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Portraying the Quest for Buddhist Wisdom?: A Comparative Study of *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Abstract

This paper analyses the way in which the quest for Buddhist wisdom has been portrayed in *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Both films seek to explore the notion of hidden realities and both suggest that selflessness can enable the individual to overcome the material world. Furthermore, it is argued that the Buddhist concept of skillful means is not only employed by advanced practitioners in each of the films to ensure that central characters are on the path to true wisdom, but also that through careful cinematic manipulation the directors prompt the audience to question their own notions of reality.

Initially the two films considered in this article, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* directed by Ang Lee, and the first film of *The Matrix* trilogy, *The Matrix*, written and directed by the Wachowski brothers, may appear completely unconnected. The most obvious difference is the setting – the former being set in the period of China's Han dynasty and the latter in an advertently "dystopian cyberworld."¹ However, closer examination reveals quite the opposite. Both films follow the quest of a number of individuals to discover hidden realities, taking extended reference from advanced Buddhist teachings. Although teachings from Theravada and Yogacara Buddhism, as well as other religious traditions, have clearly impacted on both films, this paper will focus particularly on the parallels with the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.² Indeed, a number of central themes can be discerned in the two films, which form the foundation of this paper: the impermanence of the world, selflessness as a means to transcend the material and skillful means as a method to help individuals on the path to enlightenment. In analysing these areas this paper will not only consider the extent to which the two films portray the quest for Buddhist wisdom, but it will also be argued that through skillful cinematic manipulation the audience themselves become complicit in the quest.

Essential to any understanding of either film is a notion of the genre of movie into which it falls. Tim Noble's seemingly naive claim that *Crouching Tiger*,

Hidden Dragon is "at one level...pretty much your bog standard martial arts romantic thriller" holds some element of truth.³ *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is consciously of the martial arts genre and it could be argued that *The Matrix* is a post-modern version of the same genre of film. In particular, characters in both films parallel those found in the wuxia pian stories of late medieval China which saw a major revival in twentieth century Hong Kong.⁴ The heroes of the wuxia pian stories achieve amazing powers through constant practice, often becoming wandering warriors fighting for righteousness, which can be seen in the actions of both Yu Shu Lien and Li Mu Bai in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the rebels in *The Matrix*, under the leadership of Morpheus. Nonetheless, though both films may utilise aspects of this traditional genre, they move far beyond and raise fundamental questions about reality and society.

Buddhism teaches that "impermanent and unstable are all conditioned things."⁵ The impermanence or annica teachings hold that everything is changing all of the time, while the no-self or annata teachings claim that even the image that we have of ourselves is merely psychological and that physical energy is in a constant state of flux. In this case anything that is held onto is nothing and as such even that which we hold as reality may indeed be as impermanent and empty as other concepts. The titles of each film immediately allude to these teachings, providing an initial clue as to what the audience might expect. Ang Lee, the director

of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, states that the title "is a common expression, which reminds us never to underestimate the mysteries, the potent characters that lie beneath the surface of society."⁶ Correspondingly, the term 'Matrix' means a situation in which one is enclosed. Indeed, the existence of, and quest for hidden realities is the central focus of both films.

In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the hidden reality is never explicit, but is implied towards the end of the film. The point of suggestion occurs following the death of the hero, Li Mu Bai, which was inadvertently caused by Jen – the daughter of an aristocrat, who was covertly trained in the secret arts of the Wudan monastery and fled her family to avoid an arranged marriage. In the final scenes of the film she is returned to her true love, the infamous bandit Lo, and is left to reflect on the damage her actions have done. Earlier in the film Lo told the story of a man who jumped from a mountain but did not die, instead floating away and having all that he desired, claiming that "a faithful heart makes wishes come true." After asking Lo what his one wish is, Jen jumps from the bridge at the top of Wudan Mountain - though Jen descends from the bridge, her fall is seemingly cushioned by the clouds and the audience is left to interpret the result of her act. The notion that her 'faithful heart' may have saved her by transcending the material world, and allowed her to alter 'reality' concurs with some aspects of the Buddhist teachings. Indeed, if the

preferred reading of the film is accepted, then it is clear that by recognising the unreality of the world, Jen, like the Buddha, can manipulate and change it.

The Matrix provides a much more explicit concept of hidden realities, picturing the majority of society as drones that cannot see that the world in which they live is merely a mental construct (the Matrix) while machines feast on the energy contained in their bodies. As we follow the journey of Neo, who rapidly comes to acknowledge the different levels of reality, we are shown the seriousness of society's constraints. One of the crucial scenes comes when Neo, having chosen to take the red pill and join Morpheus and his band of rebels, is hooked up to a locator. As Neo's perception of reality breaks down, he touches a mirror, the glass of which turns into a metallic jelly-like substance. As it begins to engulf his body he screams and the scream turns into the sound of a modem connecting to the internet – the world as he knows it ceases to exist, and his consciousness is finally 'online' as he leaves the Matrix. Although this may be an extreme example, the notion that everything we accept as reality is a construct, is akin to the teaching of the Buddha. On his first meeting with Neo, Morpheus asks him "What is real, how do you define real? If you are talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain." This mirrors the teachings of the Lankavatara Sutra, which hold that "In the same way, the ignorant and simple-minded...do not recognise that the views that are

influencing them are only dream-like ideas originating in the mind itself, and consequently they are held fast by their notions of oneness and otherness, of being and non-being.”⁷ Indeed, Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachael Wagner have argued that Neo's complete rejection of the Matrix, exemplified in his eventual defeat of one of the sentinels and his control over events within it (such as the stopping of bullets in mid-air), may suggest that he is the Buddha or an advanced bodhisattva.⁸

The audience can also actively engage with the concepts of hidden realities in the films. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Matrix* both contain differing levels of reality in the actual film scripts. The depth of mis-en-scene in each film means that they can be interpreted in a number of ways. This is particularly evident in the scene discussed above where Jen jumps off the bridge on Wudan Mountain. One could either conclude that she is enveloped and protected by the clouds that surround her and able to transcend the material world, or that she plummets to a horrible death. Therefore, as the film progresses it is not only the characters who aim to understand the hidden realities of the universe, but also the audience who aim to understand the hidden realities of the films and in doing so are forced to challenge their own notions of reality in the material world.

Buddhism holds that the material world we must escape is samsara, the cycle of life, death and rebirth into which we are all born. Mouse's comment in *The*

Matrix that "to deny our impulses is to deny the very thing which makes us human" could be seen to support this – it is only when we deny our impulses that we can truly transcend the material values of humanity. To escape samsara, the individual must not only realise the emptiness of all things, that samsara is "impermanent and pervaded with final frustration and suffering", but must truly transcend worldly values; a teaching that is paralleled in both films, but with differing levels of success.⁹

In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the Green Destiny Sword is representative of Jen's attachment to worldly values. However, Jen fails to realise that while a powerful weapon, its strength and sharpness is controlled by the mind, which Li Mu Bai proves by defeating her with a twig. In the film's finale Li Mu Bai underestimates Jen's attachment to the sword, and when he throws it from the top of a waterfall she risks her life to retrieve it. Indeed, throughout the film none of the characters truly transcend worldly values – the most notable instance being the case of Li Mu Bai. In the opening scenes of the film Li Mu Bai explains to Yu Shu Lien that something forced him to leave deep meditation and the prospect of enlightenment. As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that it was his love for Yu Shu Lien that called him back. At the end of the film, as Li Mu Bai draws his final breaths, he refuses to continue meditating instead telling Yu Shu Lien that his

meditation kept him a prisoner, and implying that his love for her set him free. In doing this the film's characters all fail on their quest for Buddhist wisdom.¹⁰

The rejection of worldly values in *The Matrix* is equally limited. While Neo comes to lose any attachment to the values of the Matrix, his loyalties are immediately transferred to the 'real world' occupied by Morpheus and the rebels aboard their ship the *Nebuchadnezzar*. Nonetheless, within the Matrix Neo transcends material values, which results in his eventual resurrection after being shot by the sentinels and his flying at the end of the film. Grasping material things is an obstacle on the Buddhist path to enlightenment – a factor evident in *The Matrix*, illustrated most starkly when Neo walks through the practice simulator and watches the 'lady in red'. On being cautioned by Morpheus he turns to find that she has morphed into a sentinel and is pointing a gun to his head. Indeed, an attachment to the 'lady in red' is partly to blame for the death of Mouse, who rather than keeping watch was idly canvassing her picture.¹¹

A central aspect of both films considered here is the use of violence as a means to overcome a plethora of situations – this is particularly the case in *The Matrix*, throughout which there is an array of hand to hand combat and gun battles. Clearly, as Flannery-Dailey and Wagner have shown this seemingly contravenes the Buddhist doctrine of non-injury to all living beings, ahimsa.¹² However, it is worth noting that throughout both films martial arts mastery is seen as residing in

the mind, a factor evident in the teachings of those who have written on the relationship between Buddhism and martial skills, such as Takuan Soho and Miyamoto Musashi, who perceived parallels between Buddhist practice and advanced swordsmanship.¹³ Indeed, in both films the power of the heroes has little to do with the capabilities of their bodies, clearly evident in the weightless jumps of *The Matrix* and the gliding run in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The fight scenes in both take on significance beyond mere violence; under the choreography of Yuen Wo Ping, both become an artistic display of mind over matter, of emotion and inner strength.¹⁴ Furthermore, the use of violence throughout both films may be viewed as a necessity to ensure that individuals who cannot see the error of their ways are brought onto the true path to Buddhist wisdom – this is particularly the case in *The Matrix*, in which the vast majority of humans cannot see that the notion of reality they hold is false. If this is the case, then the use of violence is in fact an example of skillful means being employed by the characters, and it is to this issue that we shall now turn.¹⁵

One of the greatest tools in the arsenal of Mahayana Buddhist teaching for helping individuals onto the path of true wisdom is skillful means. The concept of skillful means holds that the advanced Buddhist, or bodhisattva, who postpones enlightenment to help others onto the path can employ strategies, many of which may appear to be based on dubious ethical grounds in the Buddhist worldview, to

steer an individual onto the correct path.¹⁶ A well known example of skillful means can be found in the Lotus Sutra, when a father entices his sons out of a burning house by deceitfully claiming that outside the house is a cart for each of them. The children run out of the house and their lives are saved. Though the father accepts that he has done wrong in lying, lying was the lesser of two evils and in an attempt to rectify the situation he later gives each of them a spectacular cart laced with jewels.¹⁷ The use of skillful means is evident in both films under consideration.

In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* Yu Shu Lien falsely claims that she does not know the mystery thief is Jen, and in so doing successfully roots out the underworld criminal Jade Fox. Skillful means is also evident in Li Mu Bai's treatment of Jen. Though he initially vows never to fight again, he disregards this in an attempt to secure Jen as his pupil, ensuring that she would be studying on the path to true wisdom. Although Li Mu Bai eventually fails to enlist Jen as his pupil, it is clear that his brief interactions with her have had an impact. Indeed, it could be argued that his death is in fact the greatest illustration of skillful means in the film, as it is this that gives Jen the strength to heed the teachings of the elders and commit what was arguably a truly selfless act that recognised the impermanence of the world in jumping from the bridge on Wudan Mountain.

Throughout *The Matrix* similar use of skillful means is made to ensure that Neo realises the impermanence of the world and recognises the Matrix as a

computerised projection of reality. The most obvious instance of this comes when Neo visits the Oracle inside the Matrix, a visionary who it is believed could see into the future. Her advice to Neo is that he is not 'the One' and will shortly have to choose between his own life and the life of Morpheus. As a result, when Morpheus is captured by the sentinels Neo rescues him and in so doing realises his true identity. That this was an example of skillful means is given credence by Morpheus's later comment on the conversation between the Oracle and Neo – "she told you what you needed to know!" It is also worth noting that while Neo may be helped by the Oracle and Morpheus on his path to wisdom, it is he who must see the truth for himself – a point emphasised in Morpheus's comment – "I'm trying to free your mind Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one that has to walk through it." This corresponds with the notion, particularly apparent in the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, that holds that the bodhisattva may only guide his or her subjects onto the true path – they cannot walk it for them.¹⁸

It could be argued that the most proficient use of skillful means in the two films is that practised on the audience. In watching *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Matrix* the audience themselves are inadvertently on a quest for Buddhist wisdom, and as such also fall prey to the techniques used to guide the central characters of each film. Modern video techniques assist this method – the audience is left having witnessed "images which have no basis in any photographic

reality but nevertheless seemed realistic.”¹⁹ Scenes such as the meeting of Jen and Li Mu Bai on the bamboo tree, or the few 'reality' shots in *The Matrix*, in which robots farm people, assist both films in persuading us to believe in an alternate reality. Indeed, despite both films being advertised as action films, they raise deep, underlying questions about our own perceptions of hidden realities and selflessness.

The quest for Buddhist wisdom is portrayed in a parallel manner in both *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Both are multivalent and can be interpreted differently by individual audience members. Although *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* alludes to a hidden reality, *The Matrix* is explicit about this. However, the characters in both remain attached to worldly values throughout – a complete rejection of which is portrayed as impossible and undesirable. This may reflect a desacrilisation of the quest for Buddhist wisdom that has become particularly evident in those films that have been designed to appeal to western values.²⁰ Nonetheless, by even raising the notion that there are hidden realities to be discovered both films have exposed western audiences to this quest, and as such the failure of the central characters to reject the material world completely may prove the greatest example of skillful means in the films - opening the possibility for the huge number of individuals who have witnessed them to themselves start out on the path to enlightenment.

¹ David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 86.

² For two excellent discussions of how Theravada and Yogacara Buddhist teachings have been drawn on in *The Matrix* (as well as Christian teachings) see: Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner, 'Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*' *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 5, No.2, October 2001; James L. Ford, 'Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in *Contemporary Cinema*' *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 4, No. 2, October 2000. Indeed, though arguing that Hindu teachings have also been drawn on in the film, Julien R. Fielding maintains that *The Matrix* has received so much attention from scholars of film and religion precisely because the Wachowski brothers drew on the traditions of a variety of religious and popular cultures in the film. Thus, what is offered here is not a single way of viewing either film under consideration, but instead an analysis of whether they can be seen as having successfully incorporated a Buddhist worldview. Julian R. Fielding, 'Reassessing The Matrix/Reloaded' *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 7, No. 2, October 2003.

³ Tim Noble, 'Film Review: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*' *The Month*, February 2000, 92.

⁴ Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema. The Extra Dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 97.

⁵ Edward Conze (ed.), *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p. 158.

⁶ Ang Lee and James Schamus, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Portrait of the Ang Lee Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 76.

⁷ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (ed.), *The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahayana Text* (London: Kegan Paul, 2000). I am grateful to Stewart McFarlane for providing me with this reference. Indeed, in Greek Mythology, Morpheus is the God of Dreams controlling whether the dreams we have are true or false. I owe this reference to David Appleby.

⁸ Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, 'Wake Up!'.

⁹ Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 226.

¹⁰ Indeed, a recent article has argued that the film is a critique of enlightenment, and Li Mu Bai did in fact reach enlightenment before he withdrew himself from meditation, his fear was a result of the experience not being what he had expected. J. Heath Atchley, 'When the Master is Not Master: The Critique of Enlightenment in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*' *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol 7, No. 2, October 2003.

¹¹ Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, 'Wake Up!', 27.

¹² Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, 'Wake Up!', 35-6.

¹³ Stewart McFarlane, 'Fighting Bodhisattvas and Inner Warriors: Buddhism and the Martial Traditions of China and Japan' *The Buddhist Forum*, Vol. 3, 1994, pp. 188-9, 200-2; Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*, trans. Thomas Cleary (London: Shambhala, 1994).

¹⁴ J. Heath Atchley, 'Film Review: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*' *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 5, No. 1, April 2001, 3.

¹⁵ McFarlane, 'Fighting Bodhisattvas', pp. 195. For a discussion of the links between martial arts and Buddhism see: Stewart McFarlane, 'Mushin, Morals and Martial Arts: A Discussion of Keenan's Yogacara Critique' *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1990, pp. 397-420; Stewart McFarlane, 'Warrior Myths and Tales of Power: Asian Martial Arts in the West' *Demos*, Vol. 6, 1995, pp. 44-5.

¹⁶ For a full discussion of skilful means see: Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept of Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Duckworth, 1978).

¹⁷ Burton Watson (ed.), *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 57.

¹⁸ Pye, *Skilful Means*.

¹⁹ Stephen Prince, 'True Lies, Perceptual Realism, Digital Images and Film Theory' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 1996, p. 28.

²⁰ This notion will be considered in more depth in my forthcoming work on Southeast Asian cinema.