

FILM REVIEWS

Satya: *A Prayer for the Enemy* has won a number of Best Film festival awards in the United States and Europe in youth, education, and documentary film categories. Why is no surprise. This video is a gem and well worth purchasing for film libraries. It packs a direct moral punch, and an instructive one as well, without being strident or self-righteous about incontestable human rights violations or cultural genocide. In a little less than half an hour of haunting images and touching song and sound effects, director and producer Ellen Bruno allows viewers to experience for themselves aspects of the recent painful history of Tibet through the unembellished testimonies of humble Buddhist nuns who were imprisoned and tortured by Chinese Communist troops who have ravaged their land and suppressed their religion and core values. Since the Chinese occupied independent Tibet in 1950, it is reasonably estimated that more than one million people have been tortured, executed, or starved to death for their role in demonstrations against the Chinese occupation.

The young nuns, who appear to be in their teens or early twenties, are disarmingly poised and wear their sufferings lightly. They seem to have transcended anger, vituperation, and revenge. Instead, they have chosen loving sympathy to combat those who have deprived them of everything, including their country. Speaking for the others, and echoing the teachings of the Dalai Lama,

SATYA

A Prayer for the Enemy

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY ELLEN BRUNO
IN ENGLISH AND TIBETAN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES.

VIDEO: 28 MINUTES, COLOR, 1994.

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Photo courtesy of New Day Films

one nun confidently and gently teaches that the Chinese, too, “can acquire the wisdom eye to see what is right and what is wrong.” “Our enemy is our greatest teacher, teacher of patience and compassion,” another young nun narrates, “our imprisonment is our greatest test of faith. . . . I ask that those who imprison us be freed from the darkness of ignorance, that the clouds which obscure the truth give way to clarity.”

Satya is a Sanskrit term which means “truth.” The film lives up to it in every cut and terse narration. Before the Maoist invasion of Tibet in 1949, “to shave the head was to retreat from the world. Now it is to enter the world as witnesses of truth,” we learn. “Monks and nuns have become the real enemy of the Chinese. The strength of our devotion frightens them,” a nun asserts. “When we went to demonstrate (demonstrations by Buddhist clergy began in 1988), we expected nothing but death. We are fighting for the truth and for this we must be ready to die. The truth will find its way. We never doubt this.” The deep conviction and strong determination of these heroic young women make *Satya* a message of hope and courage, rather than a tale of despair and pitiful martyrdom.

Thoughtful high schoolers and young adults will be impressed by how the young protagonists of this film dealt with their unspeakable suffering with unshaken resolve and an almost unbelievably generous attitude toward their torturers. The nuns are totally

self-effacing and nearly invisible in their modesty compared to modern urban youth's search for identity and noisy distractions. Their compelling stories make the culturally distant world view of Tibetan Buddhism and a bleak episode of oppression in modern Asian history effortless to learn and hard to forget. The topic remains timely as major political powers finesse their policies toward China, weighing and weaving human rights concerns with economic and military considerations.

Ellen Bruno spent months in Dharamsala, India, where the Dalai Lama has set up his government in exile in order to interview nuns who had escaped from Tibet. She also visited Tibet itself to witness firsthand the effects of the Chinese occupation there. It was a dangerous mission to attempt to connect with the resistance movement which the Chinese military was forcefully trying to obliterate. The film contains footage of torture chambers and prison guards torturing a nun which was actually shot by Chinese soldiers who employ photos and videotape of demonstrators in order to identify and arrest activists. One of the tapes was apparently dropped by a soldier during a protest demonstration and snatched up by a monk who passed it on to a Westerner who brought it to an archive in London where Bruno obtained it.

This film is not a light documentary about exotic cultural features of mystic Himalayan kingdoms. Those who wish to duck or tiptoe



Photo of Ellen Bruno courtesy of New Day Films

about the political realities of Tibet and China must go elsewhere. Those who wish to explore and experience the spiritual depth of Tibetan Buddhism in the face of human suffering will be richly rewarded. The slow pace of the film and easy language of voice over and subtitles can allow it to be used in ESL teaching with older students and adults. A transcript of the complete text, voice-over and subtitles is available from the producer. ■

Frank M. Tedesco

FRANK M. TEDESCO, Ph.D., lectures on Buddhist philosophy and sociocultural issues in contemporary Buddhist cultures for the University of Maryland Asian Division in Korea and other institutions in the Pacific region. He has published works on bioethics, death and dying, inter-religious relations, and the education of Buddhist monastics. He is an advisor to the Korean National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and other NGOs.

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