



BUDDHISM GOES TO THE MOVIES

Introduction to Buddhist Thought and Practice

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Selected List of Films with Buddhist Content

1. Dramatic films with overt Buddhist themes arranged by release or completion date

Doomsday Book (Pil-Sung Yim and Jee-woon Kim, Korea, 2012)

A science fiction comedy suggesting three doomsday scenarios. In the middle sequence, a futuristic sentient robot created to serve visitors to a monastery in Korea seems to have attained Buddhahood. Considering this a malfunction and a threat to the Buddhist institution, the manufacturer comes to terminate it.

Flowers in Hell (Korean title: Jiokhwa, literally “Fire in Hell,” Lee Sang-woo, Korea, 2012)

A monk is banished from a temple for having an affair with a parishioner. In the secular world his passions grow beyond control and he accidentally kills a woman from the Philippines. He goes to her family’s home in that country to deliver her ashes but falls in love with her sister. The film explores karma.

Mindfulness and Murder (Thai title: Sop-mai-ngeap, Tom Waller, Thailand, 2011)

When a murder takes place in a monastery in Bangkok, a resident senior monk and former homicide is called upon to investigate. Based on a Thai book series about detective-monk Father Ananda by American writer Nick Wilgus.

Abraxas (Naoki Katô, Japan, 2010)

A Japanese Zen Buddhist persists in his secular attachment to punk rock music. His master suggests he perform a live concert.

Rolling Home with a Bull (*Korean title: So-wa hamque Yeohang-ha-neun Beob, Soonrye Yim, Korea, 2010*)

When sent by his father to purchase a bull, a reluctant son undertakes what turns into a pilgrimage of sorts, and comes to understand something important for his life.

9 Wat (*a.k.a. Secret Sunday, Saranyoo Jiralak, Thailand, 2010*)

Three people undertake a journey to nine temples, each for a different reason. Along the way they discover their karmic affinities.

Phobia 2 (*various directors, Thailand, 2009*)

Five horror film segments by different directors. One segment, "The Novice," is about a 14-year-old boy whose mother makes him become a monk after he is caught being a thief. Thinking this would free him from suspicion, he joins the monastic order and continues his lifestyle. He faces the karmic consequences of this.

Enter the Void (*Gaspar Noé, France, 2009*)

A film with sometimes shocking sequences depicting incest and conception, it follows the trek of the disembodied consciousness of a fallen drug dealer in the *bardo* state between death and rebirth, as described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

In the Shadow of the Naga (*Thai title: Nak prok, Nasorn Panungkasiri, Thailand, released 2010, completed 2008*)

Three criminals become Buddhist monks in order to recover stolen goods buried beneath a temple. Release of this film was delayed due to protests by Buddhists in Thailand.

Okuribito (*English title: Departures, Yôjirô Takita, Japan, 2008*)

Based on ideas from Jōdo Shinshū in Japan, as told in the book *Coffinman: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician* by Shinmon Aoki, 2004. Encoffiners prepare corpses and families of the departed. It received the 2009 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

God Man Dog (*Singing Chen, Taiwan, 2008*)

Chance and karmic interactions of five individuals from different social-economic backgrounds are depicted in scenes of alcoholism, postpartum depression, religious desperation, compassion, and redemption.

Only the Way (*Dang Tak-Wing, Hong Kong, 2008*)

A washed-out songwriter's bad karma begins to catch up with him. His life goes downhill as his girlfriend leaves him, his career declines, and his mother passes away. All these setbacks make him live in even greater spite of the world, until he encounters a temple street vendor who introduces him to Buddhism.

The Coffin (*Ekachai Uekrongtham, USA, 2008*)

Following a Thai custom aimed at cheating death and ridding oneself of bad karma, a man who lies in a coffin for an evening has a series of terrifying experiences.

12 Lotus (*Royston Tan, Singapore, 2008*)

Also called *1028* (or *Ten 28*), *12 Lotus* is a musical. A girl steals an image of the Bodhisattva Guanyin and cares for it. The lead actor, Qi Yu Wu, was himself named Guan Yin in Royston Tan's previous film, *881*.

Un Buda (*Diego Rafecas, Argentina, 2005*)

In Argentina, two brothers are orphaned as children when their parents are killed. As adults, one becomes a skilled Buddhist practitioner, the other a university philosophy professor, influenced by their father and mother respectively.

Ghost of Mae Nak (*Mark Duffield, Thailand, 2005*)

From a Thai legend about a wife who dies in childbirth but refuses to leave her husband. Buddhist priests work to exorcize her relentless ghost. The story is also told in the Thai film *Nang Nak*, 1999 (see below).

A Chinese Tall Story (*Jeffrey Lau, Hong Kong, 2005*)

A science fiction comedy based on *Journey to the West* (sometimes called *Monkey* in English), which was also the model for the *Dragonball* animation series. The story takes place in the younger days of the famous Chinese monk Tripitaka (Xuangzang) and tells of the relationship

between a monk and an alien.

Zen Noir (*Marc Rosenbush, USA, 2004*)

A detective investigates what seems to be a murder at a California Zen temple and ends up examining his own life.

I Heart Huckabees (*David O. Russell, USA, 2004*)

A man hires “existential detectives” to investigate his life. According to the director’s commentary, ideas in the story are based on his college classes under noted Buddhologist Robert Thurman, who also serves as the model for Dustin Hoffman’s detective character in the film.

The Simpsons episode 332 (season 15), “Simple Simpson” (*Jim Reardon, USA, 2004*)

Homer becomes a superhero, “The Pie Man,” throwing pies in the faces of the deserving. Mr. Burns unmask him and puts him to work for evil. As a part of this plan, The Pie Man is ordered to pie the Dalai Lama. Because Lisa has become a Buddhist, Homer is conscience-stricken. The Dalai Lama is depicted making jokes and flying.

Ok Baytong (*Nonzee Nimibutr, Thailand, 2003*)

A Thai Buddhist monk leaves the temple where he has lived since he was 5, after learning his sister has been killed by insurgents. He learns to live in the secular world and meets Muslims in south Thailand.

Travelers and Magicians (*Khyentse Norbu, Bhutan, 2003*)

A man seeking to immigrate to America is forced to travel with a monk. Their interactions take unexpected turns.

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and Spring (*Ki-duk Kim, Korea, 2003*)

The story takes place on an isolated lake, where an old monk lives in a small floating-island temple. The film follows the life of an apprentice monk who studies under the old master.

Changes in the life of the younger monk are symbolized by the seasons and Buddhist imagery. The apprentice eventually leaves the temple, is involved in a murder, and decides to come back to take his own life. However, the old master has different ideas.

Hollywood Buddha (*Philippe Caland, 2003*)

A broke film-maker seeks advice from a Buddhist master in Los Angeles. The master convinces him to purchase an expensive statue of the Buddha. The release of this film was cancelled due to Buddhists protest about the poster and the content of the film.

The Anniversary (*Ham Tran, USA, 2003, 28 minutes*)

A Vietnamese monk is haunted by his memories of war and betrayal on the anniversary of his brother's death. Winner of 25 international awards, the USA Film Festival award for Best Short Film, and semi-finalist for a 2004 Academy Award.

Running on Karma (*Johnnie To and Ka-Fai Wai, Hong Kong, 2003*)

Big is an ex-martial-artist monk who has turned bodybuilder. He has the ability to see karmic connections. He befriends a female cop and helps her solve cases with his visions and fighting skills. But it is her destiny that really concerns him most.

Oseam (*Baek-yeob Seong, Korea, 2003*)

Animation about what an orphaned boy and girl learn after being taken in by a monastery.

A Little Monk (*Korean title: Dong seung, Kyung-jung Joo, Korea, 2002*)

Similar to *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*, this film depicts a child monk, a middle-aged monk, and an old monk living together in a remote temple. The child is constantly longing for the mother he cannot remember.

Samsara (*Pan Nalin, An independent Italy/France/Indian/German film, 2001 Tibetan with English subtitles*)

A spiritual love story set in the majestic landscape of Ladakh in the Himalayas. *Samsara* is a quest; one man's struggle to find spiritual enlightenment by renouncing the world, and one woman's struggle to keep her enlightened love and life in the world. But their destiny turns, twists, and comes to a surprising end.

Echos of Enlightenment (*Daniel J. Coplan, US, 2001*)

Allegedly inspired by the "Skill-in-means" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is referenced in the film.

Hi! Dharma! (*Korean title: Dalmaya nolja, Cheol-kwan Park, Korea, 2001*)

A comedy about a crime ring that comes to hide out in a monastery. The monks challenge the criminals to a series of competitions to determine if they can stay. A sequel was made called *Hi! Dharma 2: Showdown in Seoul* (Korean title: *Dalmaya, Seoul gaja*, Sang-Hyo Yook, 2004).

King of the Hill episode 4.18, "Won't You Pimai Neighbor?" (*Boo Hwan Lim and Kyoung Hee Lim, USA, 2000*)

In apparent parody of the *Kundun* story wherein the infant Lhamo Döndrub is identified as the 14th Dalai Lama, Bobby is examined as a potential Lama.

Enlightenment Guaranteed (*Doris Dörrie, Germany, 2000*)

Dörrie creates a comic work about two brothers who travel to Japan for a retreat in a Zen monastery in hopes of getting their lives back together.

The Cup (*Tibetan title: Phörpa, Khyentse Norbu, Bhutan, 1999*)

Young monks scheme to watch the World Cup in a Tibetan temple in exile in India.

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai (*Jim Jarmusch, France, 1999*)

A hitman models himself after Buddhist-inspired Samurai philosophy.

Himalaya or Himalaya—l' enfance d'un chef (*Eric Valli,*

France/Switzerland/UK/Nepal, 1999)

A beautifully shot film about the semi-nomadic people of the Dolpo, a remote region in the Himalayas. It was the first Nepalese film to be nominated in the Best Foreign Film category at the 72nd Academy Awards.

Nang Nak (Nonzee Nimibutr, Thailand, 1999)

Local monks struggle with the ghost of a woman who refuses to be parted from her husband in death. The story is also told in the Thai film *Ghost of Mae Nak*, 2005 (see above).

Hwaomgyong (also called Hwaomkyong. English title: Passage to Buddha, Sun-Woo Jang, Korea, 1993)

A boy travels seeking to understand life. Based on similar events in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, some say this is the best Korean film on Buddhism to date.

Little Buddha (Bernardo Bertolucci, UK/France, 1993)

Tibetan monks find an American boy in Seattle who they identify as the reincarnation of their deceased master.

Come, Come, Come, Upward (Korean title: Aje aje bara aje, Kwontaeck Im, Korea, 1989)

Sun Nyog becomes a Buddhist nun and attempts to disentangle herself from a suicidal alcoholic she once saved.

Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East? (Young-Kyun Bae, South Korea, 1989)

A middle-aged man becomes a monk and practices at a remote mountain temple. There he struggles with his guilt about abandoning his ailing mother.

Fancy Dance (Masayuki Suo, Japan, 1987)

Yohei, a punk rocker, has to become a Buddhist monk in order to inherit a mountain temple. Yohei, though initially rebelling against the tough monastic discipline, learns to adjust. Then

his girlfriend shows up, enticing him to return to his rock 'n' roll roots.

Mandala (*Im Kwon-taek, South Korea, 1981*)

A critically acclaimed film by one of South Korea's most renowned film-makers. It follows the lives of two Seon Buddhists with contrasting lifestyles and practices.

Kung Fu (*television series, 1972–1975*) and The Way of the Tiger, the Sign of the Dragon , its feature-length pilot (*Jerry Thorpe, USA, 1972*)

David Carradine stars as Kwai Chang Caine, a Chinese-American Buddhist priest, trained in the Dharma and martial arts in China's famous Shaolin Temple. Caine travels around the American Wild West in the nineteenth century, philosophizing, righting wrongs, attempting to spread peace, and inevitably fighting bad guys.

Siddhartha (*Conrad Rooks, 1972*)

The story of a young Indian who embarks upon a journey to find the meaning of existence. Based on the novel by Hermann Hesse.

Mujō (*a.k.a This Transient Life, Akio Jissoji, Japan, 1970*)

First film in the Buddhist trilogy by Japanese "New Wave" auteur Akio Jissoji. All three films, including *Mandala* (Japanese: *Mandara*, 1971) and *Poem* (Japanese: *Uta*, 1972), explore Buddhism and eroticism in post-industrial capitalism.

The Burmese Harp (*Japanese title: Biruma no tategoto, Kon Ichikawa, Japan, 1956*)

At the end of World War II, a soldier of the Japanese army escapes capture by pretending to be a Burmese Buddhist with surprising consequences.

Lost Horizon (*Frank Capra, USA, 1937*)

After a plane crash in the Himalayas, a small group of civilians explore the fabled kingdom of Shangri-la, a seductive escape from the realities of World War II.

Broken Blossoms (*D.W. Griffith, USA, 1919*)

A Chinese Buddhist travels to London to teach the Dharma. There he discovers the harsh realities of everyday life and gives up his broad ambition. Applying his principles on an individual level, he meets a local girl who is abused by her father and tries to help her.

2. Dramatic biographies of Buddhists

Zen (*Banmei Takahashi, Japan, 2009*)

A biopic on the life of Dōgen, founder of Japanese Soto Zen.

Shinran-sama: His Wish and Light (*Japanese title: Shinran-sama: Negai, Soshite Hikari, Honganji-ha, Japan, 2008*)

Japanese animation about the life of the founder of the True Pure Land Tradition of Japanese Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) and released for the 750 th anniversary of his passing.

Recalling a Buddha: Memories of HH Karmapa XVI (*Gregg Eller, USA, 2006*)

The life story of Karmapa XVI is related by people who knew him in Tibet. Not only was *A Buddha* recalled, but so was the film. Likely because of complaints about production and content quality, the film-makers decided to rework it.

Milarepa (*Neten Chokling, Bhutan, 2006*)

A film about the early life of the Tibetan saint Milarepa.

Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet (*Luc Schaedler, 2005*)

The story of the radical Tibetan monk Gendun Choephel.

Kundun (*Martin Scorsese, USA, 1997*)

Depiction of the life of the 14th Dalai Lama.

Seven Years in Tibet (*Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997*)

True story of Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountain climber who became friends with the Dalai Lama at the time of China's takeover of Tibet.

Kūkai (*Setō Junya, Japan, 1984*)

Currently in Japanese with no foreign subtitles. But if you know the basics of his life story it's easy to follow.

Nichiren and the Great Mongol Invasion (*Japanese title: Nichiren to moko daishurai, Kunio Watanabe, Japan, 1958*)

Japanese with English subtitles.

3. Dramatic films with themes identified as Buddhist

3-Iron (*original Korean title means "Empty Houses," Kim Ki-duk, Korea, 2004*)

A man lives in empty houses while their owners are on vacation. He applies principles of a Buddhist mendicant and seems to develop extraordinary abilities.

Angulimala (*Sutape Tunnirut, Thailand, 2003*)

Based on a Jataka. Believing people seek release from suffering, Angulimala tries to kill 1,000 people for his own spiritual merit. After an hour and a half of murder and mayhem, Angulimala meets the Buddha and lives a converted life for the last ten minutes of the film.

Waking Life (*Richard Linklater, US, 2001*)

A young man seeking to awaken from a long vivid dream seeks the advice of philosophers.

After Life (*Japanese title: Wandâfuru raifu, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Japan, 1999*)

After people die, they spend a week with counselors, also dead, who help them pick one memory they can take to eternity. They describe the memory to the staff, who work with a crew to film it and screen it at week's end; eternity follows.

The Matrix (Andy and Larry Wachowski, US, 1999)

A group of people begin to see life is an illusion and work to help others realize this.

Fight Club (David Fincher, USA, 1999)

Analyzed by critics as a man's philosophical struggle with himself, the story progresses along the lines of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path.

Fearless (Peter Weir, US, 1993)

Following a plane crash, a survivor sees life from a new perspective.

Point Break (Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 1991)

A group of bank-robbing surfer/skydivers are led by a free spirit called Bodhi/Bodhisattva and are hunted by a federal agent who learns about life from them.

Dreams (Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1990), also called Akira Kurosawa's Dreams

A classic film with eight segments showing human interaction with nature.

Jacob's Ladder (Adrian Lyne, USA, 1990)

A man wounded in Vietnam continues to live a nightmare in New York. His path of intrigue and horror seemingly leads to hell or heaven. Allegedly based in some part on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thodol)*.

4. Documentary films on aspects of Buddhism

I Am (Tom Shadyac, USA, 2010)

The Director Tam Shadyac tells about his brain injury and the resulting change of lifestyle that is close to Buddhism.

The Dhamma Brothers (Andrew Kukura and Jenny Phillips, USA, 2008)

A documentary about doing Mindfulness Meditation in an overcrowded maximum-security prison in Alabama.

How to Cook Your Life (Doris Dörrie, Germany/USA, 2007)

A Zen priest in San Francisco and cookbook author uses Zen Buddhism and cooking to relate to everyday life. By the director of *Enlightenment Guaranteed*, 2000 (see above).

Amongst White Clouds (Edward A. Burger, USA, 2007)

An exploration of Chinese Buddhist hermit monks.

10 Questions for The Dalai Lama (Rick Ray, USA, 2006)

Film-maker Rick Ray is allowed to ask the Dalai Lama ten questions of his choosing.

The Giant Buddhas (Christian Frei, Germany, 2006)

Investigation of the destruction by the Taliban of the huge Buddha cliff-carving in Afghanistan.

The Zen Mind (Jon Braeley, USA, 2006)

A documentary about Zen practice, the film features Soji Monastery, Kyoto Zen Center, Dōgen Sangha in Tokyo, Tenruji Temple, Nanzenji Temple, Ryoanji Temple, and Komazawa University.

On the Road with the Red God Macchendranath (Kesang Tseten, Nepal, 2005)

Documents the periodic trek of a large image of Macchendranath in Nepal.

Discovering Buddhism (*Christina Lundberg, USA, 2004*)

A film featuring Richard Gere, Keanu Reeves, the Dalai Lama, Lama Thubten Yeshe, Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

Words of My Perfect Teacher (*Lesley Ann Patten, Canada, 2003*)

Documentary film-maker Lesley Ann Patten turns the camera on her guru, Khyentse Norbu, one of the world's most admired Buddhist teachers, and accomplished filmmaker (*The Cup*, 1999, see above).

The Yogis of Tibet (*Jeffrey M. Pill, USA, 2002*)

A documentary showing Tibetan Buddhists discussing ideas and demonstrating practices.

To the Land of Bliss (*Wen-jie Qin, USA, 2002*)

Portrayal of the Chinese Pure Land Buddhist way of dying and living. Film-maker Wen-jie Qin is an anthropologist from Sichuan Province in southwest China.

Doing Time, Doing Vipassana (*Eilona Ariel and Ayelet Menahemi, USA, 1997, 52 minutes*)

A documentary about teaching Mindfulness Meditation in a prison in India.

The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei (*Christopher J. Hayden, US, 1993*)

A documentary look at the extreme marathon training of monk Tanno Kakudo. The film depicts death-defying fasts, vegetarian training diets, handmade straw running shoes, and ritual feats of endurance.

The Reincarnation of Khensur Rinpoche (*Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, UK, 1991*)

A documentary on a life of devotion, and the continuity of Tibetan culture in exile. A disciple searches for the child who is the reincarnation of the late Khenshur Rinpoche.