, training in the tantric voice, taking an initiation and holding a fire ceremony.

SUGGESTED USE
Anthropology/Sociology of Religion
Buddhism
Chinese Studies
Comparative Religion
East Asian Studies
Eastern Religions
History of China
History of East Asia
History of Religion
History of South Asia
Non-Western Religions
Religions of South Asia

South Asian Studies
Tibetan Studies
World Religions

INFORMATION DETAILS OF THE FILM
(Note: The questions are arranged in the sequence in which the film presents the relevant material.)

1. What crops are in the fields in southern India (Karnataka) that Lobsang's father and sister are cutting?

Corn is the principal crop planted by Tibetans in South India. They also occasionally plant millet or rice.

2. Why did the Tibetan refugees travel all the way to southern India to set up their new homes and monasteries?

In the early 1960s, soon after the massive flight of Tibetan refugees into India, settlements for Tibetans were set up in the hill station areas of North India at the foot of the Himalayas. Sera, Drepung, and Ganden monasteries were reestablished at Buxaduar in Assam near the eastern border of Bhutan. Some years later, the Indian government gave land in the south to lay Tibetans for settlement because it was more suitable for agriculture than some of the previous settlement lands and also had a cool climate (the Tibetans came from a very cool climate and had difficulty coping with the intense heat of the Indian lowlands). As increasing numbers of lay people moved south, the three great monastic communities followed. At present, Sera and Gyume Monasteries are near Mysore, and Drepung and Ganden Monasteries are at Mundgod, all in the state of Karnataka in southern India.
3. **What were some of the factors Anila took into consideration when she decided to become a nun?**

Generally the motives were religious. Often, when a family has several children, whichever child has the greatest inclination becomes a monk or nun. Buddhism is the religion of the vast majority of Tibetans. They have tremendous respect for those who epitomize the Buddhist ideal by entering the religious life. Monks and nuns accordingly enjoy the highest status and respect in society. It is understood that they are pursuing religious objectives of the greatest importance both for their own welfare and for that of all others. Although in this film Anila is described as an "aunt," Anila is actually the former wife of Lobsang's father. After her marriage, she decided she wanted to be a nun. So she obtained her husband's permission and entered a nunnery. Lobsang's father then married again.

4. **What is the significance of Lobsang's mother and father putting a white scarf around his neck?**

A white scarf is presented at ceremonial, ritual, and social occasions such as marriage, acceptance into monkhood, celebration of an official appointment, making first acquaintance, and leave taking. The whiteness of the scarf signifies goodness, virtue, and good fortune. The scarf is presented as a sign of respect and as a hope for good fortune.

5. **Why is the monastery in Southern India called "Sera Monastery?"**

Sera, Drepung and Ganden, the three original Gelupka monasteries, were located near Lhasa in Tibet. They were reestablished by the Dalai Lama in India in order to preserve their great traditions of religious study and practice. There are several theories of how Sera acquired its name. One common theory is the following: Sera monastery in Tibet was located at the foot of a mountain where it was encircled by numerous briar bushes called "se" in Tibetan. The se bushes appeared to form a fence (Tibetan: "firwa") around the monastery. Thus, the monastery was referred to as "Se rwa," "the briar bush fence." "Se rwa" is usually transliterated "Sera."

6. **In what ways does the Gelukpa (Gelupka pa) sect differ from the other three major Tibetan Buddhist sects?**

It is primarily distinguished by means of its founder, Tsong kha pa, who is recognized as one of the greatest scholars and Buddhist masters Tibet has produced. He studied and mastered the systems of all the Buddhist sects of 15th century Tibet. Then, using logic and scripture, he wrote synoptic commentaries that penetrated deeply into the meaning of the Indian Buddhist texts in terms of both theory and practice. He is known as a reformer because, through his moral example and clearly reasoned positions, the excesses of some of the Buddhist practitioners of his time were cleared away. His 18 volume collected works are essential texts for the followers of the Gelukpa (Gelupka pa) sect. The other three major Tibetan Buddhist sects are the Kagyupa (Bka' brgyud pa), the Nyingmapa (Rnying ma pa), and the Sakyapa (Se skya pa).

7. **How does a family develop ties with one particular monastery (as Lobsang's family has done with Sera monastery)?**

Generally, a family has a number of relatives
or close friends who are monks in a particular monastery. Lobsang's family lives close to the monastery and has known some of the monks for a long time. The family knows that when Lobsang enters there, he will see a few familiar faces and be looked after. Upon entering a monastery, a young boy is assigned an older monk who acts as his surrogate father, giving the boy advice, seeing that he follows the monastic rules and studies hard, etc.

8. What is the significance of shaving one's head when one becomes a monk?

When one enters the religious life, changing one's clothing and shaving one's head indicate that one is changing one's secular lifestyle and undergoing a deep change of mind from the secular to the religious. The life of Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, is paradigmatic for monks and nuns. He had been a prince. Upon leaving his palace, he cut his hair and changed into poor clothes to signify his renunciation of attachment to the secular life and his entrance into the religious one. The Buddhist Vinaya (religious rule) states that the length of a monk's or nun's hair should be no longer than two or three finger widths.

9. What are some of the questions included among the 41 that are asked Lobsang in connection with his becoming a monk?

Some of the questions are asked to determine whether the candidate is suitable in general to receive the monks' vows. For example: Have you killed your father? Have you killed your mother? Have you been making your living as a thief? Do you firmly hold non-Buddhist tenets and beliefs? Are you a butcher or an executioner? Some other questions are used to discover whether there are impediments to the candidate's continuing as a monk after he has received the vows. For example: Have your parents not given their permission for your becoming a monk? Has your king not given his permission?

10. What are some of the major differences between the ways in which Sera monastery functions in Southern India and the way it used to function back in Tibet?

In Tibet, the lay community and the government provided sufficient support for the monks so that they could devote all their time and energy to religious study and practice. The refugee community in India cannot provide such support so the monks must spend much of their time working in the fields to support themselves. Because of this distraction, the strength of their religious study and practice is significantly less than it was in Tibet.

11. What shapes are the tormas supposed to represent?

The torma is a tantric food offering that is meditatively transformed into a pure substance and then offered in order to accomplish one of four tantric religious purposes. The shape and color of the torma symbolize these purposes. A white, round torma is for pacifying disturbances. A yellow, square torma is for increasing beneficial qualities. A red, crescent-shaped torma is for spiritual power. A dark blue or black triangular torma is for destroying hindrances and confusion. These are all immediate purposes. The ultimate purpose of all Buddhist tantric practice is the attainment of Enlightenment itself.

12. What are some of the subjects included
in the twenty-year-long curriculum for learning and interpreting the Buddha's words?

The main courses are the following. There are also many other adjunct courses.

**Buddhist Logic:** In-depth study of the logical forms of various kinds of arguments and their applications to philosophical problems.

**Epistemology:** Establishing valid and invalid cognitions, the parts played by perception and conception in cognition the objective and subjective conditions that give rise to cognitions, etc.

**Abhidharma:** (Buddhist metaphysics): A detailed analysis of the inner and outer world of living beings as understood by pure analytical wisdom. This includes a description of the cosmos and the types of living beings within it (the outerworld), and a detailed analysis of the mental components that comprise the human psyche (the inner world). A careful study is made of the various emotional afflictions (klesas), their relations to mental and physical activity (karma), and the way in which these two factors bind living beings into cyclic existence by conditioning their future experiences. Also presented in detail are the spiritual paths that remove the emotional afflictions and result in the different types of Buddhist Enlightenment.

**The Perfections:** An extensive description of all the spiritual practices and stages of attainment that culminate in full Enlightenment (Samyaksambodhi), and the ways in which to accomplish them.

**Vinaya:** A study of the rules of ethical behavior: the vows of monks, nuns and lay persons. These rules were taught by the Buddha in order to lay a firm ethical foundation upon which to base spiritual practice.

**Madhyamika:** A system of Buddhist ontology that teaches voidness (sunyata), the negation of the independent and reified way in which all things appear to ordinary individuals.

**Buddhist Tantra:** A profound, highly specialized, and secret meditation practice that involves visualizing and identifying with Tantric deities and mandalas (symbolic of the qualities and pure environment of Buddhahood) in order to effect a fundamental transformation of the mundane mind and body into the supramundane.

13. Why do the young monks rock back and forth as they study the Tibetan scriptures?

When reciting and memorizing for long periods of time, rocking the body back and forth helps the monks prevent drowsiness.

14. What is the relationship between Sera monastery and Gyume Monastery?

Upon finishing their curriculum at either Sera Monastery, Drepung Monastery, or Ganden Monastery, Geshes can enter Gyume (also transliterated "Gyud med") Monastery to devote themselves to tantric study. Gyume happens to be located closest to Sera Monastery in south India, but it is equally associated with all three monasteries. Gyume also contains monks who are not Geshes. These are called "Bskyed rim pas," and specialize in tantric ritual and the development stage (bskyed rim) of tantric practice. The Geshes, called "rdzog rim pas," specialize in the completion stage (rdzog rim) of tantric practice.

15. What are the major differences of opinion between the tantric and the non-tantric Buddhist traditions? Where do
16. What is the sand-grain mandala used for? And what does it represent?

Amandala can be made of sand, painted on cloth, or constructed out of wood or other materials. It serves as a model of the pure abode and environment of a Buddha and as a basis for visualizing that abode in meditation. Each aspect of the mandala, every tiny color and form, is symbolic of some inner quality of the Buddha's mind. In Sanskrit, "mandala" means "circle." Mandalas are generally enclosed in symbolic circles of diamond and fire.

17. In the collective tantric ritual why do the monks wear what looks like a woman's wig of hair?

The monks visualize themselves in the forms of perfect deities. They wear special garments, crowns, and hair in order to support that visualization. In the ritual depicted in the film the deity is visualized as having long hair.

18. What is the significance of the crown-like headdress worn by some of the monks?

The peaceful deities who are visualized by those monks wear a crown composed of five panels, upon which are images of the five Tathagatas (symbolic of the five wisdoms of the Buddha). Wrathful deities wear a crown of five skulls, symbolic of overcoming the five kinds of emotional affliction (attachment, hatred, ignorance, pride, and jealousy).

19. When the monks are debating, what is the thread-like object they drape over their arms, and why do they clap their hands?

The motivation for debating is that of compassionately seeking to remove the ignorance of others. Wisdom is the means to do this. Debating involves the giving and receiving of wisdom. Monks carry rosaries with them. When debating, they drape the rosary over their arm. They use the beads of the rosary to help them count their points and to keep track of enumerated portions of arguments. The rosary is put on their left shoulder before clapping. The clap is a symbolic gesture. The right hand stands for compassionate method, the left hand for wisdom. Clapping the hands indicates that ignorance and mistaken views are destroyed by the conjunction of compassionate method and wisdom.
THE ART OF DEBATE IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM
Geshe Lhundup Sopa

In India it was the tradition for many centuries for representatives of the various Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools to gather together and hold great debates on religion and philosophy. Because the Buddhists and non-Buddhists adhered to different scriptures, and because within Buddhism different schools of thought differed in certain areas of scriptural interpretation, reason was considered indispensable toward ascertaining philosophical truth and the proper path to release from the cycle of reincarnation. Two great Indian Buddhist scholars, Dignaga (circa 5th century Common Era, i.e., C.E.) and Dharmakirti (circa 7th century C.E.) developed a rigorous system of logic and epistemology that provided a formal structure for personal inference and interpersonal debate, and was the foundation for many developments in Indian logic in the succeeding centuries. This tradition continued in Tibet with the composition of important commentaries by Sakyapa and Kagyupa scholars (such as Sakyapa Pandita and Ngog blo Idan shes rab) and by the founder of the Gelukpa (Gelupka pa) sect, Tsong kha pa, and his students. It is believed that Cha pa chos kyi seng ge (circa 14th century) introduced the hand-clapping style of gesticulation that the Tibetans use when debating to this day.

Many commentaries discuss at length the proper motivation for debating. Its purpose is not to establish one's own intellectual supremacy over one's debating partner. The teachings of the Buddha are deep and, in some areas, very difficult to understand properly. It is for this reason that some of the greatest Indian and Tibetan minds have composed commentaries explaining them. However, a cursory reading of the commentaries is not enough. The ultimate purpose of Buddhism is Enlightenment, which includes omniscience or perfected wisdom. To attain this, many kinds of misconception and wrong understanding must be removed; and for this an important tool is discussion with others of what one has studied. The proper motivations for debate include wisdom and compassion. Wisdom generates a strong desire to remove one's own ignorance, and compassion generates the wish to remove the ignorance of one's partner, so that both may move closer to Enlightenment.

Tibetan students study the subjects of their curriculum under their own individual teachers. Those who are at the same level of the curriculum are grouped into a class of ten to thirty individuals. As a class, they gather each day in pairs to discuss and debate what they have studied. Debate is an excellent way to penetrate deeply into complex philosophical subjects. It can help each student identify what he has misunderstood or understood only superficially. Individuals in a class have different levels of ability, and through this intellectual sharing they help each other to learn. A student who has misunderstood his teacher may hold a mistaken view for some time, but tinder the rigorous onslaught of debate, that mistaken view is ineluctably cleared away.

Each morning, afternoon, and evening the monks gather in the monastery courtyard (called the "chos grwa") to recite their prayers and meditate. Following this, they divide into their classes, each class gathering in a different part of the courtyard. They then thoroughly debate on the text and topic they are studying that month. The preliminary
prayer and meditation helps them clear away their hindrances to understanding. The debate itself is considered to be an analytical form of meditation. Each class selects one of its members to be its organizer, called the "skyor dpon." The abbot of the monastery appoints a monitor ("dge bskos") to watch over the proceedings of the whole courtyard. The debate format draws on the scholarly literature that sets forth the proper terminology and logical form to be followed in presenting one's thesis, avoiding reductio ad absurdum, supporting reason, and presenting a response.

Sometimes different Buddhist commentators present differing interpretations of a point. Each time this occurs, it becomes a subject of debate to determine which interpretation is more reasonable. For example, it is taught in numerous Buddhist scriptures and commentaries that everything is "empty" (Sanskrit: "sunya," Tibetan "stong pa"). But different Buddhist schools and subschools give different interpretations of the expression "empty." This is a very difficult point to understand. By himself, a student often finds it impossible to clarify his own subtle confusions on the subject. Some of his debating partners, however, may employ strong arguments and sharp responses in support of a mode of interpretation that helps him to develop a much deeper understanding of emptiness.

Another major subject of debate is to differentiate between which scriptural passages are to be taken literally and which are to be understood in their implicit meaning. For example, one sutra says: "You should kill your father and your mother." But of course it is a fundamental precept of Buddhism (taught in many sutras) that one should avoid intentionally harming any living being. The expression "kill your father and mother" is not to be taken literally but must be understood in its profound implicit meaning; and what is implicit must be determined through reason.

The Buddha told his students that they should accept his words only after examining them well. They were to scrutinize his words like a goldsmith tests his gold by burning, cutting, and rubbing it. After such an examination, they should accept his teaching; but they were not to accept it literally merely out of respect for him. The ancient Buddhist tradition of debate, then, is based on the Buddha's own precept to his followers that they not neglect reason in their quest for Enlightenment.