

BLESSINGS:

The Tsoknyi Nangchen Nuns of Tibet

Reviewed by Kathy Jean Schultz

Directed by Victress Hitchcock
Chariot Videos, 2005, DVD, 90 minutes
Sound-track music from the CD *Chö* by
Choying Drolma and Steve Tibbetts

Blessings: The Tsoknyi Nangchen Nuns of Tibet, a documentary film directed by Victress Hitchcock, is an account of a 2005 journey up into the mountains of Nangchen. Hitchcock and a group of Westerners, mostly women practitioners from the U.S., arrive in Tibet to visit Nangchen's remote monastic nunneries, which are home to some 3,000 Tibetan nuns. The group travels with Tsoknyi Rinpoche III as their guide. He is a lama who ministers to the monastic women. The party sets out with some trepidation about what they already know from their preparations will be a journey into mixed metaphors: It will be life in the slow lane—and it will be that on steroids.

As they climb into several jeeps at 3:00 A.M. and prepare to travel twelve hours up the mountains, away from Tibet's populous areas, the soundtrack's ghostly music melts into the breathless, arid, clear, and wondrous landscapes that can't help but alter the heart of anyone in their thrall. Hitchcock's pacing is never slow, but rather matches the climb, marbles into the scenery, and sets a suspenseful tone.

The travelers' courage in attempting this venture is tested only a few miles out. Their vehicles predictably get stuck in deep mud, and there are other car troubles that nomads met along the way help out with as well. An umbilical sensation rises, a knowing the cord has been cut. We can almost feel the pinprick of there being no safety net, no road service to be phoned, no tow truck mechanic in rescue mode. The people here do everything for themselves

and live completely on their own, even rebuilding a bridge if and when needed. Off the beaten path and off the grid, in a place where there is, indeed, no path and no grid to be off of anyway. Fittingly, we learn the Nangchen mountains are known as the Land of Meditators. Why would such a place have a repair shop?

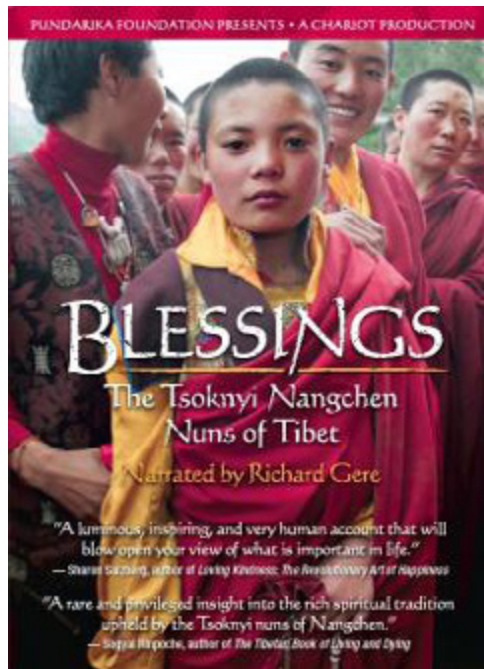
With deft touches, Hitchcock captures the travelers as

they laugh, joke, and demonstrate acceptance and simplicity while pushing their vehicles out of deep ruts. But in more than one set of eyes, concern for the growing distance from civilization is evident. When the road ends, the last few hours of the journey are made on horseback. In the rain. The now-travelers-on-ice experience the physical pain and hardship that Tibetan mountain people live with every day, albeit with a still-jolly ethos.

Richard Gere narrates portions of the documentary, filling in the blanks non-Buddhist viewers might not know. Basic tenets include the understanding that all of life is suffering, and detaching from suffering is the goal. The urge to cling—to conditioning, delusions, new cars, designer clothes, socioeconomic

pecking order, glory, and more delusional thinking—is not the Buddhist road to peace of heart. Indeed, clinging stands to be seen through new eyes on this trip. Relaxing into things as they are—and not what someone dictates they should be—brings relief.

For the nuns the travelers are seeking to visit, being born female in eastern Tibet means being born to hardship. The local dialect's word for woman





Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Mingyur Yogini

Photo: <http://www.tsoknyirinpoche.org/monestaries/questions-and-answers-about-the-nangchen-nuns/>

literally means “lower birth” or born into a lower status than baby boys. In the late 1800s, a local guru quite startlingly directed a wealthy spiritual seeker to build monasteries for women and to care for the women. This was a highly unusual rupture away from the history of male-dominated Tibetan practitioners. The seeker was Tsoknyi Rinpoche I, the current lama’s first incarnation. By the mid-twentieth century, there were 4,000 nuns living and practicing in the area’s monasteries.

In 1959, these monasteries were attacked and destroyed by Chinese soldiers of the Cultural Revolution. The lama at that time, Tsoknyi Rinpoche II, was jailed and then died in prison. Some of the nuns were sent to labor camps. Many of them scattered to their nomadic families. A few of them escaped to hide in caves, where they lived and continued to practice secretly for nearly twenty years in the harshest of climate conditions.

In the 1970s, the surviving nuns began to emerge from hiding. They rebuilt a monastery, and then another, brick-by-brick and wood slab-by-wood slab. These monastic women managed to rebuild their monasteries with their own labor. Understating that history, Hitchcock notes their struggle “shows me how much superfluous stuff I do not need.”

Along the road, the travelers meet nomadic peoples eagerly awaiting a blessing from the lama. Tsoknyi Rinpoche III is welcomed everywhere, like any beloved traveling friar, rabbi, priest, or pastor. A universal human need for spiritual solace and a strong belief that his blessings will help them through their travails wafts through the sights, sounds, and music here in the Land of Meditators. Nomadic peoples in primitive villages gather around, approaching the lama for blessings, and their confidence the lama can help them is

ironclad. The question arises: Is this naïve, quaint, and pre-scientific—or something the world could use in an era of endless war and terrorism?

As the travelers finally arrive at the first of several monasteries they will visit and hear the nuns’ stories, the thread of suffering runs prominently through each. When questioned about why they chose to live monastically, several of the nuns recount tales of suffering and pain within their families. Seeking a life of prayer, meditation, and preparing their own food and shelter, they felt their lives were actually easier than those of their neighboring villagers. The nuns’ lives of serenity and joy, as well as compassion for each other, seemed the better choice when faced with the choking circumstances of their birth. Moreover, in the monastery, the women—the lower births—could read and sing, whereas women in the nomadic groups were illiterate and without any scholarship in their lives. As more of the nuns recount through translation how they came to join the monastery, more speak of the suffering their tribes endured, poverty, and family strife in a milieu where they are doomed as lower births. For them the monastic life seemed more peaceful and serene by comparison. What looks like isolation and hardship to the visitors is joy to the nuns.

The visitors witness the nuns lugging their water up a hill in the damp and cold, and it’s yet another reminder of the Grand Canyon-esque contrast between lifestyles. The visitors remark on how they practice in their own lives, how they try to deepen their practice, and how they do grasp that the concept of renunciation in the historic Buddhist framework would include physical discomforts unknown to them. How often do we leave a meditation class or retreat and warm up our cars immediately because it is so cold? If they had come

on this trip to truly wrap their heads around “renunciation,” they got more than their money’s worth.

To the video makers’ great credit, as viewers we are on that same quest. Hitchcock frames each scene with such nuance—of shadows and light conveying the lack of electricity and the candlelit world—that when we learn another constant medical problem the nuns face is eye trouble due to reading in candlelight for so many years, we can almost feel it, and certainly understand how it happens. And so there is another example of physical hardship and primitive medicine to help us reimagine the Western concept of renunciation. Not for the fainthearted, this renunciation—or the coddled. Renunciation can seem to be separated from practice in the West, but not here. One nun witnessed a woman enduring a long childbirth that was so painful and fruitless, with the baby stuck and not able to be born, that the mother grabbed a knife and cut her own throat. Many of the nuns came to the monastery after witnessing some terrible tragedy. One says there is “no comparison” between living the peaceful life of a monastic and living in the world.

Lama Tsoknyi Rinpoche III explains that in the regions surrounding the monasteries, the communities welcome

during the twenty years they spent in hiding, living in caves, guarding their traditions. The younger nuns learn from the older ones in this regard, with great determination. “They never give up,” Lama Tsoknyi says. Near the end of their trip the visitors are taken to meet the oldest nun, who dwells high up in a cave-like shelter. She prays every waking moment and believes “Every moment you can benefit other beings.” Although this statement may have been heard in a Pollyannaish tone in any number of Western retreat houses, standing atop the mountains in the cold mist, meeting someone who personifies the teaching, it takes on a different perspective. The shallowness of its Western meaning can almost be smelled, and it feels like the visitors are literally inside a prism, recasting perspectives.

The nuns’ collaborative lifestyle serves long retreats and periods of meditation with apparent ease. Some sit in retreat for weeks, months, and in one example, years, while the others manage the household by tending to the food, maintenance, and garden. Then they switch places. Upon visiting a monastery where some nuns had just completed a three-year-long retreat, the visitors naturally had questions. Imagine a Westerner not talking for three whole years? The

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the nuns and what they are trying to achieve. They respect that there are these little pockets of residents praying for all the others. He says that since the monasteries or nunneries have grown, crime has actually decreased. The nuns serve the surrounding peoples by bringing solace. “Having a kind heart” works, he notes.

The nuns make the point that they are always meditating, whether cooking, weeding their food gardens, or talking with visitors and locals. Their goal is continuous practice. In this regard they proceed with tremendous confidence. Because they have the older nuns as guides and teachers, they are able to believe they are capable of achieving understanding and enlightenment, capable of bringing spiritual peace to their neighborhood. In this manner they can overcome the destiny of their birth, the lower birth of women in Tibet, and know that they are entitled to self-confidence and self-esteem, like men are.

The older nuns kept alive methods of concentration

retreaters explained, “If we don’t practice, we let down all sentient beings.”

One of the practice-deepening gifts of the film is the visitors’ respect and awe for their hosts, evident in shots steeped in both contrast and silence. Four weeks into their journey, the visitors notice that “having no personal space” has become an irritant. Chuckling at their discomfort over being crowded into sleeping spaces after long days of hiking or horseback riding, they are able to vividly see that the nuns live in close quarters all the time—close and primitive.

“Is this the same practice I’m doing?” Hitchcock herself laughs.

It’s inspiring, one visitor notes, to see people so devoted to practice, people who embody a quality of un-self-consciousness. “I could not be a nun,” one of them decides, acknowledging the cultural divide. “They’ve truly achieved something,” another observes. Yet the Westerners are not sure what it is. What the nuns have achieved seems untranslatable. The genuineness

of loving kindness and compassion strived for by the nuns is striking to the point of seeming surreal or unreal to the visitors. How could this be taken back home? The answer is that one doesn't know. It may take a lifetime to figure that out. Deepening practice is challenging for Westerners, and to see the real thing in action is akin to nothing most Westerners have experienced.

Lama Tsoknyi notes it is helpful when Western practitioners can "slow down their engines." Hitchcock demonstrates just how ingrained fast-engine ruminating is when she asks him, "How do the prayers of these nuns impact others?" He explains that while the mind has obstacles, the heart sees that there are these "pockets of practitioners" here in the mountains who can actually benefit the peoples around them. "More pockets of kindness could completely transform the world," in his view.

On their last night before leaving Tibet, the visitors and the nuns sing songs to each other in a cultural exchange. The visitors sing the pop song "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," which greatly amuses the nuns, followed by "You Are My Sunshine." The lyrics, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine," translated for them, prove even more thought-provoking for the monastics. The little songfest is a moment where Hitchcock's vision truly shines. She captures this slice of life with both nuance and thunderbolt at the same time: One wonders what in the world the nuns must truly have thought of this performance. An astonishing level of acceptance and respect, from and for all parties, flowing in all directions, soaks right through the viewer's screen, inducing yet another of Hitchcock's visual mixed metaphors—gentle shock. This moment is why the filmmaker came here; this is why she made this arduous journey. She captures the attempt so many Westerners make of trying to practice an ancient tradition wrapped and hidebound in Asian history, its many hills and valleys highlighted in this moment of music-sharing. So far

apart the two groups of women are, yet so mystically alike in their goal. All roads lead to Rome, we'd say in the West. Here, all roads lead to Buddha.

Well, not roads actually, but horse paths.

If there is to be any minor quibble with the film, it might be that sexuality is not addressed and at some points in the story seems a bit of an obvious omission. When the lama speaks of lower crime rates and less alcoholism in the neighborhoods near the nunneries, he doesn't mention whether local men ever try to break in or force sex on the nuns, and the filmmaker also never addresses homosexuality in a story of many women living in close quarters for all of their lives. One of the visitors, when talking about whether she could live the Tibetan lifestyle, answers no because she "is a sexual being." From her perspective this precludes her ever being able to live in a Nangchen nunnery. This would have been the perfect point at which the filmmaker might have doled out just a slice of information. The nuns seem somewhat ethereal and perhaps even over-blessed by the end of the film, but we know they must be quite human.

In all, *Blessings* can't help but deepen our practice and be intriguing for anyone seeking transformative metamorphosis. It is the diary of that quest. Director Victress Hitchcock, with the combination of her camera angles, lighting that could tell the story by itself, haunting music, and perfectly paced editing, takes us to a place we really could not possibly have gone before.

Kathy Jean Schultz is a writer, editor, and video maker living in Ventura, California. She co-authored the book *Intuition: Finding the Healer Within*, available on Googlebooks. Her short video *Perishables in Love* was screened at the 1998 Channel Islands Indie Film and Video Fest. She has authored dozens of magazine and newspaper articles, as well as written and produced programming for public-access TV.

