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## *Alms & Vows*

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# A Review of *Alms & Vows*

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*Alms & Vows*. By E.A. Burger. Commonfolk Films, 2010 & 2013. \$150/film.

*Alms* (2010) and *Vows* (2013) are two short documentaries directed by Edward Burger as part of the *Dreaming Buddhas Project* series. Burger's purpose is to provide stories about the religion, as told from a practitioner's point of view, for use by educators in the classroom. Each film touches upon key points relevant to basic understandings of Buddhism, while at the same time exploring specific Buddhist practices and concepts found in China to significantly deepen that basic knowledge. Each film also invites further questions, hopefully voiced by the students themselves, which contribute to the ongoing discussion about Buddhism in a university setting.

The films are brief, with *Alms* running twenty-four minutes and *Vows* running thirty-seven minutes, so each film easily fits within the typical fifty-minute time slot of a university class. The brevity of these films does not mean that they are lacking in data, however. Because each film is dedicated to one specific topic related to Buddhism, students are able to experience each film as rich in content. The length of these films also allows an educator time for follow up questions and discussions

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within the same class period, in which to gauge student understanding and reaction.

*Alms* focuses on how the concept of alms is realized in a Chan Buddhist monastery. It is narrated by the head chef, who oversees the production and preparation of food, food storage, and meal planning, and is responsible for ensuring that the food accords with the monastic ideals of Buddhism. Burger combines both the head chef's narration and statements of fact about Buddhism in general and Chan Buddhism in particular, with images ranging from the production of food on the temple grounds, the preparation of food in the kitchen (or "Big Hut" as it is called at the monastery), its consumption by the meditating monks, and finally, ritual offerings of food to the buddhas. This combination of easy-to-follow explanation and vivid imagery allows the filmmaker to capture a typical day of food production, preparation, and consumption at the monastery in rich detail. Throughout, one gets a sense of how highly ritualized these processes are, both through implication and through the explicit discussions of the head chef.

Certainly, both educators and students will be left with questions as a result of watching the film. On one hand, this type of film allows for easy classroom discussion of what was actually portrayed. On the other, it is open-ended enough that it leaves a lot of room for speculation, which is good, even desirable, for upper-level courses but not always ideal in first year university classes such as an introduction to world religions, where students are struggling to grasp new and complex concepts. For example, there is an implied hierarchy between monks who focus only on meditation and those who produce the food. It is said that those monks who attend to food production can use the means for survival (the growing and eating of food) as a form of spiritual cultivation that highlights selflessness by emphasizing the needs of the monks who meditate over and above those who produce the monastery's food. This raises questions that are not answered in the film. For example, how and why are certain monks chosen to participate in food

production over and above participation in meditation? The head chef himself seems a little unsure about how he came to take his position, stating that he knew nothing of cooking before coming to the monastery and that the food he prepared was not that good. Was his role as head chef, therefore, one of his own choosing, or was it assigned to him? When do those who produce the food eat? They are shown serving food to the meditating monks but never eating the food themselves. What does it mean that they eat separately? And when do they meditate, if at all? Intriguing issues of power and class are not explored, yet to me are an essential aspect of how this monastery operates. Perhaps this is a weakness in Burger's style of filmmaking, which highlights the need to let others tell their own story—for how could the head chef critically evaluate his own role in the monastery without challenging the very idea of selflessness that is upheld as the ideal of his spiritual cultivation?

*Vows* is more extensive due to its length and the diversity of its subjects. This film focuses on an ordination for Chinese Buddhist monks. With over 200 monks present for the ordination, Burger is able to interview diverse subjects who address a variety of topics. These topics include the question of why these men became monks in the first place, their desire to graduate from novice monks to fully ordained monks, descriptions of the preparations and studies they undertook as a precursor to ordination, and finally the rituals that mark the ordination itself. While the monks narrate their paths to ordination, Burger aptly contrasts these with the ritual activities of the laity, essentially providing us with a visual display of the diversity and difference that exists within the Chinese Buddhist tradition.

As with *Alms*, *Vows* is excellent in showing us the variety of Chinese Buddhist experience. In the case of *Vows*, the film addresses the various experiences that led its subjects to become monks. The diversity of their stories remind educators and students that there is not a single path to a monastic life: some men enter the monastery later in life, while others are drawn to it as early as childhood; some attempt to live the

monastic lifestyle multiple times before they are considered successful; and they all experienced differences in the reactions of their families to their decision to become monks. These narratives challenge idealized notions of monastic vocation, where one simply knows from an early age that a focus on spiritual matters is their calling, or that every Buddhist family finds honor in having a monk in the family. The film ultimately shows us how personal the decision to ordain is, which is not only refreshing, but greatly diverges from the narratives frequently presented in introductory textbooks on world religions.

Just as one perhaps detects (or projects?) a sad wistfulness on the part of the head chef in *Alms*, one can also imagine discomfort at the sorts of questions the filmmaker asks of the ordinands. Again, a great deal is suggested by the film that is not spelled out explicitly by the filmmaker and this leaves plenty of room for class discussion. For example, when asked if they were happy and excited about being ordained, the young men who had gathered look visibly uncomfortable and even subtly edge away from the camera's view only to disappear, never answering the question. For some filmmakers, this would be an opportunity to offer some commentary, perhaps to point to the Buddhist principles that highlight detachment from such emotion, but Burger leaves this moment as it is, allowing us to decide what to do with it.

*Alms* and *Vows* could be easily be shown together in a single class, or be shown separately. They are not only helpful in denoting specific cultural manifestations of Buddhism (for example, both films depict the ways that Chinese Buddhists have adapted Buddhist precepts to conform to Chinese society), but *Vows* in particular reveals diversity in that specific context. Because of both the very clear explication of the narrative, and the rich, and occasionally ambiguous, visual record, I can envision these films used in a variety of different types of university classrooms, from survey courses, introductions to Buddhism and thematic courses, such as courses on religion and food, or religion and ritual. This is because they ultimately provide a good balance in showing

us what people do, what they say they believe, and what is implied in the combination of the two.