

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

Volume 14, 2007

*Amongst White Clouds and
On the Road with the Red God
Macchendranath*

Reviewed by Joanna Kirkpatrick

Bennington College
jkirk@spro.net

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: editor@buddhistethics.org

Reviews of *Amongst White Clouds* and *On the Road with the Red God Macchendranath*

Joanna Kirkpatrick¹

Amongst White Clouds. Edward A. Burger: filmmaker, cinematography, music. Producer, Chad Pankewitz. DVD, 86 min. NTSC and PAL versions. Distributor: Cosmos Pictures Inc., Canada, 2004. Website: <http://www.amongstclouds.com/>

On the Road with the Red God Macchendranath. Kesang Tseten. 2005. DVD. Color, 72min. NTSC & PAL versions. Distributor: Kesang Tseten, c/o Hidden Treasure Tours, 509 Lincoln Blvd., Long Beach, NY 11561.

The two recently issued films reviewed here, on aspects of Buddhism from two different countries, have already appeared in film festivals in the United States and Europe. These films are outstanding in that they are not couched in discourses of hyperbole or romanticism, as popular commercial films on Buddhist subjects have been in the recent past. Although *Amongst White Clouds* is the work of a non-Chinese filmmaker, he learned to speak Chinese sufficiently that he was able to communicate with the people around him and the technicians who helped him in production, thus enhancing the credibility of the film. *On the*

¹Bennington College, ret. Email: jkirk@spro.net.

Road with the Red God Macchendranath benefited from its filmmaker being both Tibetan and a native of Nepal, thus able to communicate in Nepali, and also knowledgeable about Newari Vajrayāna Buddhism.

American director Edward A. Burger—Zen student, filmmaker, and songwriter—decided to become a Buddhist while attending university and visiting a local Zen center. After encountering Red Pine's book of translated Chinese poems by Buddhist monks, in 1999 he decided to go to China and learn Chinese. This film is about his quest to find and interview some of the Zen (Ch. Chan) recluse monks dwelling in isolated hermitages among the peaks and gorges of China's Zhongnan Mountain range, home to hermit monks for hundreds if not thousands of years.

After introductory footage, we find Burger at a hermitage, meeting his Master. Scenes of the Master teaching are interspersed with views of the landscape, images of monks chanting, and close-ups of insects eating leaves or being attacked by insect enemies. The Zhongnan Mountains in southwestern Shaanxi Province, centuries ago, were first a refuge for Taoist monks. The parallels drawn in the film between nature and the monk's teachings also reflect a major Taoist point: that humans should live according to nature, not against it. Next, we see the Master planting bean seeds in his vegetable garden. Burger says (in Chinese), "Hey Master, sit for a minute, teach us something." He replies, "Quiescence and action you can't separate. Put your heart into it with one mind and all this is done in no time." He stands up and gestures around him. "All this is practice, it's not just sitting quietly somewhere. All is balanced and tranquil, even work is very calm. Don't give rise to discriminating mind. When you work, just work." The camera shifts to reveal a tall ancient pagoda, sprouting bushy wild plants, rising out of the forest, then moves to a view of the garden and its bean vines, of an owl in the cleft of a tree trunk, of garden stakes and a whisk broom leaning against the wall of the monk's hut.

Burger asks the old man why he lives in the mountains instead of the city. The Master says, "Those who live here have this recluse heart. This Path is strong in them, they are willing to leave those noisy bustling places. They have very little contact with the world, few distractions, they don't leave the mountain, they don't want to see the world. Most of the monks here already understand the practice methods, they don't make mistakes. But you must understand the practice. If you don't, you make mistakes and that's nothing but torture." The monks here are responsible for all of their maintenance (they do not go on alms-begging rounds as monks do in some traditions). They must provide their food and water, build huts, sweep and clean, as well as sit in meditation and study scriptures.

In following episodes, Burger meets two ascetic monks, eating only enough to stay alive and wearing old robes cast off by other monks. They are helping each other build their huts, living together for now on the mountainside, but when both huts are built they will separate and begin practicing alone. One monk laughs as he says, "We can't live together. What if one of us snores? That's no good." Burger then goes in search of other hermit masters, including a nun living in a hermitage far away from her native province of Guangdong. She lives there with her novice disciple, who helps her do some of the hard work. She is spirited in her expression, less restrained than the male monks in her personal comments to Burger about daily practice. The last monk visited is said to be "almost at the end of his journey," meaning close to enlightenment. He is meditating when they arrive. They wait for two hours, wondering if he will open his gate. When he finally allows Burger and his crew to film, they ask, "Why did you come to Zhongnan Mountains?" The monk chooses not to deal with the question directly, but saves the face of his interrogator by smiling broadly and simply saying, "I wish I knew myself."

Viewers cinematically follow Burger's hikes through these beautiful mountains, meeting Buddhist monk hermits and encountering their wisdom stories and ways of living. We gain an immediate sense from this film of the forest recluse tradition of Chinese Buddhism. Variations of this tradition are followed today in two other places, in Tibet and in Thailand. In Japan, religious practice in some schools calls for periods of lone wandering retreat, but such monks are attached to monasteries, unlike the reclusive (as opposed to monastery-dwelling) monks of China, Tibet, or Thailand.

One problem with the film is the dubbed background music and chanting, which often obscure the narrator's voice-over. Aside from this reviewer's perhaps idiosyncratic response to the music, I highly recommend this film for courses in comparative religions, Buddhism, and China Studies. However, instructors should be knowledgeable about Chinese Buddhism and/or Buddhism in general because the film does not offer explicit explanations of Buddhist teachings. Students will have questions about the meaning of the monks' teachings in this film, which should provoke opportunities for extended discussions.

Filmmaker Kesang Tseten, a citizen of Nepal, has created a superbly edited depiction of a twelve-year Newari festival, said to have been observed in the Kathmandu Valley for a millennium, when the chariot (*ratha*, a flat platform on four huge wheels) of the red god, *Rato Macchendranath*, is pulled by devotees between the towns of Bungamati (near Kathmandu—where the deity stays for six months of the year), and Patan (where he stays the other six months during the festival), with stops in-between. This festival (*jatra*) is organized jointly by Newari Hindu and Buddhist devotional societies. To Hindus the deity is a yogic saint or *siddha*, Macchendranath (or Matsyendranath), and also a manifestation of the deity Shiva; to Buddhists he is the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. The film narration consists partly of voice-overs by the filmmaker. Con-

versations among *jatra* principals, and interviews with individuals, are subtitled in English.

The film at first focuses on the two castes who construct main components of the *ratha*: its gigantic tower of woven branches, and the wooden wheels. At the tower's base is a cave-like area where the red-painted image of Macchendranath travels together with one or two priests. The tower is decorated with evergreen branches, flags, and the hinged, golden metal banners often seen hanging from the peaks of Nepali temples. Some of the tower-builders and weavers ride high on the moving tower as they help to guide the *ratha* through narrow streets, around power lines, and between tall buildings. One of them proudly asserts that although he is of low caste, because of his job he gets to ride high above the deity. Projected in front of the *ratha* and lashed to it is a long, heavy timber (representing a *naga* or divine snake), upon which sits a young man who clings with one arm to its prow while sweeping his other arm to urge the pullers onward. When the chariot reaches the town of Patan, it meets the smaller *ratha* of the deity Minnath, pulled by children, and the two *rathas* proceed together through the streets, Minnath following Macchendranath.

We meet Kapil, the main priest and a Buddhist of the Vajrayāna school, as well as caste-leader participants. Kapil will perform most of the rituals because it was his ancestor who stole the deity from the distant forest and brought it to Bungamati. He also rides on the *ratha*. The *jatra* has a foundation myth, illustrated by vernacular hand-painted pictures, about the magical transformation of the god into a bee that is put in a pot and secretly stolen away from its demon mother. Throughout the proceedings, Kapil must perform rituals on the roads and in the forest to appease the demon mother by sacrificing goats, otherwise she will come and spoil the festival.

The vehicle, with huge wooden wheels and decorated with large painted eyes, represents the demon-fighter deity, Bhaivrava. Since his mask is also hung on the prow of the chariot, it is clear that he is bearing Macchendranath along under his protection. We are shown the cutting of tree branches to fashion wooden brake-wedges, and we meet the main brakeman, who has been doing this job all his life, as have the other leading participants. As the chariot moves, we see the brakemen in action, stopping the *ratha* from hurtling out of control. At one point the tower leans over forty-five degrees. Ropes are brought to pull the tower back up and keep it from falling. A crane stands by in case of need, but nobody wants to use it. The pullers must also get the chariot through a shallow stream. Women and girls at another stage of the *jatra* enthusiastically pull the god on his way. It is their turn because, according to the sacred story, the deity stopped in this neighborhood to dally with some local women. If the participants who pull and push the *ratha* along succeed in getting it to Patan and back to Bungamati with the tower and chariot intact, devotees say that the god is satisfied and that he will ensure prosperity for everyone. If they do not succeed and the tower falls, or the *ratha* tips over and cannot be righted, the god will be displeased and people will die. A bystander says that the previous king (Birendra) died because of accidents at the last Macchendranath *jatra*. Devotees believe that it is only by agreement of the god that the heavy chariot moves or does not move. The ritual imperative—that everything must be done flawlessly—is what keeps the god agreeable.

A poignant subtext winding through the film is the story of Priest Kapil's desertion as a child by his mother, who vanished after her husband took a second wife. Kapil says that as an adult he discovered where his mother was living and went to see her. They wept together, but she told him to go away and not come back. Kapil tells us how he longs for his mother to visit the *jatra* and see him at work. He comments on the irony of his being the priest who ritually appeases the god's demon

mother, keeping her away, while he himself is prevented from seeing his own mother. He complains that he has served the god faithfully, but the god does not allow it. "If I could see her it would be like seeing god," he says.

The diagesis includes shots of two different towns' auspicious Kumaris, the living virgin goddesses, sitting with their families to watch the procession. Popular excitement peaks when the King, traditionally the chief *jatra* patron, and his entourage come in a parade of large automobiles to get the blessing of the god. Finally the *ratha* returns to its starting point. The film ends as one of the tower weavers and a toothless, ninety-year old fellow wearing huge sunglasses, meet and joke about how the god was pleased with the *jatra* because it all went well, and now they can eat meat, dance, drink, and be happy.

This is a complex film. Not only does it cover *ratha* construction in detail, and stories pertinent to areas the chariot passes through, but also the religious rationales and the social and gender roles involved in performing the *jatra*. The ironic subtext of the priest Kapil's longing for his mother invites the viewer's personal interest. Scenes of thousands of devotees massed together in the landscape, pulling or watching, cheering-on the *ratha*, some dancing before it, provides suspense. There is also fighting during various phases of the festival. A devotee anxiously comments that arguments are caused by greed and envy. Eventually the conflicts blow over and peace returns. The *jatra* achieves its mission to go on the road and return in one piece to its starting place. The film is thus a first-rate visual exposition of collective liminality, of how the performance of this widely popular ritual not only divides but also unites the religiously diverse human collective in shared exertion, expense, suffering, and happiness.

Instructional use of this film can enhance illustration and analysis of such topics as Newari Buddhism and Hinduism; comparative ritual structure; gender issues and hierarchies; social issues of caste and class; rural-urban contrasts in myth and ritual; religious syncretism; and comparative approaches to ritual processions in Asia or even across the vast Asian supercontinent (which could include such processions in Europe as well). This many-faceted film offers varied opportunities for instruction in the cultural study of Asia in general, and South Asia in particular. Courses on Himalayan Buddhism that use this film would require instructors knowledgeable about Newari Buddhism. An illustrated website with photos of the Rato Macchendranath/Avalokiteshwara temples in both Bungamati and Patan, can be found at <http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/Nepal/nepal.html#avalok>.