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One Mind: A Zen Pilgrimage

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A Review of *One Mind: A Zen Pilgrimage*

Dale S. Wright¹

One Mind: A Zen Pilgrimage. Directed by Edward A. Burger. COMMONFOLK FILMS, 2016, (DVD), U.S. \$349.00.

Edward A. Burger's superb film *One Mind* is a documentary contemplation of the meditative life currently practiced at Zhenru (true suchness) Chan monastery in Jiangsi, China. The film aspires to be a Chan Buddhist film, not just about Chan practice at Zhenru monastery, but more importantly an open exploration into the state of mind that is cultivated and lived there experienced through the filmmaker's own long-term participation in this meditative way of life. In this respect *One Mind* is a remarkable success and in addition provides justification for a review of a Buddhist film in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. If ethics is concerned with the qualities of particular ways of being in the world then what we see in this film is Buddhist ethics at its best.

The film tacks back and forth between monks engaged in work and meditation, and shows a contemporary Chinese monastic community that continues to thrive in this remote mountainous region. Thirty-two years ago I had the opportunity to visit this monastery while exploring the ruins of Chan monastic institutions from the "golden age of Zen." Although virtually all of the great monasteries of this period had fallen

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into disrepair by the early 20th century and then completely destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, somehow Zhenru temple managed not only to survive but to continue a life of Buddhist practice through these periods of religious disinterest and suppression. At that time there were only a handful of monks practicing and living in the monastery, and the buildings were clearly in need of renovation. What the film, *One Mind*, shows is a community of work and practice that has successfully weathered this period of difficulty to emerge as a Chan institution of considerable significance.

An excellent soundtrack is fundamental to the success of the film. Viewers hear the brisk, unsettling sound of wind in the bamboo before any visuals appear and the meditative focus on sound continues from beginning to end, even or especially on the carefully chosen occasions when silence prevails. We hear the sounds of what we are seeing—monks' sandals scurrying into the meditation hall, then their breath and silence, heads being shaved, rain on stone, wooden fish clapping. When a storm bears down on the monastery, a monk pounds a huge drum matching the power and fury of the thunder—a breath-taking minute of sound and sight.

Flowing along in perfect alignment with the sounds of “True Suchness” are exquisite visuals. Here again the film quality is superb, as is the camera work and subsequent editing which allow us to contemplate one take at a time before each yields to impermanence. Close-up shots alternate with wide open perspectives. Sometimes we see only a fragment—monks' walking feet but not the monks; a single worm struggling in the topsoil as a monk hoes the ground. And sometimes the entire valley comes into view contextualizing the community in overall space. Although the film is shot in high-quality color, these colors appear in earthy, muted hues. Everything seen is wood, stone, metal, and ceramic, with dim light and fog muting these already matte organic colors. Browns, greens, and greys are the color of bark, leaves, and well-worn monastic robes rather than glossy painted and plastic surfaces. As is true for the Mennonites and other religious communities committed to an

older order of existence, these basic elements of wood, stone, and earth constitute the full world of experience.

Another dimension of superb artistic skill-in-means is that language is at a premium throughout the film, just as it is in Zhenru monastery. The filmmaker doesn't narrate; there are no chatty descriptions telling you what the monks are doing now. They just do it, and you're fully there to witness. Language does intervene upon the film in three fitting ways, however. First, the film begins with passages juxtaposed on the screen inspired by the final, Gandhavyūha chapter of the *Avatamsaka sūtra*, in which a pilgrim, Sudhana, travels arduously in his quest for enlightenment through many landscapes and teachers to consult the bodhisattva, Maitreya. "Great Teacher" Sudhana pleads, "Please guide me on my quest for an awakened mind." "Young Pilgrim," Maitreya replies, "To find the awakening you seek, turn your gaze inward now toward the landscapes of the mind." As the film progresses through various monastic practices of labor and meditation, further instruction from Maitreya is projected as text upon the scene. These occasional teachings help set the Chan practices we are observing into the larger Buddhist context of the quest for enlightenment.

A second occurrence of language in the film hones in on one monk or another as he talks to the camera about what he is doing. This language is subtle and multi-layered. The subtitles tell us about tea or turtles or gardening or head shaving but in each case there is at least one more layer of Chan wisdom explicitly spoken or implied. Picking tea is about tea, *and* mindfulness, *and* awakening. A third form of language in the film is the monks' ordinary worldly talk: "put it here" or "it's time to finish our harvest." In many of these cases there are no translated subtitles. If you understand Chinese you can hear what they're saying, but for the most part you're better off not understanding so that these sounds and their human origins blend into background audibles just like the babble of the stream. Other than these three occurrences of language, the film offers no additional story line; no individual human interest stories. "True Suchness" just tells its own story.

In one set of scenes a monk in charge of tending the monastery ox as it forages in the brush admits to the camera that he fell asleep and that the ox is now nowhere to be found. “If you look away,” the monk says, “the ox is gone.” Then further teachings from Maitreya flash on the screen. “Young Pilgrim, do not turn away from the unruly ox that runs wild through the forest of the mind,” and we see once again how everything in the everyday world points beyond itself to the “true suchness” of “one mind.” Attentive, mindful editing keeps bringing this theme back into focus, and in the background of our minds the classic sequence of Zen Ox Herding stages is brought literally to life. Mindfulness of the whereabouts and well-being of oxen is analogous to mindfulness of the whereabouts and well-being of one’s own mind. We watch the monk search for the ox, find the ox, struggle to get it under control, and at the end of the film watch him bring the ox into enclosure.

Behind all of these profound spiritual teachings are the daily activities of Zhenru monastery, clearly a thriving Buddhist contemplative community in contemporary China. Set deep in the remote mountains of Jiangsi, this community maintains traditional Chan monastic practices that feature close alignment between manual labor and meditation. The film takes us back and forth between these two activities—seated meditation as practice and mindful labor as practice. Monastery labor maintains a self-sustaining organic farm, a tea plantation that must produce some basic income, and a bamboo forest that supplies materials for many purposes including fuel for the monastery kitchen fires. The worldly and the spiritual come together impressively in both monastery and film.

Because we see monks engaged in the chores of the monastery through all four seasons, we know that this was not the work of a large film crew flown in for a frantic three day shoot on location. Indeed the long cultivated meditative quality of this film has already been conveyed to us throughout. The filmmaker, Edward Burger, was clearly resident in the monastery and a participant in its communal life. As a result he can show us not just the detail of Chan monastic life but how it all coheres in the experience of “one mind.” One Mind (*yixin*) was the central symbol of

early Hongzhou Chan in its origins, and it has carried through this monastery all of these centuries into this revealing film. The result is a deeply moving glimpse into classical but contemporary Chan meditative life. At one point Maitreya instructs Sudhana: “Young Pilgrim, continue forth in gratitude,” which is precisely the response that comes to me as reviewer. Many thanks to Edward A. Burger and crew for including us in the “one mind” of True Suchness monastery. Highly recommended. This is an authentic Chan film.