

Film Notes on *Why has Bodhidharma left for the East?*

Why has Bodhidharma left for the East? (1989) was written, produced and directed by Young-Kyun Bae, a professor of art and painting at Dongguk University in Seoul. The film was shot with a single camera and hand edited with a minimalist style over a ten year period. The film's title is a classic Zen kōan and the film itself is often described as a cinematic kōan about the interconnectedness and dynamic impermanence of all things. The plot revolves around an aging Son master (Hyegok), a young man who leaves his aging (and blind mother) to practice Son in the mountains (Kibong), and an orphaned child (Haejin) who has been adopted by Hyegok. As the film opens, the three generations of protagonists are living together in a remote monastery on Mount Chonan.

In keeping with the Chan notion of realizing our own (Buddha) nature without relying on words and letters, the film has minimal dialogue and the dramatic/narrative underpinnings of the story have to be gleaned by placing various scenes and images into association with one another. The title is drawn from a famous kōan and the two kōans are posed in the film by the old monk, Hyegok. Asked why Bodhidharma came to the East, Chan master Zhàozhōu Cōngshěn (778–897) replied, “The cypress tree in the courtyard.” The film can be engaged as a cinematic response to the kōan that riffs on Zhaozhou's response.

The film also includes an allusion to the famous “ox-herding” paintings that have long been used as didactic devices in East Asia—devices that represent or literally imagine the life cycle of Chan/Zen/Son practice. Look out for references to the transmission exchange between the Buddha and Mahakasyapa, “fingers pointing at the moon,” and other emblems of Zen lore. As a film made by a painter, it is not surprising that the cinematography alludes to classic Chan/Zen landscape painting, not so much formally as in terms of mood. There is an emotional quality to the film that is at once earthy and atmospheric—a quality that expresses East Asian tendencies to view emotions as being deeply situational or relational rather than as fundamentally subjective/interior. In a sense, the film invites us to use seeing and listening as modes of direct understanding. It is not a film that is easily “comprehended.” Its “meaning” eludes intellectual grasp and points us to the classic Chan self-description as a tradition that is not only about direct heartmind to heartmind transmissions, beyond words and letters, but also about directly point to our own true nature. Recall Huineng remarking that Chan is crucially about “*seeing* our own nature,” but where this nature is relational propensity. It bears keeping in mind that a core metaphor of East Asian conceptions of knowing is penetration rather than grasping—entering thoroughly into things rather than taking possession of them.

The question we might pose the film, then, might not be “what do we get from or out of it?” but “where do we get to through it?”

There are lots of academic and film critic articles on the film. One that addresses using the film in university courses is available at:

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