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*Buddhism Goes to the Movies: Introduction to Buddhist
Thought and Practice*

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A Review of *Buddhism Goes to the Movies: Introduction to Buddhist Thought and Practice*

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Buddhism Goes to the Movies: Introduction to Buddhist Thought and Practice. By Ronald Green. New York: Routledge, 2014, 166 pages, ISBN: 9780415841481 (paperback), \$34.95.

Since 2003, when the first International Buddhist Film Festival was held in Los Angeles, there have been dozens of similar events around the world (Whalen-Bridge 5). The practice of exploring Buddhism through movies has since steadily increased, and similar events have been organized throughout the United States, in London, Amsterdam, Singapore, Calgary, Bangkok, Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur, and other global cities. Popularizing Buddhism with the help of movies has also been on the rise in classrooms, and Ronald S. Green's *Buddhism Goes to the Movies* is an introductory text that "describes the basics of Buddhist philosophy and practice" (xi), especially those elements associated with Theravāda, Pure Land, Zen, and Tantric Buddhism. Ten chapters discuss a dozen films in order to introduce students to some of the more prominent Buddhist sects, foundational concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, and contemporary issues such as gender disparities and the rise of Engaged Buddhism. Little or no knowledge of Buddhism is assumed at the outset, and

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the ten chapters “can easily be considered units for a quarter or semester school term” (xi). *Buddhism Goes to the Movies* is not a focused study of the dozen films listed in the table of contents. Rather, it shuttles between discussion of the films and the Buddhist background issues that the author connects to the films.

The first chapter, “Early Representations: *Broken Blossoms* and *Lost Horizon*,” makes the point that Buddhism has been presented as an “other” to the Western imagination since the beginning of cinema history, and the chapter clearly explains the problem of orientalist representation. Interspersed with discussions of films by D. W. Griffith and Frank Capra, the reader will find glosses on the “Dalai Lama,” “middle path,” and “loving kindness,” emboldened terms that are explained in a little more detail in the glossary. These sidebar discussions of Buddhist elements are not always organically related to the direct discussions of the films as one might hope.

After the first chapter, each chapter begins with a summary of the films in question, usually running about two pages, followed by an analysis of relevant themes. For example, the second chapter uses *Fight Club* to explicate the Four Noble Truths. Green is not the only author to interpret the film *Fight Club* in relation to Buddhism; Charley Reed has written an article on the subject, and David Harper and Richard Anderson have included discussion of the film in their book chapter. Green’s argument follows Reed’s “Fight Club: An Exploration of Buddhism,” in which a rather loose set of correlations is made between Buddhist topics (the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the *trikāya* doctrine) and parts of the film. The narrator and main character Jack, dissatisfied with life, begins to attend various self-help groups, an activity which corresponds, according to Green (who follows Reed), to the four sights: old age, sickness, death, and then a renunciate. The film’s audience eventually learns that Jack has all along been *imagining* Tyler, the charismatic figure who has led him to increasingly violent behavior. Without much recognition of the ways in which Buddhism and the ethos

taught by the hallucinated guide Tyler *diverge*, Green proposes that the rules of *Fight Club*, an activity in which men bash each other back into a sense of grounded authenticity, are precepts of a sort. The apocalyptic/revolutionary plan Project Mayhem that concludes the film has five rules, recalling, argues Green, the Five Precepts of Buddhism:

- (1) You don't ask questions. (2) You don't ask questions.
- (3) No excuses. (4) No lies (which is also one of the Five Precepts), and (5) You have to trust Tyler, indicating the growing cult-like nature of the gatherings. Buddhism also developed more rules and vows beyond the basic five as time went on. (23)

The five rules correlate to the Five Precepts weakly, if at all. Green's analysis might have benefited from a preliminary discussion of the various ways in which Buddhism and film tend to interrelate before using a film like *Fight Club* to explicate the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. As I propose in "What Is a Buddhist Film?" we can clarify matters with an initial sorting exercise: there are films (1) that are clearly about Buddhism; (2) that toy with Buddhist ideas, without being constrained by a need to represent Buddhism accurately; and (3) that may not appear to follow from any Buddhist intention whatsoever, but which are nonetheless drafted by Buddhist film interpreters as allegories. At various international Buddhist film festivals, movies such as *The Cup* fit well in the first category, movies like *Matrix* and *Donnie Darko* the second, and even *It's a Wonderful Life* has been screened as what I call a "draftee" film. *Fight Club* may well be an example of a film in the second category, but Green discusses it as if it were *Kundun* and fits it into the first category. Much undergraduate confusion might result. It would have been better to use a different film to explicate the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

In the third chapter, "Buddhist Awakening: *Waking Life*," Green discusses a film about many aspects of dreaming: "The title *Waking Life* contrasts to what we might think the film should be called: 'Dreaming Life.' This draws attention to the idea that what we consider ordinary

waking consciousness is like a dream according to Buddhism” (32). The chapter then works out the four stages of awakening in Theravāda Buddhism, beginning with “stream entry” and concluding with the *arahant* stage. Green then charts a sequence of awakenings in the film, including a detailed discussion of Tibetan dream yoga practices (37), but during these discussions the films are often left behind. Film and Buddhism are sometimes connected in useful ways, but there are many stray shots as well: “Perhaps one of the most important indications of the director’s Bodhisattva activity is his decision to leave the main character anonymous. Like Clint Eastwood’s *High Plains Drifter*, he rides into town a stranger and remains nameless. This calls into question the self and has the effect of universalizing the character” (41). It is unclear how Eastwood’s mythic vengeance-seeker connects in any significant way with the doctrine of no-self.

The chapters that are clearly intended as Buddhist parables (e.g., “I Heart Huckabees” in chapter four), or which directly represent Buddhist characters and settings (e.g., “Korean Seon Buddhism: *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*,” chapter five) are relatively successful. The discussion of *Huckabees* does a very nice job of using the mischievous, fast-talking quasi-gurus of the film, played by Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin, to discuss emptiness of self and the nonduality of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. In addition to the film summary and Buddhist theme analysis, each chapter also offers brief suggestions for “Further Reading” and “Further Viewing.” Viewers who like *I Heart Huckabees* might also like *Zen Noir*. Readings by Chogyam Trungpa might have been included—his irreverence and earthy humor is a nice analogue to this film’s goofiness.

The fifth chapter, “Korean Seon Buddhism: *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?*,” uses the Korean film as an entrée to discussion of the various Zen traditions, the history and primary characteristics of Seon Buddhism, and the famous ox herding drawings. The sixth chapter, “Theravada Buddhism, Socially Engaged Buddhism: *The Burmese Harp*,” chooses a good film from which to initiate a discussion of specific fea-

tures of Theravāda Buddhism, as the film is set in Burma at the close of World War II, but the characteristics of the religion and the plot, style, and so forth of the film are not connected well. The chapter includes some discussion of Japanese atrocities with reference to Brian Victoria, author of *Zen at War*. The section of the chapter on recent events such as the “Saffron Revolution” are included but not connected to the film in a meaningful way. Though the film is not about Engaged Buddhism, Green wishes to link the tension between contemplative detachment and worldly responsibility by discussing the Japanese soldier who first becomes a monk to avoid responsibility.

“Tibetan Buddhism: *The Cup*” is the seventh chapter. Earlier chapters mention Vajrayāna in a piecemeal way, and one wishes that the volume began with the chapters on Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Buddhism, locating them firmly in time and place, before moving on to films with a more idiosyncratic relationship to Buddhism. There are a number of mistakes in the text—for example, the monks performing a ritual offering are identified as members of the Gelugpa lineage just because they are wearing yellow hats. Green states that the film was shot in Bhutan. The Bhutanese director set his second film (*Travellers and Magicians*) in Bhutan, but it is important to understand that *The Cup* was filmed in a Tibetan settlement area of northern India.

“Japanese Shin Buddhism: *Departures*,” the eighth chapter, uses the film about Japanese funereal practices to discuss Shin Buddhism. As he does in his discussion of *Fight Club*, Green moves freely between the film and the book upon which it is based, but what he does not notice about the film *Departures* is that it strips out much of the overt religious affiliation that one finds in the book. The author of *Coffinman: the Journal of a Buddhist Mortician* in English, on which the film is based, complained about this specifically on the Hongwanji International Center web page:

To my mind it was important to draw the line somewhere, even if it meant abandoning my claim to authorship. The reason is, it was the light of the teaching of Shinran

Shōnin that led me to write *Nōkanfu nikki* / ‘Coffinman’. It just did not sit well with me that the movie should divest itself entirely of the theme of religion. (Aoki)

The chapter refers to the book to supply the missing connections; key terms and names introduced in this chapter include karmic affinity, *nembutsu*, *butsudan*, Shinran, Amida Buddha, *mappō*, and *jiriki/tariki*.

Chapter eight, “The Buddhist Order of Nuns: *Windhorse*,” introduces the problem of Buddhist sexual politics and includes the arising of the *bhikkhuni* order and historical differences in the status of Buddhist nuns from country to country. This chapter offers a forthright discussion of historical sexism within Buddhist institutions.

Chapter ten, “Thai Buddhism in Horror Films: *Nang Nak* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*,” touches on Thai religious holidays, ways of relating to hungry ghosts, and the use of amulets. This chapter pays a bit of attention to cinematic technique and genre, noting camera angles and montage techniques that enhance the thematic treatment of karmic ties across lifetimes. Further, Green discusses the ways in which directors such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul access the horror genre to comment on the relationship between Buddhism and film in Thailand: “There is a very real sense that what *Uncle Boonmee* [sic] in the film can recall is the past lives of horror films in Thailand, including their representations of Buddhism” (127).

The first book on Buddhism in relation to film, *Buddhism Goes to the Movies* covers various Buddhist traditions, can be used to give students an increased working vocabulary of Buddhist concepts, and would work well in a course that uses popular culture to provide a beginner’s level introduction to Buddhism. However, there is a basic confusion of aims that creates serious problems. By discussing films such as *Fight Club*, the point is made that Buddhism has worked its way into American popular culture, but the film is not the best choice for explaining the Four Noble Truths. *Kundun* would be better, as the young Dalai Lama in that

film works through them in his lessons. Or *Little Buddha* would work well, as Keanu Reeves plays the Buddha in a story-within-a-story that gives the audience a sketch of the Buddha's birth, quest, and enlightenment. Perhaps that choice seems too obvious, but Green enjoys using offbeat choices that do not always work. Sometimes they do. Teaching dependent origination through *I Heart Huckabees* works well because the film seems to be written and directed in a spirit of improvisational, comic nonduality.

When the connections do not work, the reader may be frustrated by what cinema scholars call “weak montage,” which is putting elements in sequence without a sufficiently meaningful or suggestive set of connections. Green links Theravāda Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism in his chapter on *The Burmese Heart*. The story concerns a Japanese soldier who pretends to be a Buddhist monk and then grows into the role. About the similarities and differences between East Asian Mahāyāna and Southeast Asian Theravāda, we learn that the protagonist Mizushima “stays in Burma to become a Buddhist instead of returning to Japan. Doing so implies that Japanese Buddhism has roots in goodwill but has departed from them in the modern world” (74)—a bit of a leap. Although it is true that Theravāda Buddhism has been the dominant form in Burma (Myanmar), and it is fitting to connect discussion of Engaged Buddhism with the consequences of war, the chapter has far too many lax connections, such as this one: “Although the story does not mention it, there is also a Theravada practice of meditating on the decay of corpses. The idea in doing this is to become free of attachment to the body and realize the transience of our condition” (76).

An Introduction to Buddhism course would presumably work through rituals, beliefs (e.g., karma and rebirth), monastic and lay life, doctrinal matters and basic teachings (e.g., the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path), and issues related to historical development of the religion, especially the difference between Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Buddhism. The chapter on Vajrayāna and *The Cup* repeatedly

discusses the Dalai Lama and asserts without evidence that the Gelugpa sect is represented in the film. To my knowledge, no sect is identified in the film. The author may assume that a picture of the Dalai Lama in one or two scenes indicates that the monks must be Gelugpa, but this is wrong. Most Tibetan temples in India have a representation of the Dalai Lama, and this fact could be an occasion to explain some of the various ways in which Buddhism and politics intersect, contra the assumptions some students might have that Buddhism is always peaceful and apolitical. If the minute particulars of the film were more frequently and reliably connected with the basic features of various kinds of Buddhism, the book would be stronger.

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