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# Picturing the Way in Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?*

## **Abstract**

Last year the teachers of a course called "Religion and Film" asked me to lead a discussion of *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (hereafter, *Bodhidharma*) a film directed by Bae Yong-Kyun that tells a story set in the context of Son Buddhism (the Zen Buddhism of Korea). This opportunity has allowed me to reflect on the use of the film in classroom teaching and to evaluate how well this particular film displays the key elements of Zen. I find *Bodhidharma* uses a Zen-like simplicity to teach simplicity. With an otherwise simple story, it gradually opens up Zen's compelling subtlety and richness. The Zen-like simplicity is key to the movie and to teaching Zen. I hope readers will respond with ideas about how this and similar films can be used effectively in teaching and with suggestions about my interpretation of *Bodhidharma* as a teaching device and a religious film.

## I

In the film a young man (Kibong) struggles with a decision to leave home, stop caring for his blind mother, and go to an old Zen master (Hyegok) who lives with an orphan boy he has saved (Haejin) at a decaying hermitage high in the mountains. The simple story is of the interaction of these characters from three generations, during which the old master dies and Kibong cremates him. The relatively little dialogue in the film is cryptic and at first enigmatic, as in the koan given to Kibong by Hyegok and the brief comments about the nature of Zen practice. Much of the way the story develops depends upon slow and repeated images of mountains, rivers, forests, fires, and faces. These sequences seem further to be interconnected with key events in the story. In one, Haejin hits a bird (a jay) with a stone, and the bird, tended by a guilt-ridden Haejin, later dies. But the bird's mate cries intermittently at Haejin throughout the film, often startling him. Once Haejin is so startled that he falls into a stream, is carried away and becomes lost. In another, while Kibong does zazen (sitting meditation), an ox kicks the slats out of its stall and escapes to the forest. The ox is glimpsed throughout the film, once apparently leading the boy Haejin home from being lost and, later, at the end of the film, walking malleably with Kibong across shimmering rice paddies back to "the world."

The meaning of the interactions as they develop through this slow, image-filled unfolding can be elusive. Yet for anyone who has studied Zen,

"Bodhidharma" contains many scenes, images and spoken phrases that allude to Zen teaching and lore. It opens, for example with the story of the Buddha's recognition of Kasyapia's enlightened smile and includes moonlight scenes and important references to the moon and to the pacification of the ox. In fact, with a movie such as this one, the danger is that, as Tony Rayns suggested, in its simplification, it become too programmatic (Rayns, 47). I will return to this question later.

Since for most students such allusions might be unknown, I provided the following notes to the students prior to the class meeting at which I assisted.

In Buddhism it is expected that to come to terms with the impermanence, anxiety, and suffering that are typical of human experience and life, one must awaken (a "buddha" is an "awakened being"). Awakening, or "enlightenment," is much more important than rituals, beliefs, or doctrines (even doctrines about enlightenment). In fact, clinging to doctrines or anything else is one of the main sources of suffering. In Buddhism, you have to "get it" on your own. You have to wake up to how to live life as it is without clinging to ideas about why you're right. Yet that practice of correct living always includes interrelatedness with others, especially, a teacher. Hence, one's own enlightenment can also be called "transmission" from teacher to student.

It is said that the kind of Buddhism that emphasizes practice through absorption and concentrating the mind or "meditation" [dhyana (Skt.)--->ch'anna

or ch'an (Chin.); thien (Viet.); zen (Jap.); son (Kor.)] was brought to China from India by Bodhidharma. He is said to have come to China, met with the ruler, and then proceeded to Shaolin where he sat facing the wall for nine years.

In contrast to traditions of Buddhism that emphasize certain scriptures (sutras) or scholarly activity, or certain rituals, this type focuses on getting the point through one's own practice and direct transmission from a teacher. The transmission is not, however, through words. Often, Zen is said to be based on four notions: A special transmission outside the scriptures; not based on words or letters; A direct pointing at the heart of reality; To see into your own nature and wake up.

There is, then, something indirect, something that cannot quite be said. That is the main point. This is also evident in many a story (mondo) of teachers and cases to puzzle over (koans) that characterize much zen teaching. Again, the point is to see into things as they are, not to engage in intellectual pursuits. Hence many of the koans seem to be unsolvable by directly rational means. Teachers may use koans to learn whether the students gets it or not. It has often been suggested that life is a koan "which we must break through before we begin to be really alive." (Wu 92)

For instance, in a famous koan, Chao-Chou is asked, "Why did Bodhidharma leave for the East?" Chao-Chou replies, "The cypress tree in the courtyard." The question about Bodhidharma means something like, "What is the essence of Buddhism?" or "What is the way" or "What is the tao?" (Wu 104)?

There is a long tradition in China, Japan, and Korea, that connects zen with mountains and rivers. It became something of a custom to go to a teacher and a monastery in the mountains to engage in the practice of seeing into your own nature. This might also be a connection to the Chinese tradition of Taoism, in which tao (the way) is both a seeing into oneself and a seeing into the processes of nature. Becoming enlightened, one awakens with all beings--not only other living beings, but also with fences, gates, stones, rivers, mountains, rain, and fire.

Because of this "going off into the mountains," it can seem that zazen ("meditation") practice is a removal from the world. But zen teachers insist this is not the point. According to them, you do have to take yourself off, so to speak, to attain insight into your life and come to terms with life and death. But then there is also the return to life in its everyday patterns. The withdrawal to meditate and practice is what allows you to see your daily life (the same life) in a wholly new way. As one old zen saying puts it: "Before practicing Zen, rivers were rivers and mountains were mountains. When I practiced Zen, I saw that rivers were no longer rivers and mountains no longer mountains. Now I see that rivers are again rivers and mountains are again mountains" (Nhat Hanh 94).

All contemporary schools of zen follow the idea of "sudden enlightenment". That is, enlightenment is not some state of mind achieved as an accumulated sum of practice. It is part of the effort itself. Nonetheless, there are many aspects to the

process, and these aspects are sometimes put into a sequence. Such a sequence is expressed in the traditional "ten ox-herding pictures."

The class discussion of *Bodhidharma* was very engaging. Yet even with such references to enlightenment, meditation, indirect transmission, koans, awakening with all beings, seeing mountains as mountains, and ten ox-herding pictures, difficulties remained. A number of students expressed trouble in interpreting the film. Despite the sense of some powerful significance, it was difficult for them to do more than begin to articulate it. Nothing seemed to "happen" in the film in terms of decisive action, and at the end the young man and boy seemed pretty much as before. The engagement among the students ranged from resistance (maybe childcare authorities should be called in to stop the old man from raising the orphan that way) to quite subtle interpretive suggestions. The latter included queries whether the young monk Kibong seeks a replacement for his deceased father; whether Kibong, when he stops caring for his mother at home and commits to taking care of the dying old monk in the mountains, is doing something quite similar, hence learning what he needs to do to come to terms with his everyday life.

Interpreting *Bodhidharma*, at least for this group of students and teachers, cut across a number of issues. What was depicted in the film, for instance, seemed Asian or "Eastern". Nearly all the students were from Christian backgrounds and some wondered whether they could really understand it. Some struggled with the Buddhist perspective assumed by the film. It seemed so different from more

familiar religious orientations. For instance, the film clearly seemed "religious" but there was no clear reference to God or creator. At other times the discussion centered on the simple monastic life of the monks in contrast to the more familiar world of the big modern city from which the monks detach themselves. The attendant values of each seemed so different. Are these two worlds trying to escape one another? Further, parts of the classroom interaction raised issues about the ways the film seemed to call for personal response as well as for careful observation and interpretation.

Finally, some of the discussion had to do with film viewing. It seemed in many ways like an "ordinary movie," yet it got hard to follow in ways that seemed important. It made viewers look for long periods of time at slow sequences that were almost like still photographs or paintings. There were so few words. The discomfort expressed in this sort of comment has to do not so much with the religious or cultural content of the film as it does with challenges to typical conventions for watching movies. As Margaret Miles has recently emphasized, noticing the workings of these conventions is important for interpreting cultural values since so many popular films and videos function by continually reinforcing such conventions (*Seeing and Believing* 14-15; 29-30). *Bodhidharma* is not a popular movie in her sense, of course. It is not perceived as entertainment. It demands a lot of viewers, and was a box-office flop. Yet if we accept Miles' contention that "religion has centrally to do with the articulation of a sense of



relatedness" (14), cross-cultural efforts can be taken seriously in terms of religious content and values (46). Still, it is only because of some broad conventions for viewing films that a movie such as *Bodhidharma* can hope to "travel," that is, to somehow prove accessible to viewers in other cultures. As director, Bae must, it seems, depend on the conventions, yet bend them and challenge them in order for viewers to see something for themselves.

## II

Wondering about how to teach such a film in a university course is thus connected to a second question: Is *Bodhidharma* a religious film or, since that is too abstract a way to put the question (Miles, p. 46), is it a Zen film?

The subject matter of *Bodhidharma* is the experience of some Zen practitioners, monks, in an old hermitage. But it is not "about" Buddhism or Zen in the way some films are, in, say, *The Long Search* or other documentary or informational series. The latter have their own film conventions, and most students know "how to watch" a "classroom video," but those conventions will not provide fruitful access to *Bodhidharma*.

Bae's film, however, is also not about something like "everyday life in a Zen monastery." The sort of life portrayed is commonplace, down to earth, and that is important. But as the questioning title indicates, what is addressed is a question regarding the essence of the way. Robert E. Buswell, Jr.'s book *The Zen Monastic Experience*, contains many descriptions of the everyday lives of Korean monks.

The routines and experiences described there are not what is at the center of *Bodhidharma*. One of Buswell's aims is to correct Western literary views of zen that believe that daily zen monastic practice is accurately described in the famous and mysterious mondo, stories of encounters of monks or of teachers and students (Buswell ch. 1). It is a point well-taken.

Nonetheless, such teaching stories and, we should add, paintings depicting famous teachers and encounters, can be helpful. They can instruct, encourage, and provide paradigms of what is attainable even though they are not themselves the practice. Their aesthetic appreciation is not itself enlightenment (Brinker 147). We must assume, then, that *Bodhidharma* is to be taken like one of the Zen teaching stories or Zen paintings or, since it is possible with cinema, a combination of both. Providing something that is important, it provides something less than enlightenment.

With Zen, it is easy to say too much. In Buddhism generally, the powers of speech (of naming, name and form) and of written texts (words and letters), which seem to create something to cling to, are often warned against. They are part of what creates difficulties for letting go of our attachments. What we think, say and do are karmic actions, actions with consequences, and language tends, of its very nature, to introduce dualities and reifications. In Zen an acknowledgment of the deceptive possibilities inherent in language and writing is woven into almost all the traditional stories. For example, one line in *Bodhidharma* states "The world is not

imperfect, I think the imperfection is in our language." The way lies outside our language, our statements of belief, and our scriptural interpretations. One must stare directly at reality (Bodhidharma's wall?) and deal with one's teacher. If there is transmission, it is not through words (no matter how many words or how many sutras have been studied). Transmission is face to face, heart-mind to heart-mind. One's whole body-mind, not knowing, becomes central to gaining the way, the down-to-earth process of coming to terms with life and death.

Of course, within everyday-mind and down-to-earth activity, there are "words and letters." We say things and write and read. Sometimes these can be important in their own way and there are, of course, many books about Zen. There are even some Zen books, composed as part of everyday activity, that are written in full recognition that words are not to be mistaken for practice. As Dogen (one of the monks who brought Zen to Japan) warns, readers might confuse intellectual understanding and the pursuit of words with practice.

But what of images and pictures? Are they not another way we might mislead ourselves? We may think that we have understood something when we have not, in fact, come to terms with it ourselves? It would seem so: pictures and sculptures and visual representations of all kinds might capture and express in misleading ways. The true way is presumably beyond forms and colors, just as much as beyond words and letters. Any "medium" might raise such issues. Within Buddhist visual art traditions, Zen seems to take a distancing stance on the fulsome

and lavish nature of much Mahayana art, so replete with ornament and splendid imagination. (Brinker 145-148). Perhaps the famous Zen ink paintings stand in relation to other Buddhist art and sculpture as Zen monks stand to written texts--their spareness and wit is simple, defies easy or ready-made interpretation, and demands that the viewer bring a lot to the interpretation. They depict earthy encounters rather than many levels of reality or universal principles. That is not to say that *Bodhidharma* is connected only to ink painting. But it is interconnected with a number of visual traditions. And it does indicate how simplicity of form can embody rich meaning. It is significant that Bae's film seems so connected with previous visual art of Korea (Erlich 30-31), and that he himself is a teacher of painting (Ciment 3; see Cooper 218-221 for an interesting interpretation of "mountains are again mountains" in relation to ink painting).

I point to this possible comparison of words and pictures for two reasons. One is to ask whether the question about images and pictures does not take on new meaning in cultures, such as ours in the contemporary United States. Here the reproduction and transmission of images is a prominent characteristic of everyday life, not only because of the many types available (TV, video, body scanners, video games, movies, printed magazines, computers and internet, and so on) but also because of the ways they reach into places of work, homes, and entertainment.

Really listening and really seeing, we could perhaps say, have always been difficult for us human beings. But this might be especially so in cultures where we

accept inundation with thousands of images and words daily, most of which we are not, it is understood, supposed to take seriously or spend time with. Most are unrelievedly commercial in content. Were Buddhism forming today, would there be warnings against relying on images and reproductions and transmissions just as there have always been warnings about language and speech? If the answer to such a question is "yes," is it nonetheless possible to make a religious film? If I understand the direction of Margaret Miles' thought in *Image as Insight* and then in *Seeing and Believing*, the answer will have to do with whether the visual form (film, for instance) "has centrally to do with articulating a sense of relatedness--among individuals, within families, communities, and societies, and with the natural world" (*Seeing and Believing* 14). But our ability to "understand through the eyes" will also have to do with the effectiveness with which the contemporary form draws upon inherited forms of imagery, especially devotional imagery (*Image as Insight* ch. 6 & 7).

There is a second point about "seeing" that also bears on the interpretation of this particular film. Sometimes images, seeing a clear picture of things, has been emphasized positively in Buddhism and Zen, as though it was always recognized that, done right, images need not introduce duality in the same way language does. Sometimes the central message of Buddhism is interpreted as an invitation to "come and see" (Rahula 8-9). While "clear seeing into the nature of things" is not a metaphor unique to any one religious or philosophical tradition, it is often repeated

in Buddhism and Zen. With Zen in particular the connection goes even deeper. The Buddha holds up the flower; Kasyapia sees and smiles. It is important that *Bodhidharma* opens with this reference, for it invokes the idea that seeing may convey or embody what words cannot (Niel 26).

As I suggested earlier, the danger in a film such as *Bodhidharma* is that it might become too simplistic or didactic. Indeed this is an issue because if, as we have seen, it is about the essentials of the way, it should be a simplification in the manner of a paradigm. Yet it must convey this sense without reducing it to a few dogmas or repeatable slogans, since such a reduction to "beliefs" would violate the spirit of Zen.

The film does not fail in this way, even though it is simple in outline. The characters represent three generations, the boy, the young monk, the old monk. The young monk undergoes an internal struggle to leave city and family to follow a spiritual path. The young monk and the boy come to terms with the death of the old monk. The question, it seems to me, is whether there is enough to the movie in the way it is imaged and told, to make of it something subtle and rich. There are three ways in which it is successful in this: in the narrative; in the images themselves; and in the way an underlying tension develops gradually through the interaction of the story, the images and the music.

**1. *The narrative.*** The telling of the story is slow-paced. It opens with the old monk and the boy in the mountain hermitage. The career of the young monk is

told partly in the time of the film (as when he returns to the congested fast paced and smoggy city on his begging rounds), partly through flashbacks (as when he is coming to terms with his own decision to stop caring for his blind mother to seek enlightenment in the mountains). Sometimes part of the story is told by other characters, as when the abbot of the monastery down the mountain tells the story of the old monk and how he saved the orphan boy. He carried him back up the mountain on his back. The manner of all this is straightforward. It is all told with a realistic camera. Yet as the film progresses one comes to realize that the narrative sequence is often not so obvious as it at first appeared. In a long sequence, for instance, the boy, startled by the mate of the bird he has earlier killed, tumbles into a stream. After struggling he lets go of the struggle and drifts slowly, finally coming to rest on a rock (sand bar?) where he sleeps. Awakened by the baying of the escaped ox, he looks up to see a woman standing in the water very nearby. Then he proceeds to follow the call of the ox, eventually finding his way back to the hermitage. Was it a vision of his mother? Was there a deep-lying memory associated with the ox? Later, in a striking scene in silhouette, stark trees and figures backlit against an evening sky, Kibong debates with another monk about the continuation of monastic practice versus the return to the world. Or is it that Kibong debates against himself? Is this a story of Kibong's enlightenment, or is it that the enlightenment of one of the characters is somehow implicated in the enlightenment-possibilities of the others? And, in general, the important

interconnections involved in contrasting scenes of city and monastery must be deciphered and temporally ordered by the viewer. As Tony Rayns said in a review of the film, "The uncertainties about the narrative tense mesh with the overall languorousness of pace to work against clear-cut interpretations" (Rayns 47).

**2. *The images.*** A similar point can be made about the way the images of *Bodhidharma* unfold. Visually as well as narratively slow-paced, scenic sequences are so seamlessly connected with the narrative that there is a blending of the story itself with long and careful inquiries of skies, panoramas, forests, waters, fires, and faces. Sometimes the monks attempt zazen in the center of a raging torrent. Sometimes they are small in large settings, recalling some Chinese and Korean landscape ("mountains and waters") paintings. At other times, stillness seems to pervade the atmosphere. One is tempted to use the term "tableaux," perhaps in comparison to Carl Dreyer, except that instead of stopping or freezing what is moving or symbolic, the effect of *Bodhidharma* is the reverse. Everything is flowing. No matter how slowly. Even those things usually taken to be determinate and fixed. Even stillness flows. Visually *Bodhidharma* seems to be about the elements, earth, wind, wood, metal, fire, and water, especially fire and water. But overall the result is that the attentive viewer begins inextricably to interconnect the relatedness of the characters and the elemental processes that make up the world (Niel 25-26).



3. *An underlying tension.* Languorous and still as the surface may sometimes be, *Bodhidharma* generates an involving tension. The relations of characters, story, and image is joined with sound and music to increase gradually a mysterious pressure, an urgent feeling that something is happening, growing and building. Sometimes things are startling, as with cries of the bird that so frighten Haejin; sometimes incremental, as with the musical accompaniment; sometimes riveting, as with the shamanic dance and music in the lower temple that portend and accompany the master's passing. The combined effect directs us toward the end. And it is this that also lends itself to a feeling of both resolution and insight. Having cremated his master, Kibong carefully searches the ashes to find all remains, pounds them carefully and slowly scatters them to all the elements in scenes of gripping serenity. Haejin burns the master's remains in another slow fire. All having come to terms with the issue at hand, and the master having died without leaving a trace (as the Zen ideal has it), the bird can no longer frighten Haejin and is set free. Kibong looks out upon the mountains as he did at the beginning of the film, but now we see his eyes as well, presumably buddha-eyes, disciplined eyes that see the world truly, though the mountains again are mountains as before.

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