

Defender of the Dharma:

Tales of a Buddhist Murderer

by

Thomas K. Shor



He was not who I would have expected to appear out of the fog in that narrow alleyway late on a mid-February afternoon in Darjeeling. The Himalayan town had been in the clouds for weeks, and after a succession of cloaked figures and women wrapped in damp shawls appeared out of the gray fog only to dissolve back into it, when I first saw him I thought it couldn't be. Only the hardiest of travelers make it as far as Darjeeling in winter, people with a reason for being there. I was there to collect stories for a forthcoming book, though I was in the alley trying to make myself invisible with my camera, taking a break from writing to photograph, trying to make the best of bad weather by photographing the interplay of figure and fog. I hadn't seen a tourist in weeks.

What struck me was how normal he looked, like your typical American guy. Middle-aged, rounded, balding, what hair he did have was crew cut. He wore a light-gray windbreaker with a corporate logo and loafers. His loafers were encrusted in mud. He looked cold and out of place, as if his Chevy had broken down somewhere outside Kansas City and he suddenly found himself walking down an alleyway in the middle of a cloud. The majority of Americans never leave North America. This man looked a part of that majority.

He came right up to me. "If you think this is bad," he said, sounding a little like a stand-up comedian, "it's even worse in Gloom—I mean Ghoom." Ghoom, a town a few miles from Darjeeling, is foggy even when the sun shines

everywhere else. The sun hadn't shown itself in Darjeeling in weeks. Ghoom must have been dripping.

"My lama is down there, staying at the monastery," he continued. "God, it was horrible. The clouds were so low I got lost right in the courtyard. I'm still chilled to the bone. You know what pilots say who fly in the Himalayas: You have to be careful, the clouds have rocks in them." He laughed heartily at his own joke. He did not fit my idea of someone with a lama in Ghoom.

He put out his hand with the assertiveness of a traveling salesman. "The name's Johnny Hill," he said. I introduced myself.

"Do you know where one can get shelter from this weather, and maybe a glass of beer?"

I knew of a place close by, the Shangri-La Restaurant, upon whose back wall was painted a huge mural of de Vinci's Last Supper, with Buddha sitting in for Christ and monks in burgundy robes with shaved heads taking the place of the twelve disciples. It was getting too dark to photograph anyway, so I led the way to the Shangri-La. As my reward, he offered to buy me a beer.

Since we were the only customers, we chose the table next to the fireplace. We ordered beer.

"I've done many things in this life," he said. "Now I'm on the lama circuit with Geshela—that's my lama. He lives in the States, you see, and I'm his lead disciple, I've been with him the longest, more than fifteen years. We asked him how long he'll live. He doesn't think that long. He's in his eighties. Maybe another five years. That's why we're here. To take him to his old haunts, the monasteries where he lived, so he can see his old friends one last time. I've done enough in this lifetime to fill a few incarnations. I'm a filmmaker, but I've done many things. I even used to work for the PLO."

His rapid fire of words ended suddenly with those three letters. Maybe he had said too much. I didn't care. I asked him what he did for the PLO.

He took a sip of beer, glanced around the room, and leaned forward.

"It's a long story," he said, "but I started by smuggling hashish from Morocco and Tunisia. This must have been in '68. I was driving a van in Tunisia and the police caught me and brought me to the police station. And there I was in cuffs next to my van, my hashish piled up on the sidewalk, about a hundred bystanders looking on. I thought, O-oh, I'm in trouble this time. There was a lot of money in that shipment—and the money wasn't mine. I could bribe my way out of jail, but I needed the hash too. So I had to do some fancy negotiation. I insisted on speaking with the big boss, the district commissioner of police. They brought me to him, but my problem was to find a solution mutually acceptable and beneficial to us both. You see, you have to find a way to make the other guy save face. You can't just come out and bribe such an official, not someone that high. He has his dignity.

"Then I hit upon an idea.

"So I say to him, 'Do you have a son?'

"He says, 'Yes.'

"I say, 'Has he made his haj?' You know, the haj, that's the pilgrimage to

Mecca. He says, no his son hasn't made his haj. So I say, 'Don't you think I could make a contribution towards your son's haj?' He smiled a crooked smile, as if my hook got him right in the lip! So I ask him how much a ticket would cost to Mecca and he tells me and I say, 'No, a first class ticket.' I was out of there in no time. And for the next couple of years, I sent many a police official's son on his haj.

"The finest hash wasn't in North Africa, though; it was in Lebanon. So I started smuggling hash from Lebanon. In Lebanon, it was mostly the Palestinians selling the hash. Their struggle, just to survive, took money; and the more traditional methods of making money were closed to them. Remember, I had spent a long time in Muslim countries and had many Muslim friends. I must have gained lots of good Muslim karma by sending so many fine and outstanding sons of North African police officials on their haj.

"Smuggling arms or drugs—it wasn't that different. Many of the same skills. I was in my twenties—I'm in my mid fifties now—and I was idealistic, fighting the good fight. Or so I thought. When you're young, you have lots of energy. I used to smuggle shipments of high-powered weapons. I even once delivered a shipment for the Black Panthers. We stole them from an armory in North Carolina and drove them to the West Coast.

"The whole world was on fire. Vietnam was raging. People were freaking out all over the place. It couldn't go on forever. For me the end came when I got busted with a shipment of guns for the PLO. The PLO were both honorable and loyal. They busted me out and helped me flee the country.

"That was long ago," Johnny said, laughing nervously. Maybe he had said more than he wanted to. With hardly missing a beat, he changed the subject.

"I believe we all have many incarnations in this very life. In this one, I'm with Geshela. He's been in the States a long time, you see. He's on the lama circuit there—you know retreats, the whole thing. Our retreats are by donation only. By relying on peoples' consciences, you get more. Most put in \$100. We have a hundred people. That's \$10,000. For a weekend. Not bad wages."

Johnny Hill cracked a wry smile and produced a pregnant pause by simply closing his mouth for a second and allowing the underlying silence to manifest.

"To tell you the truth," he continued, "though he wears a simple monk's robe, Geshela's a rich little fellow."

"How do you think the money and the West effects him?"

"I think he plays into it. They all do."

"These Tibetans are a bit like children," he said, laughing. "Right there in the moment. They're probably the most developed human beings the earth has ever produced; but socially—sexually—they're unsophisticated. They're really mountain people, you know. And then they go to the West and the women fawn over them. They can have their pick."

As Johnny spoke he shifted constantly on his chair and ran his hand over his closely cropped, bristly hair. He wiped beads of perspiration off his forehead and upper lip as he told his tales at breakneck speed.

I asked him how he dealt with the elaborate ritual, all the demons and gods, in Tibetan Buddhism.

“That’s a problem, even for me,” he said. “Actually I’m a Theravadan—you know that’s the southern branch of Buddhism. I first encountered Buddhism in Cambodia, where it’s all much cleaner and to the bone. No gods, nothing. Just meditation and cleaning the mind. Later, I lived in Sri Lanka, with my second wife. My daughter was conceived there. I’ve been married three times, you see. Long story. Have two children. A son who’s twenty-nine. My daughter’s now nineteen. Geshela kids me. I’ve been with him fifteen years now and he says, ‘Johnny, you’re still a Theravadan.’ So I say, ‘When will you convert me?’

“So I ask Geshela: You can pick your parents for your next life, right? And he says yes, if he wants. He’s known my daughter since she was four. I named her Alexandria because of Lawrence Durrell’s Quartet. Did you know that Lawrence Durrell went to school here, in Darjeeling? That’s right, he went to Saint Andrews, just up the road.

“Anyway, the first time I brought my daughter to meet Geshela she asked me if he was going to be like a raisin, all bald and wrinkled. I told her yes.

“So I bring her to him—this was in the States—and there were many people there and I had to speak to someone. I lost track of her and then there she was with Geshela in the next room sitting on the floor playing jacks. Ever since, they’ve had a special closeness.

“So I say to him, ‘If you can pick your next mother after you die, why don’t you wait a few years and then pick Alexandria? She’ll be of child-bearing age, and she’d be a good mother for you.’ His face lit up with the thought. He really beamed with the idea. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think I’ll do that!’

“But then I told him, ‘If she’s your mother, then I’ll be your grandfather—and it’ll be payback time!’ His whole face turned red; from his chin, it moved up right to the top of his shaved head. ‘Oh—no,’ he said, ‘oh, no!’”

Johnny Hill laughed a staccato laugh, wiped the sweat from his upper lip, and changed directions yet again:

“Everything has its purpose, you know. Even our meeting. It’s not often we meet someone on this level. There’s a reason our paths have crossed. Can’t you feel it? There is no coincidence.”

Though strange to say it, I knew he must be right. He was some sort of madman with a motor mouth, intent on telling the mad tale of his life by stitching the disparate facts of the universe together into a unified whole, making connections like flashes of lightning, hugely powerful, yet ephemeral.

Out the window a bevy of Western women passed by in the darkening gloom, shaved headed, in the robes of Tibetan nuns. When I turned back to Johnny Hill, he had a strange look on his face. He told me he knew what it was like to kill a man.

This is how he put it: “I know the feeling of a knife go into flesh. It was difficult the first time. It weighed on me. But then, well, you have to defend yourself...

“The whole problem of humanity is courage. Fear—that’s the block. I’ve

always defended myself. The only difference now is that I've taken the bodhisattva vow, the Buddhist vow of love and compassion for all sentient beings. I'm a follower of the Tibetan dharma—the sacred teachings, the Way.

"I have defended my life—with death. Now I am a defender of the dharma."

I asked him what the circumstances were, when he killed a man. For the first time, Johnny Hill was silent. He closed his eyes and rocked gently in his seat, rather like an inmate in an asylum. A full minute went by. Then, with eyes still closed, he started nodding his head. He opened his eyes.

"I've rarely spoken of this. My three wives know, and two or three close friends. My children don't even know. I haven't spoken of it in years.

"It was after I got in trouble in the States, with the guns and all, and been busted out by the PLO. They smuggled me out of the country—and I couldn't return. Nor did I want to. America.

"America was waging war in Southeast Asia, shredding villages in Vietnam. It was also the time of the secret bombing of Cambodia. And they considered me a fugitive from justice? I had grown up the son of a career military man: World War II vet, American Legion—the whole thing. I saw how the war had destroyed him. And now America was doing it again, sacrificing their young on the altar of war.

"The war had done a job on my father, and in turn he did a job on me and my three brothers. My youngest brother was a heroin addict. When he was nineteen, he said to me, 'I'm not going to stick around here for long.' I asked him what he meant. 'I'm opting out. There's too much pain down here.' Two months later, he was dead of an overdose.

"Yeah, I've seen a lot of death—and too much destruction. Both my godfather and godmother committed suicide.

"It's all karmic, the life one leads. Even one's death, one's pain. I told you, I'm a defender. It's true that I've defended myself by killing. And although I'm now a defender of the dharma, I could kill again—if I needed to. The stance of the warrior is always defense, never offense. All true warriors know this. And I was bred for it. I'm a Scott. I come from four generations of military men.

"After I married my German wife, I told my brothers we had to forgive Dad. You see, his problem was that as a soldier he had killed a lot of innocent people. And because of this, he was embittered, alcoholic, and we all hated him. But you know, you get older—and maybe a bit wiser?—and by then I had been with Buddhism a long time, so I thought we should have compassion for him and forgive. Dad was old by then, and all alone. My brothers refused. So I went myself to see him, where else but at the American Legion Hall. He was drinking with his buddies and they all knew I was married to a German, and none of them would look me in the eye. But not because of why you'd think, because I'd married the 'enemy.' They just stared into their glasses of Budweizer. They were so ashamed—of the death. Of all that death. They knew they had killed innocent people. Just think of Dresden and the firebombs. This is what bonded them, what kept them knocking back the beer. Not the glory. If it were only the glory, they could have gotten on with their lives. No, it was the

death they had delivered to innocent people, to women and children.

“And that the kid of a buddy of theirs was married to a German woman brought it all back, the memories beer could not erase. All they could do was drink more beer and wish for stronger medicine.

“And compared to the soldiers of Vietnam, they were mature when they went to war. Did you know the average age of a soldier in World War II was twenty-four? In Vietnam, it was only eighteen! But they had stronger medicine. They had heroin and ganja.

“After I got caught with the guns and was busted out of jail by the PLO, the PLO helped me out of the country. I had had some pretty rough characters after me before, but now I was a wanted man, and a big enough fish that I was on the FBI’s short list. The CIA were expending resources on me as well.

“I was in my mid twenties. I didn’t care whether I lived or died. Actually, I thought I was invincible, that nothing could get me. I had been in many ‘situations.’ I had killed and was always the one to survive. I was in flight from the United States government, and where better to flee than to the center of the maelstrom, to the very heart of dark violence.

“So I went to Cambodia. It was in Cambodia that I first encountered Buddhism.

“The country my country was bombing was going to teach me about peace.”

Johnny sipped his beer and looked into space over my right shoulder.

“I was traveling through the countryside—hot, steamy Cambodian jungle, staying in villages, always on the move, sleeping in Buddhist monasteries, trying to stay one step ahead of America’s bombing raids. This was 1972. The stench of death was everywhere.

“Then I found a peaceful place, a village in the jungle. I stayed there about a month, got to know the people there. And then we saw the formations of bombers; we heard the distant rumblings. Then the bombs exploding in the neighboring villages. We were next. There was a bus in the village, and a bunch of us jumped in. We were a few miles from the village when we heard above the engine’s drone the sound of the missiles coming in, a high whine followed by silence, followed by a tremendous explosion whose impact blew the bus’s windows out. The sides of the road exploded. Everybody panicked. The driver froze. He didn’t know what to do. Bombs were exploding now one after the other in long lines.

“If I had learned anything it was how to act in a situation of life and death. So I ran to the front of the bus, peeled the drivers’ fingers from the wheel, grabbed him by the shoulders, and threw him out of his seat.

“I was now responsible for a busload of souls the might of the US Air Force was hell-bent on killing.

“Since the bombs were pressing forward before us, I thought the safest place was back in the village. So I turned the bus around. And when we got to the village, the village was in ruins. There were craters everywhere, half the size of this restaurant.

“We staggered out of the bus and the trees were filled with shredded meat.

It was impossible to tell which meat was human and which was water buffalo.”

Johnny closed his eyes and tears ran down his cheeks. Any question of whether his stories were true or not vanished. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve only spoken of this a few times.”

He collected himself and continued: “Then we heard the unmistakable sound of choppers coming in—you know the sound.”

His face lit up. He was suddenly the stand-up comedian. “You know the mantra of Cambodia in those times, don’t you? ‘Chicka.’ The sound of helicopter rotors. Chicka—chicka—chicka—chicka.”

He howled with a sudden burst of laughter like machine gun fire. The tears running down his cheeks were for this brief moment tears of laughter.

“Two helicopters came in over the village and landed. We were all too stunned and in shock to do anything—neither to fear nor to hide. And out of the helicopters came these American Southern Baptist fundamentalist missionary medics. They were there because they were Christians and felt it their duty to administer to the wounded.

“Remember, this was Nixon’s dirty little secret, his bombing of Cambodia. And mind you, they had come in about \$300,000 worth of equipment, all from passing the hat in churches in Alabama and Mississippi and who knows where else.

“I went with one of the nurses—she had a beautiful little body and a sweet Mississippi accent—and assisted her with the wounded. The whole time I thought they’d take me with them. I thought I was saved, being a white guy like them and an American. But when they started up the rotors and I began running with the nurse toward the chopper, she grabbed my arm and stopped.

“‘We can’t take you,’ she said.

“I was stunned. Smoke from a distant town rose on the horizon. She pointed to it and said they were headed there to do their good works. ‘It is all we can do to lift ourselves and our supplies,’ she said. ‘We can’t afford the weight.’

“For the first time in a long while I cared whether I lived or died.

“The nurse said, ‘Over there, in that direction, is Thailand. It should be a three-day’s walk. Stay off the trails and travel only at night, and God willing, you’ll make it.’ And I did. I walked to Thailand.”

Johnny took a long sip of beer.

“What happened that day in the Cambodian jungle changed me forever. There was America, in the guise of B-52s, bombing the shit out of the country, shredding innocent Buddhist villagers and leaving their meat hanging in trees—all to protect civilization from the godless commies; and there was America, in the guise of fundamentalist Christians, coming in to mop up after them, performing their Christian duty in hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of equipment gathered by church donations, no doubt from good commie-hating, flag-waving bible thumpers. It renewed my faith in America. It was in the jungles of Cambodia suffering America’s secret bombing that I experienced America’s diversity.

“You never heard of this in the press, did you? But I was there. That both extremes could exist at one time changed me forever—maybe because I was myself a nest of such contradictions. I’ll tell you a secret—we all are.

“And by the very fact that America is still wrecking havoc with the world at the same time that we are sitting here, in a cloud in the Himalayas, connecting at such a high level—this speaks to the fact that the planet is changing fast. It’s all coming to fruit. There must be thousands of other conversations just like this taking place all over the world—at this very moment! We’re not the only ones pushing the envelope; it takes many minds, in joint effort, to think new thoughts.

“Look: the Tibetans had the dharma, perhaps the greatest kernel of ancient wisdom to survive to the 20th century; but they hoarded it, they kept it for themselves. They also had a rigid social system—vast landholders (often the high incarnate lamas) and their tenant-slaves. They had internal wars going on all the time, often between monasteries! They fought so much amongst themselves that when the Chinese invaded, they couldn’t unite against them.

“It is because the Tibetans fled Tibet and have been scattered around the planet that the dharma has spread. Without the Chinese slaughter, my lama wouldn’t have left Tibet. Without him, I wouldn’t have gotten the teachings. I wouldn’t be here. I probably would have killed myself long ago. The Tibetans protected this ancient kernel of wisdom for millennia. Now they’re sharing it with the world. The Chinese gave them the push. These teachings could just save the planet yet. And for that, we’d have to thank the Chinese.

“I don’t condone what the Chinese did in Tibet,” he said, “but I don’t like all this complaining about it either, especially among Western Buddhists, who idealize everything Tibetan. Look, two out of six million Tibetans were murdered by the Chinese. Do you really think the Tibetans had nothing to do with it? When it’s one’s karma to kill, it’s another’s karma to die. What’s the law of karma worth if it only holds for when good happens? When something bad happens and you don’t see how you’ve brought it on, it’s only because you don’t see the connections. That’s the law of karma: Everything’s connected. Everything!”

Johnny Hill’s compact Midwestern salesman’s exterior seemed but a disguise, for there was something all-encompassing about his vision, the way he explained how both butchers and saints are needed for humanity’s new dawn, how if only one hundredth of one percent of humanity understood the tenets of wisdom and compassion as handed down by the Tibetans, that’s all it would take. One hundredth of one percent—critical mass to turn the whole thing around. He believed nothing could stop it now. He saw a new dawn. And in his presence, I saw it too.

“Look, I’m a film maker,” he said. “See it from third camera, from that objective place, like God looking down. The lamas travel now to every country on earth, teaching love and compassion. Think of how small their number next to the total six billion.

“It’s all a big play,” he said. “We’re all just out here on the planet. But we’re

only here on parole!”

Johnny Hill reached across the table and put his hand on my shoulder. He squeezed so hard I had to keep myself from wincing.

The greatness of a man may be known by the breadth of his contradictions.

When we got up to leave, Johnny Hill told me he was going to Nepal early the next morning with Geshela. I realized he had never told me the circumstances around which he had killed.

We shook hands outside the restaurant, Western style. Then we hugged each other. Then we stood with our palms pressed in an attitude of prayer, knowing it was unlikely we’d ever meet again. It was then I saw what was written on his windbreaker, what I had taken for a corporate logo. It was from a film he had worked on. In big letters it said, THE GUILTY. And under, in smaller letters, was written, CREW.

