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Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey

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A Review of *Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey*

Adam T. Miller¹

Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey. Dir. Wendy J. N. Lee, Exec. Prod. Michelle Yeoh, Nar. Daryl Hannah. 2013, \$549 (Campus Screening License and DVD), \$499 (Digital Streaming License), \$299 (College and University DVD), and \$129 (K-12, Library, and Non-Profit DVD).

On August 5, 2010, a rare weather phenomenon known as a cloudburst ravaged Ladakh, India. Two inches of rain fell from the sky within the first minute alone, followed by a steady downpour, resulting in catastrophic mudslides and flash floods. Buildings were damaged; animals were injured, lost, or killed; and people were left without homes, livelihood, health, friends, or relatives. So begins director Wendy J. N. Lee's first feature-length film, *Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey*.

Since its first screening in early 2012, the film has garnered a good deal of critical acclaim. Not only has it been the official selection of over thirty film festivals and special events around the world, but it has also received ten awards, ranging from a few Audience Awards to Best Environmental Film, Best Cinematography, and Best Documentary. Although I am not a film critic myself (my training is in religious studies), I was not surprised to discover that the film has received such accolades, as I too found its visuals stunning, its message inspirational.

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One impetus behind the film was to draw attention to the effects of the environmental crisis on Himalayan communities, as well as those in surrounding regions, many of which ultimately rely on the Himalayan glacier fields for fresh water. To paraphrase narrator Daryl Hannah, the rise in global temperature has caused these glacier fields to melt more rapidly, which is in turn causing the already extreme climate to become even more extreme, less predictable, and ultimately less habitable. And the fact that plastic goods have been made available without the means of sustainable disposal or recycling only exacerbates the problem. The short of it is this: the pollution of the Himalayas and the river systems originating there, if left unchecked, threatens to put an end to the various human cultures indigenous to the lands affected.

However, the film does not merely spotlight the grim reality the people of the Himalayas, and ultimately we as humans, face if we continue to ignore the crisis at hand. It offers hope for a better future in its documentation of the Pad Yatra, a collective effort of approximately 700 people, led by His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa, to make a positive material and symbolic impact on the Himalayan environment. A Sanskrit phrase loosely translating to “foot journey,” the Pad Yatra was just that—for three months and 440 miles, hundreds of people walked on foot through northern India and Nepal. In addition to the perils one would expect during a hike through the highest mountain range in the world (e.g., extreme temperatures, fatigue, and nausea—the latter was especially found among non-locals), the trekkers at one point faced starvation when an unseasonal blizzard rendered their pack animals unable to continue, and one particularly unfortunate Drukpa nun whose leg was crushed by a boulder nearly died while waiting for emergency transportation.

But the Pad Yatra was more than a laborious stroll, and these trials were not endured in vain. On their arduous journey, the trekkers collected over 800 pounds of plastic and other recyclables, visited hundreds of villages, and encouraged tens of thousands of people to

participate in the effort to curtail the global environmental crisis. As a result of this campaign, several villages in Ladakh have banned all plastic products. Furthermore, just as the participants had surely hoped, the initial Pad Yatra has inspired other events much like it. For example, His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa's organization, Live to Love, organized a tree planting event that broke a Guinness World Record—over 9,000 people planted 50,300 trees in a little over half an hour. And the Eco Pad Yatra has since become an annual event, taking place in places like Mumbai and Sri Lanka.

A compelling and thought-provoking representation of Buddhists and non-Buddhists with similar ethical frameworks working together to do something about climate change—or, as Daryl Hannah frames it, the merging of spirituality and environmentalism—many *JBE* readers and contributors will find that *Pad Yatra* offers fodder for the constructive and critical conversations ongoing in the academy. On many occasions, His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa proposes that the environmental crisis would be well served by a fundamental shift in perspective and values. For example, he describes extreme weather—of which the August, 2010 cloudburst is a particularly salient example—as the environment's (not strictly literal) revenge for human beings not treating nature with respect. Furthermore, he traces the root of environmental problems to selfishness, saying that their solution lies in the cultivation of an all-encompassing loving-kindness. But this affect is much more than a mere attitude according to His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa—the chain of signification represented in the documentary continues to include an explicit equation of loving-kindness and spirituality.² If this is not too interesting in itself, it becomes so when he explicitly distinguishes spirituality from religion,³ and implicitly extracts loving-kindness from its

² Here is the quote in full: “Even though I am a Buddhist, spirituality is very important. Not the religion. Spirituality is clean, kind, selfless, mind, loving-kindness. That is the spirituality.”

³ Early in the documentary, His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa describes the Pad Yatra as “not a religious pilgrimage.” Later, he asserts that walking in nature—especially an

typical context for the purposes of exportation and application.⁴ Given their source, it is not too surprising that these views are couched in language we often identify as Buddhist. And it is precisely this encoding that will capture the attention of *JBE* readers and contributors.

On one hand, those interested in producing scholarship of a constructive nature may want to examine the rich history and literature of Buddhism for precedents or competing views, to flesh out what exactly a loving-kindness applied to environmental issues might look like, to explore how such an orientation might supplement or supersede other ways of thinking about climate change, and so forth. Scholars of a more critical bent, on the other hand, will probably be more concerned to interrogate the religion/spirituality distinction, the significance of each disjunct, the historical/discursive processes that made such a distinction possible in the first place, and the motivation underlying the distinction and subsequent classification of the Pad Yatra as spiritual.

Another aspect of the film that may be of interest to *JBE* readers and contributors of both stripes has to do with what I will call the ethics of representation. The film suffers from a lack of voices; only two individuals—His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa and an American lawyer named Carrie Lee (who also happens to be Director Wendy J. N. Lee’s sister)—receive significant attention from the director. As someone who has been trained, *inter alia*, to resist monolithic narratives, I would have liked to hear a few more perspectives—local and non-local, powerful and marginal. A good example of this lack is the segment on the Kungfu nuns of the Drukpa lineage. Though the voice of Carrie Lee, the film describes the nuns with such phrases as “extraordinarily tough,” “fiercely spiritu-

area like the Himalayas—will soften one’s attitude and gradually result in loving-kindness, which (it bears repeating) he equates to spirituality. His characterization of the Pad Yatra as *spiritual*—that is, *neither* religious *nor* Buddhist—is somewhat problematized by the fact that each day on the trek started and ended with a Tibetan Buddhist prayer ceremony. See also the above footnote.

⁴ See above footnotes.

al,” and “fiercely compassionate” (not to mention that they are “taught modern life skills,” a potentially problematic declaration), and portrays them as bucking trends by leading ceremonies that have typically been performed exclusively by monks. But at no point is even one of the nuns given the opportunity to speak for herself. I recognize that there are time constraints, of course, and a quick Google search reveals that this group of nuns has received a fair bit attention from the media, but I think the benefits of including more voices outweigh any potential costs.

All things considered, *Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey* is a great film. Not only does it provide much for folks who read the *JBE* to consider, but it would also be an excellent addition to courses on contemporary Tibetan culture, Tibetan Buddhism, and environmental ethics, as well as (to a lesser degree) introductory surveys of Tibetan history, Buddhism, or ethics.