

Soundings into the History of the Buddha's Teaching in the Deep North

by Hubert Decler

Bernstein, Anya (2002), *Join me in Shambhala*, documentary (A study of Buddhism in Buryatia [Southern Siberia]), 29 min., Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources.

This review constitutes Part II of Hubert Decler's larger piece, which includes the translation of the Sandalwood Jowo's (The Sandal Buddha) "History" by the 2nd Changkya Rinpoché, Rölpé Dorje. Part III reviews Thapa, Shanker (ed.) 2008, *Northern Buddhism in History*, Kathmandu: Vajra Publications.]

Regarding the *art* of "narrative"

For a living account of the remaking of a cultural identity, in a closely related setting—Buryatia in south Siberia, part of that same former Soviet Union and victim of an equally meticulously planned religious eradication program—we are better served by Anya Bernstein's documentary, *Join me in Shambhala*.¹

In the course of her live presentation, filmmaker Bernstein apologized for the absence of maps at the start of her movie. It was easy to guess that she preferred to keep it that way. She must have reckoned that the resonance of the word "Siberia", at the start of the film, would be 'geographical situation' enough; in the first place as a byword for *The Gulag Archipelago*.

She warned the audience about the absence, also, of narration—considered indispensable in many ethnological documentaries. Why so? In her Visual Anthropology class in the UK she had been shown plenty of examples, all drawn from works by her predecessors, where the narrator, in voiceover, assumes the role of what in the trade has come to be dubbed "the Voice of Omniscience". The public is no longer that gullible, nor, meanwhile, are those *ethnoi* any longer condemned to an a priori deprivation of a meaningful voice. In the age of globalization, any one group can assume a central stage position, sooner or later, and play their own spokesperson.

This attitude has led to the formulation, in some trends of the contemporary ethnographic filmmaking, known as "observational cinema," of Rule no.1. In a filmed interview or dialogue, one should hear the protagonists' own voices, in their own language. That should be accompanied by subtitles. Overdubs that erase the voice of the speaker after the first four words are out. Such rules ensure a degree of control, crucial for early or rare archival material, when it is (or will be) viewed half a century after the recording, in the presence of someone fluent in the language in question. Was the informant's original message conveyed with every nuance in tone and facial expression? Or are we dealing with yet another colonial display of some grand explorer's ego or an ignoramus's make-believe omniscience?

... *au feu de camp où nous écoutâmes des informateurs*
[... around the campfire, we listened at length to (our) informants']

I-forget-who from France-i-stan, somewhere in the Terai, long long ago.

Rule no.2 goes like this: if narration there has to be, let it be the protagonist's own. It is a technique widely applied in *Join me in Shambhala*. Anya must have conducted, not so much "intensive interviews", as lengthy "guided conversations" and I don't doubt that her 'informants'—that standard, slightly silly term!—were close to having become her genuine friends by this time and must have felt themselves to be a meaningful part of this project. They must have been gently guided towards one topic at a time, but never prevented from going off on a tangential tale. A conversation piece, once launched, could wander off in whatever direction, with minimal intervention by the researcher/ filmmaker.

Bernstein then cut-and-pasted selections from her collection of monologue storytelling onto often unrelated filmed sequences of Yeshé Lodrö (*Jñānamati) Rinpoché and his chief disciple and attendant Tendzin Tsering (who bears the title of Lharampa), during their different occupations or daily life in Buryatia.² As a result the monologues let us have glimpses into their private thoughts; a little as if we are overhearing stream-of-consciousness passages from a diary.

The viewer spontaneously perceives the film as such, practically unaware of the filmic technique involved. That is the admirable thing about it; exactly what Ananda K. Coomaraswamy used to refer to as "art that conceals art". The composer of the film creates the impression that it was all dead easy; that everything fell naturally into place. The long hours of patient editing in the studio that no doubt went into the production of *Join me in Shambhala* are cleverly concealed. The viewer feels like a young child for the first time 'reading' a Tintin or other *bande dessinée* album.

Freedom from a revolutionary ancien régime

Atiśa spent the last twelve years of his life in Tibet where he taught widely, revivifying the Dharma after a period of savage persecution [under Lang-darma].

Padmākara Translation Committee (1992) 2002: 108, n.5.

Apart from the introductory written blurb, *Join me in Shambhala* does not touch on What Went On Before. For this we have to consult sources such as Prof. Jerryson's historical overview of the preceding seventy years, of dictatorship by those nasty few who claimed to be 'the Proletariat'; and his translations of recorded testimonies by survivors of the Mongolian 'Lamaist Holocaust'.

Anya Bernstein's work deals with the reconstruction now occurring, among a people that were once systematically robbed of what in the past they could claim as culturally their own. She introduces us to Tulku Yeshé Lodrö whose root Lama in Tibet was a Buryat monk (hence his present commitment), but whose incarnation lineage—the 'Yelo Tulkus' of whom he is the fourth—was based in Lithang (the birthplace, in Kham, of the Seventh Dalai Lama, as predicted in the famous *White Crane* song of the Sixth). With his disciple-attendant he has for the second time accepted an invitation to visit the farflung communities who have been starved of the presence, among them, of fully

qualified Buddhist masters for nearly three quarters of a century. Here is how she proceeds.

Just as we wonder whether it is a shaman's drum we hear in the distance, the sound transforms into the rhythm of a long distance train's wheels over the rails. A girl in shorts is stretched out, reading, in one of the sleepers; the seat opposite her being occupied by a Great Dane. It is half dark in the passage way. One young kid who must have gone on an exploration fails to trace back his family's compartment; in panic, the boy breaks into tears. Seated in the next compartment are the two monks, both engaged in their early morning meditation practice, both performing the *mudrā* gestures that signify welcoming a deity with the usual offerings presented to an honored guest. At this point an official in uniform comes to inspect the travel documents: "Passports, please". Attendant Tenzin hands them over; there is a close-up of page 1, as the official reads out Yeshé Lodrö Rinpoché's name—which is how we first come to know it. Upon noticing that his birthplace is given as "Tibet" (which she pronounces with a strong Russian accent: 'Tibyet?') she breaks into a big welcoming smile. *The Times, They Have A-Changed*.

The two monks have now left the train and walk past a monumental bronze head of Lenin, set up in some colorless, former Soviet townscape: Ulan-Ude. As they climb the stairs to the flat, they greet the invisible filmmaker with "Tashi Delek".

Soon after, attendant Tsering Tenzin is seen at work in the kitchen, preparing *tentuk*, vegetable and flat-noodle soup, standard fare. He explains how worried the Buryats were at first, in 1993, about the Lama's meals and refused to believe that a monk raised in a South-Indian settlement could possibly conjure forth a genuine *tentuk*—let alone a tasty one. Later it is Rinpoché in person who reads off the recipe: dried yoghurt, dried powdered vegetables, dried meat (...), "all kept in a leather pouch and which, when thrown into boiling water, instantly turn into a highly nourishing dish". The nomad's favorite.

Ven. Tenzin—this much is obvious at a glance—does a first class job with the *tentuk*. And only now do we recall an earlier bit of 'casual monologue': his having been offered by his parents to the Lama at the age of seven, as a private disciple and how Rinpoché has remained his one and only teacher. Since then they have practically never been a day apart; to serve him is his greatest joy. He has now taken up the study of the Buryat language, in order to serve him and his disciples even better. It slowly dawns on us that his *tentuk* achievement, in fact, has been an act of Guru bhakti. It is a notion that will gradually be reinforced by other imagery, along their itinerary over the Buryat Republic's endless plains. It is expressed *by gentle suggestion*, for an audience that does not need everything spelled out.

"On the outskirts of Ulan-Ude"

We see the Lama perform a Burnt Offering (*homa-pūjā*);³ and an episode filmed in some detail includes the offerings to the Fire deity, Agni-deva, whose name (in the vocative: "Agnaye") is easily recognizable in the spoken address:

OM AGNAYE ĀDIVYĀ ĀDIVYĀ AVIŚA AVIŚA MAHĀ-ŚRĪYE
HAVYA-KAVYA VAHANAYA VAJRA-PUṢPE ĀḤ HŪM

Again as an inner monologue, 'collaged in' rather than superimposed, the Lama informs us about the function of this meditative rite, with a few words about the deities of the four elements, and an explanation about the function of the Fire deity in particular, who is able to burn away any faults committed in the course of a meditational retreat. In a roundabout way, the attentive viewer is hereby informed that some of the monks (or even lay people) must have completed either a short meditational retreat or, possibly, the full three-year and three-forthnights one. The camera lingers for a moment on one of them, a heavy set man with a white mustache.

This is what counts most in a living tradition: the presence of living masters who earned their spurs of meditational experience in *gupha* situation (literally: 'in a cave'; but basically meaning: in ideal circumstances of isolation from the world, over a sustained period of time).

This, incidentally, is a crucial point not touched upon in editor Thapa's concluding essay to the historical studies in the *Northern Buddhism* anthology. It *is* the crux of the matter—without it, we are left with mere "religion by family custom". When did the last Newar yogins complete a meditational retreat, within their own tradition? Tāranātha, in his "History of the Slayer-of-Death", informs us that Bharo Lotsāwa's chief disciple, some time in the 11th century, sponsored equal numbers of Newar fully-ordained monks and fully-qualified lay yogins for a consecration ceremony in front of the temple at Śāntipur. How soon after—and how many centuries ago?—did an abject fear of a solitary *gupha* lifestyle a priori exclude the emergence of experienced masters?

On, the Lamas & party then move, their cars preceded by a group of riders in full gallop.

"Bayangol Village"

Elsewhere an effort is directed towards healing the environment. We are all familiar with the environmental catastrophe, unleashed by the 'scientifically planned', large-scale irrigation schemes for mono-cultures which resulted in scenes like the dried up Aral Sea, emblematic of engineering over-reach by the once powerful Donkey-Ears of Science. The voiceover puts it simply. After the fire, the water element is addressed. Nāga-kings get disturbed by the throwing of rubbish, by digging and pollution in general, and may then cause harm in return. If the nāga serpent deities are made to feel better, nāga-related diseases will become easier to heal. Rains may become more regular, harvests increase.

The ritual intervention comes in the form of an offering of 'nāga medicine' (*klu sman*) composed of about a hundred ingredients (mention is made of the milk of a white goat, the milk of a red cow). The mixture is poured into the nearby lake. Also deposited therein is a ritual cake (*bali*).

Then, during the fade out, the whistling of the wind over the endless plains transforms into a chant by those who have become known as the Tuva Throat singers.⁴

Elsewhere en route, we witness an elderly lady (age 81) requesting the refuge vows as an upāsika lay practitioner. She has trouble repeating the formula of the vow:

... I, by name of *so-and-so*, from right now until I reach enlightenment, 'take safe direction' with the Buddha, ...",

(translation here given in Alex Berzin diction) in Tibetan—which apparently she knows or once knew, though not in the Lhasa form ("your dialect") in which it is formulated. When, on top of her original name Tsering-Thar she is given a new Refuge Name, "Lobsang" (*Blo bzang* = Matibhadrā, 'Fine Mind') she has an attack of the giggles. The Lama sees no problem in this. The intention is genuine and so is the basic understanding. It is all a bit strange and a bit new, after all those years.

"Egita village"

The culmination of Yeshé Lodrö Rinpoché's visit to Buryatia comes with his participation in a rite dedicated to Maitreya. The procession is preceded by two officials in old style robes, carrying auspicious arrows with five silken banners. It includes an emerald green, near-lifesize image of a horse that pulls a small ratha, the chapel-on-wheels which houses an image of the future Buddha. This time the narration is in the Rinpoché's voice:

That green horse is a local addition to the festival, based on a folk interpretation of one śloka in the text of the Supplication. The future coming of Maitreya, in there, is compared to the rising of Sūrya, the sun god, in his chariot pulled by seven emerald horses. And the prayer wish addressed to Maitreya Buddha is for him to "appear in a like manner".

But this point got lost in the Mongolian translation of the prayer, where Maitreya himself is imagined to appear on such a Green Horse[s]-drawn chariot.

Now this, like all Mongolian nomad lands, *is* of course horse country. We see the public reverently touch the horse with their head, as for a blessing. It does not look as if Yeshé Lodrö Rinpoché intends to force a correction onto that part of the ritual event. A reinterpretation, one day? Maybe.

Here again, not everything is made explicit for everyone. Bernstein informed me that, when shown in parts of the Russian Federation, the highlight of *Join me in Shambhala* was the short sequence, subsequent to the Maitreya procession, inside the temple; with a glimpse (*darśana*)—devoid of any comment—of the standing Buddha statue with his eyes aimed at the sky. Not only is it, like the two "Machendranāths" of the Kathmandu Valley, the 7th c. White Jamali of Jana Bahal in Kathmandu and the Red Karuna-maya of Bungamati & Patan, made of sandalwood and attributed a considerable antiquity; it was, as once upon a time the Jamali, recently 'recovered' from a hidden place of concealment, thanks to which it escaped destruction. A burning question, in Buddhist art-historical inquiry, has now become: Is this the original "Beijing Sandalwood Buddha?"

For a detailed discussion of the alternative origin stories of the sacred Matsyendra-nāth icons as part of the group of "Five Ārya Brothers Lokeśvara", see Ehrhard 2004 or, for non-German speakers, my review thereof (HD 2006). The object of Ehrhard's study is a "sacred biography" of the firya Wati sandalwood icon, originally established in Kyirong; and this lifestory's ornamental title is about "The [Emerald] Green Horse that draws the Day-Maker [Sun] of True Conviction in a Hundred Directions" (*Dad pa'i nyin byed phyogs brgyar 'dren pa'i rta ljang*). A similar "sacred biography" exist for the Sandalwood Jowo, from the hand of Changkya Rolpé Dorje (1717-1786); translation *forthcoming*.

Later we see Tulku Yeshé Lodrö, accompanied by his attendant walk over the prairie, under a sky that looks as if borrowed from an Emil Nolde painting. The proceedings here include a purification of "Mountains and Rivers" (*Ri klung*) whose reflections in a convex mirror are ritually cleansed usually accompanied by a temporary vow: a ban on hunting and fishing in the entire region.

I will not give away how the film ends, but it is during these visually quieter moments that the Lama provides a number of meditational instructions: "View all phenomena as a dream, as a reflection in a mirror, ...", without explicitly stating that this is what they are. The train too comes in again. And there is a short statement, as a sort of postlude, about the harsh training undergone by the 'Throat Singing' Gyutö monks, whose soaring voices end the documentary.

¹ Presented by the author, at the Fulbright Hall, Kathmandu, Spring 2008.

The subtitle explains: "A study of Buddhism in Buryatia and a map of Buddhist cosmology". Actually there is not much of this latter "map", beyond a vague comment as to whether Shambhala is a geographical place on earth—possibly even in the region of Buryatia—or a Pure Land, only accessible through a visionary journey. Or a combination of both. This map thing is basically an excuse to get "Shambhala" in the title [So I surmised. Bernstein later corrected this assumption of mine: "Not so, *Join me in Shambhala* or *We'll meet in Shambhala* were the last words of a famous Buryat Lama, presumably to a disciple who was a Kālacakra practitioner like himself. It is an allusion reserved for 'Buryat insiders']. The original Russian title of the film is *Встретимся в Шамбале*.

As I had the opportunity to point out elsewhere, one itinerary leading to a (ideal?) geographical starting-off locus for the visionary journey to Shambhala departs from ... Bhaktapur (*Kho khom*). See HD 1998: 94-95, n.23.

² On the studies that lead to the coveted Lharampa title, see Dreyfus 2003: 257-261.

In the course of a subsequent communication, Bernstein insists that these "rules", rather than being those for contemporary documentary filmmaking, are perhaps better defined as the rules associated with "a certain school of ethnographic filmmaking called Observational Cinema (of the 1970s), to which I adhered in this early work, because I was trained [in Britain], at the Manchester school of visual anthropology ." The two rules mentioned in the text no doubt still hold their validity, even if they no longer assume the role of an absolute Credo.

³ In fact centered on Resplendent Lightning Terror, Śrī Vajra-bhairava, in the Gelug lineage the main form of Yamāntaka, Slayer of Death; but this will only be evident for those who catch and recognize the relevant Heart mantra (hr̥daya-mantra) of the deity, as the fire is being lit. The text of a Pacifying homa pūjā rite for both the Thirteen Deity and the Solitary Hero forms of the Śrī Vajra-bhairava, by the Second Paṅchen Lama, Lobsang Yeshe, and the Fifth Ling Rinpoché respectively, is available in English translation; see Sharpa Tulku & Michael Perrott (transl.) 1987.

⁴ Its ritual application was made famous worldwide by the touring monks of the Upper Tantric College (Gyutö), able *simultaneously* to sing with a head voice and throat voice. As a folk art in the Mongolian republics, this 'impossible' form of bel canto is extensively documented in the film *Genghis Blues*.

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