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Enlightenment Through Film: Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?

Abstract

Through its mandala-like structure, *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (Korea, 2007) provides a kind of Enlightenment experience to the spectator. Like the mandala, Bodhi-Dharma has a symbol of the Truth at its center. Around this center are three interdependent narratives of a Zen Master, a monk, and an orphan boy, corresponding to the concentric graduated circles found in most mandalas. Also like the mandala, the film is unified by a multiplicity of motifs.

Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East? is one of those rare films that seems aimed at bringing about a spiritual transformation in the spectator.¹ Written, directed, photographed, and edited by Bae Yong-kyun, a South Korean art teacher, the film takes place mainly at a Zen Buddhist hermitage on top of a mountain near a modern Korean city.² The central interest of the film is not Zen itself, however. According to Bae, he chose this setting simply because he found it perfectly suited to express his search for life's meaning.³

Many critics and reviewers have noted the meditative quality of the film. Linda Erlich, for example, comments that what distinguishes this film from other films with Buddhist themes is “the meditative stance that underlies the entire style of the film.”⁴ Stephen Holden says that the film “goes about as far as a film can go in conjuring a meditative state.”⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum comments that the “the narrative has been suspended almost entirely for the sake of this meditation [on the natural world],”⁶

This meditative quality, as I will try to show in this article, is achieved through the mandala symbolism that pervades the film. The Buddhist mandala is typically a circular drawing which Buddhists use as a tool to find Enlightenment, or psychic integration.⁷

Center of the Circle

At the center of most mandalas is a symbol of the Truth, the ultimate spiritual reality—typically, the Buddha, a god, or a flower (the lotus or the rose). At the center of *Bodhi-Dharma* is the Truth alluded to in the nondiegetic statement printed on the screen after the screen credits: “To the disciple who asked about the Truth without a word he showed a flower.” This koan, which may be the earliest example of a koan on record, is at the center of this film-mandala, which is itself a koan. As one reviewer noted, *Bodhi-Dharma* is “a celluloid Koan, to be contemplated and considered over time, possibly a lifetime.”⁸

Three Circular Narratives

In the typical mandala, there are several concentric graduated circles. In *Bodhi-Dharma*, there are three circular concentric narratives. The first tells of the spiritual initiation of a boy named Hae-jin. The second tells of the quest for Enlightenment by a young monk named Ki-bong. Both these stories are embedded in a third narrative, which tells of the effort by a Zen Master named Hye-gok to guide Ki-bong and Hae-jin to spiritual transformation as a last step in completing his own cycle of existence. The three protagonists not only represent the three stages of life: youth, maturity, and old age, but they also represent the three stages of the spiritual quest: initiation, quest, and apotheosis.

Hae-jin’s Initiation

In the first circle is the narrative of Hae-jin's journey to consciousness. At the beginning of the film, the boy stands among the mountain foliage, silently watching Hye-gok dip water from a well, a child of nature. Hae-jin is also a natural child, an orphan rescued by Hye-gok from the city streets when he was a toddler. What Hae-jin's life might have been like had he not been rescued is suggested by later scenes of gangs of orphan children who have been abandoned to the streets playing a brutal game of cops and robbers.⁹

When the film begins, Hae-jin, like all children of a similar age, is still in that phase in which instinctual drives and influences from the external environment motivate his actions. Carl Jung compared this phase to the circle enclosed by the great world snake, which bites his own tail—the uroboros.¹⁰ The child's task, psychologists agree, is to journey from this unconscious state into full consciousness.

Hae-jin's journey begins the day he impulsively picks up a rock and throws it at the two Eurasian Jays that he spies on a ledge in front of him, fatally wounding one of them. For the rest of the film, Hae-jin suffers great guilt for his thoughtless act, which the mate of the wounded bird does not allow him to forget. In almost every scene in which Hae-jin later appears, the jay also appears, often terrorizing the boy through its raucous cries. Even if the jay does not actually appear on the screen, overhead shots of Hae-jin will indicate that the bird is keeping the boy

constantly in his sight. In Hae-jin's mind, the bird is surely orchestrating the various ordeals he undergoes, such as being dunked in the mountain pool by some older boys, falling off a ledge to the bottom of the mountain, and witnessing the death of Hye-gok.

When Ki-bong leaves, Hae-jin is forced to make a conscious decision as to how he will live the rest of his life. Should he follow Ki-bong into the world, or should he stay at the hermitage? After long deliberation, he comes to a decision: He is shown dipping water from the well with the same small gourd the Master had used in the opening scene. He then walks up the steps to the Master's old room, carrying a pot of water. This time, he scarcely flinches when the jay squawks loudly behind him, unlike his previous reaction in a similar situation in Scene 14, when he had hurriedly put down the pot of water and had run away. This time, he continues resolutely up the stairs, enters the room from which the Master had exited at the beginning of the film, and closes the door firmly behind him. This act signals his emergence from the uroboros and his commitment to the spiritual life.

Ki-bong's Quest for Enlightenment

In the second circle is Ki-bong's quest for Enlightenment. Ki-bong's narrative is structured by the Ten Oxherding Pictures, which are usually drawn in circles and are themselves mandalas. The drawings depict the various stages by

which an oxherder tames an ox. Symbolically, they depict various types of Enlightenment experiences, the oxherder symbolizing the spiritual seeker and the ox symbolizing both the oxherder's wild and unruly mind and his Buddha nature.¹¹

In the first drawing, the oxherder stands facing one direction, each of his feet pointing in different directions. This is Ki-bong's situation at the beginning of the film. He stands beside a railroad track as a train approaches, the troubled, anxious look on his face indicating his distress at being caught in the cold work-a-day world of routine, industry, speed, and brute force. In the second picture, the oxherder sees the tracks of the ox for the first time. At some point, Ki-bong realizes that there is a way out of his claustrophobic situation and that Enlightenment is possible. The third picture shows the rump of the ox, with the oxherder running after it, obviously determined to catch it. Running after the ox, Ki-bong enters a monastery, determined, as he tells the abbot, to reach Enlightenment and Buddhahood at any cost.

The fourth picture shows the oxherder in a terrific struggle with the ox. Ki-bong's own struggle is between his desire to seek Enlightenment and his attachment to his sister and his blind old mother, whom he has abandoned although he was their sole support. The violence of this struggle is dramatized by the juxtaposition of shots of the ox breaking out of its stall with shots of Ki-bong sitting in meditation. The tether and whip that the oxherder holds in this picture symbolize the spiritual

practices used to subdue the undisciplined mind. Ki-bong's major practice is meditation on the koan the Master gives him: "When the moon in your mind waxes beneath the water, where does the Master of my being go?"

The fifth picture depicts the oxherder leading the ox by the tether and the ox meekly following behind him. This picture would correlate with Kibong's eventual ability to maintain mindfulness as he went about his daily activities. The sixth picture shows the oxherder riding on the ox, playing the flute. This picture could well symbolize Ki-bong's state of mind after attending the dance at the temple. As he walks up the mountain in the moonlight through the tall, flowering grasses swaying in the summer breezes, his state of mind seems to be that described by Zen Master Yamada Mumon, commenting on the sixth drawing: "All struggle has subsided, the mind has been purified, and the person of no-mind rides the ox of no-mind home. There is nothing to be bothered about. There is nothing under the sun that he seeks. He has attained satori."¹²

In the seventh picture, only the oxherder is present because the ox and the oxherder have become one, symbolizing an experience of unity of the Self with the Absolute. Kibong has this Enlightenment experience after cremating the Master's body and dispersing his ashes over the mountainside. He is shown standing on a rocky promontory at sunrise. An extreme close-up of his forehead, eye, and

cheekbones in the sunlight makes his head look like the head of the tawny ox. It seems that Kibong and the ox have become one.

Ki-bong also presumably has the two other Enlightenment experiences depicted in the eighth and ninth pictures: The eighth is only an empty circle, symbolizing the unity of all that exists; the ninth shows only a tree, falling leaves, a stream, and a bird, symbolizing the clarity with which the spiritual seeker now sees that everything is perfect, just as it is. The tenth drawing shows the enlightened oxherder back in the marketplace extending his hand, ready to help others understand the purpose of life. In the final scene of the film, Ki-bong walks through the rice paddies, leading the ox behind him, the jay following overhead, presumably headed back to the world from which he came. Having found the answer to the koan Hye-gok had assigned him, he is now ready to help others find life's meaning.

Hye-gok's Apotheosis

Hye-gok's narrative, in the third circle, informs both Hae-jin's and Ki-bong's narratives. It is Hye-gok, after all, who brought both of them to the hermitage in the first place: He carried Hae-jin up the mountain on his back, and he sent a letter to the monastery, asking the abbot to send Ki-bong to the hermitage, on the pretense that he needed someone to care for him now that he is getting old.

His actual aim is to complete his life as a Bodhisattva by bringing his chosen disciples to Enlightenment.

At first, Hye-gok appears to be simply a wise teacher and a gentle old man. However, as the film progresses, the spectator begins to suspect that he has shamanic powers. Most significantly, the identity of Hye-gok with the dancer indicates that he has the shaman's power to shift shapes. The dancer performs the Seungmu (the "Buddhist Monk's Dance"), one of Korea's most significant folk dances. This dance, which is said to bring about the Enlightenment of the spectator, is divided into two main parts. In the first part, the dancer's movements symbolize the temptations of a monk trying to overcome worldly desires, corrupt thoughts, pain and suffering. In the second part, the dancer drums on a big Buk (barrel drum) hanging inside a wooden stand, symbolizing the monk's triumph over pain and suffering and his consequent Enlightenment.¹³ The dance, then, dramatizes the trajectory of Hye-gok's life. The dancer and Hye-gok are explicitly identified in Hye-gok's death scene: When Hye-gok's body falls against the door of his room at the moment of death, Ki-bong and Hae-jin (and the spectator) see the dancer moving backwards across the ground in front of the hermitage and disappearing into the darkness, as she had earlier moved across the stage. The identity of the two is confirmed by the white slippers that the dancer leaves outside the door of the

meditation room she enters before performing and that are shown outside Hye-gok's room after his death.

In almost every scene, Hye-gok takes some action to guide Ki-bong and Hae-jin along their spiritual paths. Often, Hye-gok's guidance is in the form of explicit teaching, especially on the themes of emptiness, the unity of all, and the inevitability of death. "Forever and ever, all is originally empty... There is no beginning and no end... Only that which does not come into being does not perish," he intones at the beginning of the film.

The Master's final, and most important, teaching concerns how his body must be disposed of after his death. He exhorts Ki-bong to follow his instructions exactly because a proper observance of the funeral procedures he specifies is essential to achieve the stasis that Paul Schraeder has said is essential to communicating the experience of the Transcendent.¹⁴ The stasis shots in this film, for both Ki-bong and the spectator, are the long takes of the smoke and sparks rising from the burning pyre and of the mountain pool, on the surface of which the autumn leaves float and in which is reflected the sky, the bare tree branches, and Ki-bong's shadow as he scatters the ashes of the Master's body. The precise execution of the funeral rites is also necessary to release the Master from his life on earth time into Nirvana, to effect his transformation from Bodhisattva to divine being, thus bringing the Master's cycle of existence full circle.

Motifs

Each circle in a mandala is typically filled with a multiplicity of details linked to each other through similarity or contrast. These motifs, like the repetition of meter and sound patterns in poetry, convert multiplicity into unity and by so doing provide a means of spiritual transformation.¹⁵

Motifs abound in *Bodhi-Dharma*. Especially prominent are images of roundness, as Linda Ehrlich has pointed out. She mentions the circular path of the camera in certain scenes and the many round objects (the moon, the tea bowl, prayer beads, shaven heads).¹⁶ To these, one might add the many close-ups of concentric circles in the water; the circular framing of certain shots (as in the shot of Ki-bong rehearsing his argument for returning to the world in Scene 12); and the circularity of the *mise-en-scene* with Ki-bong, Hae-jin, the jay, and the ox arranged around the burning pyre.

Sound motifs are also important. The diegetic sounds of the mountaintop—the chirping of birds, the wind, the rain, and the monks' chanting of the sutras—contrast with those of the city—the clanging train signal, blaring horns, motorcycles, and the cries of the hawkers of blue jeans in the marketplace. Non-diegetic traditional Korean music serves to underline the significance of certain scenes. An especially important sound motif is the sound of bells, which functions

not only to link scenes with each other, but also functions thematically. While hitting a huge bell with a mallet, Ki-bong chants, “The sound of the bell overcomes passions. It increases wisdom and gives birth to Enlightenment.”

Some motifs are simple repetition, occurring only a few times, like the rock that Hae-jin picks up to throw at the jays. The same rock later appears on Ki-bong’s head as he sits meditating on a boulder in a mountain stream. Still later, Ki-bong uses the rock to pulverize the bone fragments of the Master’s body that remain after the cremation.

Other motifs are extremely intricate, like those linking Hye-gok with the dancer (described above), Hye-gok with the Buddha, the Buddha with the jay, the dancer with the dream-woman and both the ox and the jay. For example, shots of Hye-gok and the Buddha sitting in the “calling the earth to witness” position” are juxtaposed in Scene 15.¹⁷ The Buddha in Scene 1 has a thin, black moustache (a typical attribute of old Korean sculptures of the Buddha); the Eurasian Jay has a thin, black line of feathers that runs diagonally from the corner of its beak, like a moustache. The woman that appears in Hae-jin’s dream wears a black gown with wing-like sleeves that contrasts with the dancer’s white costume with the same wing-like sleeves. As the dream-woman rises from the water, her body sways in an ox-like fashion, also evoking the movements of the dancer on the stage at the beginning of the dance. When the dream-woman opens her mouth to call the boy’s

name, Hae-jin hears the ox low. The blue patch on the train of the dancer's gown corresponds with the patch of blue in the long tail of the Eurasian jay. On stage, the dancer falls to left, then rises, falls to the right, then rises, and raises her arms in wing-like sleeves above her head, evoking the floundering of the wounded jay in the water. Hye-gok, dancer, Buddha, ox, and jay—all are inextricably linked in the same enclosure that the film creates.

Does Bodhi-Dharma Bring Enlightenment?

Given that the mandala is a tool for attaining Enlightenment, one may ask what impact the mandala-like Bodhi-Dharma has on the spectator. Michael Gillespie considers this question and concludes that although the film provides something that is important, “it provides something less than Enlightenment.”¹⁸

There are various types of Enlightenment experiences, some of which are relatively minor compared with Kensho (a glimpse into the true nature of existence) and Satori (permanent Enlightenment). However, even the minor experiences—such as visions, intense experiences of joy—are still highly valuable. According to Chinese Zen Master Sheng-yen, “they may represent positive signs of spiritual progress and, at the very least, they may deepen the practitioner's commitment to the spiritual path.”¹⁹

The list of relatively minor Enlightenment experiences should surely include aesthetic responses to works of art, including films. Certainly, by the end of *Bodhi-Dharma*, spectators are likely to have seen the tracks of the ox.

¹ The film was first released in 1989, but the Director's edition was released in 2007. This analysis is based mainly on the 2007 edition.

² The city is never named in the film, but it is possibly Taegu, South Korea, where Bae teaches art at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

³ "Director's Statement" in the Milestone press kit for the film.

⁴ Linda C. Ehrlich, "Closing the Circle," in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*, ed. Frances Gateward, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 184.

⁵ Stephen Holden, review in *The New York Times*, May 7, 2008, viewed online at <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review> September 13, 2008.

⁶ Jonathan Rosenbaum, review, viewed online at http://onfilm.chicagoreader.com/movies/capsules/9329_WHY_HAS_BODHI_DHARMA_LEFT_FOR_THE_EAST September 13, 2008.

⁷ Some representative Buddhist mandalas are the Wheel of Time (Kalachakra) mandala (<http://www.buddhanet.net/images/smandala.jpg>), the Wheel of Life (Tanghka) mandala (<http://www.angelfire.com/yt/fairtibet/whexpl.html>), and the Overcoming of Death (Yamantaka) mandala (www.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/buddhism/the-mandala.cfm), viewed online September 13, 2008.

⁸ Robert Faires, review in *The Austin Chronicle*, July, 9, 1993. Viewed online at <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3A139054> September 13, 2008.

⁹ Koreans are said to be reluctant to adopt orphan children because of the Confucian emphasis on family ties and blood lines.

¹⁰ M. Esther Harding, *The 'I' and the 'Not-I': A Study in the Development of Consciousness*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965, p. 63.

¹¹ Among the many versions of these drawings online, that of the 12th C. Chinese Zen Master Kakuan can be viewed at <http://www.4peaks.com/ppox.htm#1>.

¹² Yamada Mumon, *Lectures on the Ten Oxherding Pictures*, trans. Victor Sogen Hori, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004.

¹³ “Korean Traditional Dance, Seungmu (Buddhist dance),” http://english.whatsonkorea.com/view_reports.ph?rid=589&code=M&scode=M-06&ss_code=&pst=L September 13, 2008.

¹⁴ Paul Schraeder, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 82-86.

¹⁵ Patrick Laude, *Singing the Way: Insights in Poetry and Spiritual Transformation*, New York: World Wisdom, Inc., 2005, p. 209.

¹⁶ Ehrlich, pp. 179-181.

¹⁷ In Buddhist iconography, the “calling the earth to witness” position (the hand hangs over the knee, the palm turned inward, with the whole hand pointing to the earth) refers to the story that after the Buddha Sakyamuni experienced Enlightenment, he was challenged as to his right to sit on a particular piece of ground. To justify his seat in that place, he called the earth to witness his many good deeds of past lives and so justified his seat in that place. (“What Is Korean Buddhism?” viewed online at <http://www.buddhopia.com/eg/extensive> September 13, 2008.

¹⁸ Michael Gillespie, “Picturing the Way in Bae Yong-kyun’s Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?” *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 1, April 1997, paragraph 19, viewed online at <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/gillespi.htm> September 13, 2008.

¹⁹ Master Sheng-yen and Dan Stevenson, *Hoofprint of the Ox: Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path as Taught by a Modern Chinese Master*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 208-210.