



6-2-2016

Recalling a Buddha: Memories of HH Karmapa XVI

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Recommended Citation

Fisher, Danny (2016) "Recalling a Buddha: Memories of HH Karmapa XVI," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss2/6>

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Recalling a Buddha: Memories of HH Karmapa XVI

Abstract

This is a review of *Recalling a Buddha: Memories of HH Karmapa XVI* (2006).

First-time filmmaker Gregg Eller's *Recalling a Buddha: Memories of the Sixteenth Karmapa* is much more hagiography than documentary. Considering its area of interest, though, this is not a criticism—rather, it's the highest compliment. For, in the words of the Ninth Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, one of the great living masters in the Karmapas' Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism: "Buddhist hagiographies, life-stories, speak about what caused someone to turn away from samsara, at which point in their life they decided to do so, how they were able to find the precious teachings, who taught them the practices they did, and what they achieved from practicing diligently. Hagiographies deal with motivation, faith, trust, enthusiastic endeavor—the aspects of wisdom that arise from specific practices, and the benefits such practices bring for one's self and others. That is why biographies—in the case of siddhas and saints, hagiographies—are written: to inspire and encourage others to lead a meaningful life." As far as the tradition is concerned, then, *Recalling a Buddha: Memories of the Sixteenth Karmapa* is quite a success: even non-Buddhist viewers will probably find themselves sufficiently moved and motivated by Mr. Eller's work.

It certainly helps that the subject is one of the most beloved Buddhist figures in modern history: His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, Ranjung Rigpe Dorje (1924-1981). Already the subject of one previous documentary, 1985's exceptional *The Lion's Roar*, the late leader of the Karma Kagyus is good

copy: after receiving a remarkable spiritual education in his native Tibet, he fled to India following the Chinese occupation in 1959 and found himself responsible for directing the reestablishment of the Kagyu school in exile at Sikkim's Rumtek Monastery. (The incredibly wide dissemination of Kagyu wisdom around the world in such a relatively short span of time bespeaks his triumph in beginning this Herculean undertaking.) Using old films and photographs, as well as testimonies from his interviewees, *Recalling a Buddha: Memories of the Sixteenth Karmapa* not only takes us through the history but, more importantly, the style and substance of his teachings.

Mr. Eller's thorough research and thoughtful filmmaking produce some fascinating moments (including a memorable digression about a bizarre, irreverent radio ad for the Karmapa's first North American visit), but it is the unobtrusive, generously portioned, and reverently arranged interviews that have the most powerful impact. For one thing, in virtually every case, the viewer will feel close to having participated in a private interview with the teacher speaking; the intimate, instructive environment that the director cultivates is both very effective and very affecting. It helps too that he brings us many living titans of the Buddhadharma, including the aforementioned Thrangu Rinpoche, Her Eminence Khandro Rinpoche, the 7th Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, Lama Ole Nydahl, Ani Tenzin Palmo, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, Traleg Rinpoche,

Shambhala acharyas Mitchell Levy and Judith Lief, and part-time filmmaker Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (director of 1999's *The Cup* and 2003's *Travellers & Magicians*). But, by way of pithily summing up why it is that all these other Buddhist teachers serve Mr. Eller's film so well, it is scholar and Tibetan translation expert Gene Smith who puts it best when he says, "Look how good all these students are..." Though each individual has something distinctive and striking to share, just knowing that everyone in this extraordinary, all-star assembly feels they owe such a debt to the Karmapa and his instruction leaves a very big impression. Part of Lief's interview is the touching confession that she and the other students of the late master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche—an imposing and impressive figure in his own right—really didn't understand anything about devotion until they watched his meticulous preparations for that first North American visit of the Karmapa. Similarly, the viewer learns much about devotion through the interviews in this film.

Produced over a five-year period, *Recalling a Buddha* is a "Buddhist documentary" in the fullest and truest sense, coming as it does from very deep within the tradition. Yet it is completely accessible, perhaps because Mr. Eller has chosen to focus exclusively on the person of the Sixteenth Karmapa. It's not about esoteric aspects of Buddhist thought and practice so much as it's about a way of being. As the filmmaker writes in the media notes for the film, "Karmapa himself

was the teaching lesson. How he lived and how he died gives us the example of an awakened being: a person with a noble heart.”

In constructing his paean in cinematic form—complete with photographic and filmic traces of the departed master—perhaps Mr. Eller has offered us something more than a hagiography. In many respects, *Recalling a Buddha*, when seen in its ideal form in theaters with a community, comes closer to being something like the votive stupa of the Buddhist traditions. (It’s a mark of the film’s excellence and uniqueness that it uses the medium in such a way that it’s difficult to place it among traditional forms of Buddhist art and literature.) As Thrangu Rinpoche has said of the stupa, so we might also say about *Recalling a Buddha*: “Even though no living master may be present to teach the Dharma in actuality, generation after generation, people continue to see the stupa with their eyes, receive blessings, understand that there are the Three Jewels in which they can place their trust, and in this way, naturally, the Dharma continues. In the same way, when building a stupa for the remains of a great master, his power and blessings will remain. That is the reason to build a stupa.”