

Film Notes on *Zen and Departures*

Zen (Banmei Takahashi, Japan, 2009) is a sometimes compelling and moving biography of Dōgen, the great 13th century founder of the Japanese Sōtō Zen lineage. The film begins with the young Dōgen confronting the death of his mother—an event that arguably set Dōgen on the path of Buddhist inquiry. After a scene of his mother’s funeral, we see Dōgen on the road in China, seeking connection with “true” Buddhism. Through a couple of chance meetings, Dōgen finds his way to Tiantong monastery and the teachings of Caodong Chan master Rujing (1162-1228). After a breakthrough experience, Dōgen receives transmission from Rujing and returns to Japan where he begins teaching in Kyoto. The bulk of the film is devoted to the challenges faced by the nascent Sōtō school as Dōgen and his students are driven out of Kyoto by jealous Tendai monks from Mount Hiei, where Dōgen had done some of his early Buddhist training, and eventually establish a small monastery, Eihei-ji, in remote Echizen prefecture.

The film is generally well-filmed and offers some useful points of visual entry into the early Soto Zen community. While it does a pretty good job of mapping out Dōgen’s life journey and is fairly effective in narrating key events therein, the film overall lacks the kind of dramatic tensions that would have been required to turn a biopic into a feature film of religious conviction and community. The script also includes some minor historical infelicities and also some narrative license in fleshing out life in Dōgen’s circle—including a subplot involving an ex-prostitute cast as a latter-day Kisagotami seeking help for her sick infant and being directed by Dōgen to seek a bean from a house not visited by death. In sum, at roughly 2 hours in length, the film is perhaps not something to show students in its entirety. But in the context of a session on Zen in Japanese history, certain scenes could be shown to “dramatize” issues of religious competition and the austere simplicity of the original Soto vision of Zen as “just sitting.”

Scenes running from: 0-3:00; 21:37-27:00; 40:00-46:00; 1:06:55-1:11:00; 1:48:00-1:57:00

Departures (Yōjirō Takita, Japan, 2008) is not an explicitly Buddhist film, but it explores the deeply relational nature of ritual practice that resonates well both with the Buddhism of both Kūkai and Dōgen. In this case, the ritual is that of preparing bodies for cremation before family members and friends of the deceased. While the ritual depicted is not proper to any specific Buddhist tradition, funeral rites have long been the responsibility of the Buddhist community, especially the Soto tradition. The film centers on a transformative period in the life of a young professional musician, Daigo, who finds himself suddenly out of work not long after purchasing his dream cello for much more than he could really afford. Unable to make ends meet, he and his wife decide to move back to his small hometown where he begins working for a company specializing in “Departures.” Instead of selling travel packages, as he had anticipated in answering the classified ad, however, he learns that he will be preparing bodies of the recently deceased for their passage to the afterlife. Confronting cultural conceptions of purity as well as his own fears and revulsion at handling dead bodies, Daigo and his wife come to a new and deep appreciation for living.

Of particular interest in our institute context, are the ways in which Daigo learns through demonstration rather than instruction, the power of rituals performed personally and yet “without self,” and the embodiment of mindfulness and aesthetic engagement. (2 hrs. 11 min.)