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Mike King

London Metropolitan University, miker.king@virgin.net

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Abstract

This is a review of *Bom yeoreum gaeul gyeoul geurigo bom (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring)* (2003).

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring was released in 2003 to widespread acclaim. The film is set in a Buddhist temple, floating in a remote lake in the mountains, and has been particularly noted for its lyrical cinematography. It is also an important addition to the relatively small number of mainstream films that have a Buddhist topic, including *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Caravan*, *The Little Buddha*, and *The Cup*. *Spring* is particularly useful as it presents Korean Buddhism (itself chiefly influenced by the Chinese 'chan' traditions that became Zen in Japan), whereas the others deal with Tibetan Buddhism.

Spring is no easy glimpse into Buddhist principles, nor is it a costume-drama retelling of the foundational story of Buddhism like *Asoka*, an Indian film that tells how Buddhism was initially taken up by the eponymous emperor. *Spring* is a film that prompts viewers to find out more, both about the director and about Buddhist principles. What the film can do most usefully is to help us contemplate two differences between the religions of East and West: firstly, the cyclical Eastern vs. the linear (teleological) Western notion of time, and secondly, the difference of emphasis on compassion in Buddhism vs. love in Christianity.

The story of *Spring* starts with a monk and child on their secluded floating temple. The child has a cruel streak which finds expression in the tying of stones to a fish, a frog and a snake. The monk watches, and then ties a heavy stone to the child in the night, to teach him the Buddhist lesson of karma: all actions have

consequences for the perpetrator. The monk tells the child that if any of the animals has died, then he will carry that stone in his heart for the rest of his life. Much of the resulting drama hinges around the moral development of the child as he grows up into a teenager, seduces a visiting young woman, leaves the temple for the 'world' (where he sinks to crime and murder), returns and repents, and grows old. Finally, a new cycle begins when another child is brought to the temple and is left in his care.

Ki-duk Kim tells this story through the stunning landscape of the mountain lake and its changes in season, appearing himself as the returning penitent monk, braving snow and ice in a thin shirt to perfect his martial art and carry the heavy boulder up the mountain. Kim is trained in the martial arts, but he is a Christian rather than a Buddhist. This gives a clue to the film: it may be best understood as a journey of understanding for Kim himself, as he grapples with the ancient religion of his country, a religion not his own.

Buddhism, as presented by Kim, appears in its severe aspect: punishment is harsh for human weakness, and the 'world' is full of temptations that lead one astray. The Buddha's original emphasis on release from suffering and the value of spiritual community (*sangha*) is not dwelt on much here; rather, we see a particular aspect of Buddhist compassion that creates an instructive contrast to the active love of Christian tradition. The positive aspect of compassion in Buddhism involves the

moral care for others, just as the positive aspect of love does in Christianity – as shown by the wisdom that the monk attempts to impart to the child, and later to the returning man. When Christian love runs cold it becomes control and can sink to the persecutory depths portrayed so harrowingly in films like *The Crucible* and Dreyer's *The Day of Wrath*. When Buddhist compassion runs cold it becomes indifference rather than control. *Spring* suffers a little from that coldness, portraying a slightly imbalanced picture of Buddhism easily remedied by watching a documentary about the Dalai Lama. Nevertheless, it is a beautiful and important film.