

Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?
(137 min; 1989)

Director: Bae Yong-Kyun

Cast: Yi Pan-Yong; Sin Won-Sop; Hae-Jin Huang

Storyline:

Three people live in a remote Buddhist monastery near Mount Chonan: Hyegok, the old master; Yong Nan, a young man who has left his extended family in the city to seek enlightenment - Hyegok calls him Kibong!; and, an orphan lad Haejin, whom Hyegok has brought to the monastery to raise as a monk. The story is mostly Yong Nan's, told in flashbacks: how he came to the monastery, his brief return to the city, his vacillation between the turbulence of the world and his hope to overcome passions and escape the idea of self. We also see Hyegok as a teacher, a protector, and a father figure, and we watch Haejin make his way as a curious and nearly self-sufficient child. *Written by* [<jhailey@hotmail.com>](mailto:jhailey@hotmail.com) (IMDb website)

Review/Film; Zen and the Art of Making Its Tenets Into a Movie By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

"I am insubstantial in the universe, but in the universe there is nothing that is not me," reflects Hye Gok (Yi Pan Yong), an elderly and ailing Zen Buddhist monk in Bae Yong Kyun's ravishingly beautiful film "Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?"

Not long after Hye Gok speaks these words to his young student Ki Bong (Sin Won Sop), his riddle finds a haunting visual corollary. As Ki Bong scatters the ashes of his teacher in a mountain pool strewn with autumn leaves, the colored foliage floating on the pool's surface intermingles with the reflections of leaves still clinging to the trees above.

At the same moment, the monk's reflection and his shadow overlap. The sounds of water, wind, birds and faraway animals blend with the imagery to evoke as intense an experience of being in nature as one could hope to glean from a film. Life and death, shadow and substance, image and reflection, all seem united and indistinguishable.

The scene, which the camera holds for several seconds, is one of many stunning visionary moments in the film, which opened yesterday at the Walter Reade Theater. Produced, directed, written, photographed and edited by Mr. Bae, a South Korean film maker, the movie, whose title is a Zen Buddhist koan, is a glacially slow but often spellbinding attempt to find a cinematic language for the Zen mode of perception.

The film tells the stories of the aging monk, his student and an orphaned child, Hae Jin (Huang Hae Jin), who live together in a remote Zen monastery on Mount Chonan, in South Korea. Several of the film's most striking early scenes portray the child's spiritual rites of passage.

One day, he throws a stone at a bird and seriously wounds it. Taking the creature home, he tries to nurse it back to life, but it dies. The boy hides its carcass under a rock, which he later turns over to discover the remains being devoured by maggots. Then he instinctively gives it a proper burial.

In a scene that suggests a Rousseau painting sprung to life, the child, while running through the woods at night, encounters a cow that has broken free from its shed. The two stand inches apart, gazing into each other's eyes. When Hae Jin has a toothache, Hye Gok ties a string around the tooth and yanks it out. Hae Jin's saving of his extracted tooth prompts a lesson in renunciation of the physical body.

Ki Bong also has difficult rites of passage. Both Hye Gok and Ki Bong pursue enlightenment through such intense physical challenges as meditating for hours on a rock while being lashed by icy river rapids that chill them to the bone. The young monk, who renounced the world to live in the monastery, returns briefly to the urban slum where he left behind his elderly blind mother. Sensing his presence, she greets him, but he doesn't acknowledge her call and steals silently and guiltily out of the house.

His most solemn task is the ritualistic cremation of his teacher in a mountain clearing. As his body becomes covered with ashes and soot from the blaze, he begins to grasp Hye Gok's teaching that birth and death are one.

Again and again, the film finds visual analogues for the oneness of the universe and the enlightenment to be found through the renunciation of earthly desires. In gazing into the physical world with a fixity, clarity and depth rarely found in the cinema, "Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?" goes about as far as a film can go in conjuring a meditative state. WHY HAS

BODHI-DHARMA LEFT FOR THE EAST? Written, directed, photographed, edited and produced by Bae Yong Kyun; in Korean, with English subtitles; music by Chin Kyu Yong; released by Milestone. Running time: 135 minutes. This film is not rated. Hye Gok . . . Yi Pan Yong Ki Bong . . . Sin Won Sop Hae Jin . . . Huang Hae Jin Superior . . . Ko Su Yong Fellow Disciple . . . Kim Hae Yong

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Zen (127 min; 2008)

Director: Takahashi Bunmei

Cast: Nakamura Kankurō; Uchida Yuki; Tei Ryushin

Storyline:

'Zen' Buddhist teacher Dogen Zenji is a very important religious person during the Kamakura period, 750 years ago. After his mother died, he decides to move to China and settle as a Buddhist teacher. One bright morning, enlightened, Zenji returns to Japan as a devoted evangelist of the 'new' Buddhism. However, this new form of Buddhism is not accepted in all communities. —[Rene Guillot](#) (IMDb website)

Film Review by Jonathan Ciliberto for Buddhist Art News

Buddhist art includes not only images of Buddhas, but also paintings and sculptures of historical figures: monks, nuns, teachers, poets, artists, and others. Tibetan thangkas which depict great teachers include, in addition to a large central figure: protective deities, lineage holders, and episodes from the primary subject's life arrayed around the painting in such a way that the viewer might learn through narrative elements the history of the individual portrayed and thus Buddhist practice. In short: Buddhist art serves to explicate Buddhist practice.

“Dōgen stringently warned against the building of magnificent temples or the making of Buddha images for their own sake.” (*Zen Master Dōgen*, Yoho Yokoi, p. 33)

In modern media, films devoted to the life of the Buddhist masters in the same way offer an expression of Buddhist teaching through the narrative of an individual's life. The recently released Japanese film on the life of the 13th century founder of Soto Zen on Japan, Dōgen Zenji (道元禪師, 19 January 1200 – 22 September 1253), hews to this model, while also pursuing the aesthetics of film. Scene after scene portrays with superb symmetry his life and the understanding of Buddhism that he presented. At the same time, the film is wonderfully filmed, acted, and edited, such that viewers wholly unaware of Buddhist practice will find delight in its viewing.

Zen was directed by Banmei Takahashi and stars Kantaro Nakamura, the 19th generation Kabuki actor and son of Kabuki legend, Nakamura Kanzaburo, who delivers a masterful performance, capturing the quality of Dōgen's character: from his early struggle to understand Buddhism, to his firm commitment to see Zen spread to his native country. Rather than portraying so monumental a figure as distant or superhuman, Nakamura conveys an everyday person, one

engaged in this life fully. And, this is the Buddhism Dōgen professed: that enlightenment is not a goal, but rather a practice.

So, despite the spiritual and historical weight that Dōgen carries as the founder of one of Japan's two main Zen traditions, his person is presented without sensationalism or pomposity: no miracles or grandiose gestures are attributed, nor does the filmmaker turn to extreme hagiography, and this is appropriate to the subject. Dōgen, frustrated with the artifice and worldliness of the Buddhism he encountered, sought his "true master," one who practiced the true form of Buddhism. He found this in a Zen practice he encountered in China, which he transmitted to Japan in the form known as Soto. Dōgen

"claimed that people commonly believe the occult powers of Buddhas are such as exhaling water and fire from the body or inhaling water from the ocean into the pores of the body. These may be termed "small occult powers," but they are not worthy of being termed true occult powers. The true occult powers [...] exist within and only within the simple everyday occurrences of "drinking tea, eating rice, drawing water, and carrying faggots." " (*A Comparative History of Ideas*, Hajime Nakamura, p. 492)

The Dōgen presented in Zen pursues first and foremost: seated meditation. Many scenes which begin with a conflict of some sort end with Dōgen inviting seated meditation. On only one occasion does the film attempt to depict meditation in any other form than monks seated, meditating, and this representation of in terms of water, lotus, and light is brief.

In addition to the life of Buddhist practice, the film skillfully conveys the life of Japan in the 13th century: war, famine, political struggles, deep mountain forests and burgeoning urban areas. Although the cinematography (Chinese landscapes, mountain monasteries) is spectacular, the filmmakers seem to have made a particular effort not to lead the viewer to ooh and aaah at marvellous sites, always keeping focused on human beings in the landscape, seeking meaning.

Enforced upon those who encounter Dōgen in the film, and thus upon its modern viewers, is the key question Buddhism asks: what are you doing? "When death suddenly comes, neither the king nor his ministers, relatives, servants, wife or children, or rare jewels can save us. [...] Therefore while we still retain our human body we should quickly enter monkhood." (*Shōbōgenzō*, quoted in Yokoi, p.27) So insistent is this message that one leaves the theatre asking, "what am I doing with myself?" That such a question sounds so clearly, with such force, indicates the Buddhist quality of the film, serving as does all Buddhist art to guide the individual to self-criticism and thus better practice.

(I thank Emory University and the Japanese Consulate of Atlanta for their screening of this film.)

Retrieved from: <https://buddhistartnews.wordpress.com/2008/03/02/zen-film-review/>



Departures (130 min; 2008)

Original Title: Okuribito

Director: Takiya Yōjirō

Cast: Motoki Masahiro; Hirose Ryōko; Yamazaki Tsutomu

Storyline:

Daigo Kobayashi is a devoted cellist in an orchestra that has just been dissolved and now finds himself without a job. Daigo decides to move back to his old hometown with his wife to look for work and start over. He answers a classified ad entitled "Departures" thinking it is an advertisement for a travel agency only to discover that the job is actually for a "Nokanshi" or "encoffineer," a funeral professional who prepares deceased bodies for burial and entry into the next life. While his wife and others despise the job, Daigo takes a certain pride in his work and begins

to perfect the art of "Nokanshi," acting as a gentle gatekeeper between life and death, between the departed and the family of the departed. The film follows his profound and sometimes comical journey with death as he uncovers the wonder, joy and meaning of life and living. *Written by [Regent Releasing](#) ([IMDb website](#))*

Film Review by Robert Ebert

It is a bad time for the young couple. He plays the cello in a small provincial orchestra. Their audiences have been sparse. The owner of the orchestra sadly tells them it must shut down. He comes home and informs his wife. There is more bad news. He recently purchased a new cello, paying far more than they could afford. He didn't tell her because he knew she would say it was a bad idea. Now she knows.

The opening scenes of "Departures" (2009) give no hint of what direction the film will take. It begins as a narrative about a couple in financial crisis. We have no way of knowing, and indeed neither do they, that this is the beginning of a journey of profound growth and discovery, brought about through the instrument of death.

I showed Yojiro Takita's film at Ebertfest 2010, and it had as great an impact as any film in the festival's history. At the end the audience rose as one person. Many standing ovations are perfunctory. This one was long, loud and passionate. That alone doesn't have anything to do with making a film great, and 2011 may seem too soon to include a 2009 film in this collection of Great Movies. I'm including it because having seen in three times I am convinced that "Departures" will hold its power and appeal.

The Japanese cinema reserves a special place for death. In films like Kurosawa's "[Ikiru](#)," Ozu's "[Tokyo Story](#)," Itami's "Ososhiki" ("[The Funeral](#)") and Kore Eda's "[Maborosi](#)" and "[After Life](#)," it is handled in terms of ongoing life. There is mourning, but not hopeless grief. The mourning is channeled into ritual which provides comfort. There is no great focus on an afterlife. Attention centers on the survivors and on the meaning of the life that has just ended. Watching "Departures" again most recently, I was reminded of these words spoken in Errol Morris's "Gates of Heaven:" *Life is for the living and not for the dead so much.*

The hero of "Departures" is Daigo ([Masahiro Motoki](#)), an impulsive young man, likable, easy to read. His wife Mika ([Ryoko Hirose](#)) loves him and believes in him. When disaster strikes, she's quick to agree they must return to the small town where he was born and move into his childhood home, which was left to him after his mother's death not long ago. He sells the expensive cello and they make the trip. This is defeat for him: Unemployed, owning not even an instrument, back where he began.

Looking into the employment ads, he finds a promising offer at what sounds like a travel agency. Daigo applies at a quiet little office managed by an assistant ([Yo Kimiko](#)), and soon the owner, Mr. Sasaki ([Tsutomu Yamazaki](#)), appears. The interview is brief. He gets the job and a cash advance. He discovers the agency handles travel, all right -- to the next world. It is an "encoffinment," or undertaking, business.

Before he has time to absorb this idea, Daigo is taken along by his new boss to observe the process. It strikes me as more humane than the Western practice of out of sight embalming and so on. The body of the departed is displayed on a mat in front of the mourners, who kneel together and watch the process of preparation. It is a ceremony of precise ritual and grace. Carefully arranged sheets preserve the dead person's privacy as the corpse is washed and dressed. Then the face is made up with exquisite attention to detail. Finally the body is placed in a simple wooden coffin. Most family members remain silent, but sometimes there are outbursts of emotion -- or truth -- and young Daigo starts learning lessons of life.

He delays telling his wife what the job entails, because it would shock her. Undertaking is an important occupation in Japan, I gather, but not a respectable one. In his childhood house they grow closer than ever before, and play old LP records his father left behind. He reveals his bitterness toward the man, who disappeared and never contacted the family again. Mika is content until the day she discovers what her husband is doing for a living. As much as she loves him, she tells him she must leave him; she doesn't even want to be touched by a man who prepares the dead.

The construction of Takita's screenplay is rock-solid in its fundamentals, and yet such is the film's flow that we don't sense the machinery creaking. Subplots are introduced and we hardly notice. Mr. Sasaki misses his late wife. The office assistant has a sad story of her own. We learn something of the several families that employ the Departures firm. We meet the old lady who runs a public bath, and her oldest customer, and later the attendant at a crematorium. We watch the quiet, sweet way in which the assistant informs Daigo he was born for this work. We understand why, when his wife leaves, Daigo knows he must stay. He provides a service that has become meaningful to him.

Takita's music and cinematography are part of the film's success. Cello music, some performed in a beautiful fantasy outdoor scene by Daigo, more at home with the little cello he owned as a child, is right for this material. (A discreet shot shows the marks still on the floorboards from where it rested while he practiced.) The cinematography by Takeshi Hamada can perhaps be called polite. No shots for effect. It has the decorum of a mourner at a funeral. Beauty shots, such as the outdoor cello performance, feel as if the camera has been granted sudden freedom. Close-ups don't punch up points, but allow us to peer into these faces we have come to value.

Casting is vital in this movie, in no role more than Mr. Sasaki. The actor Tsutomu Yamazaki has a wise and serene face. He makes the character not demonstrative but understated, as he plays the young man's personality gently. We understand why his assistant reveres him. He never makes speeches about the importance of his work. All is implied or demonstrated. At the end, when several plot threads come together, it happens so naturally and is so deeply satisfying.

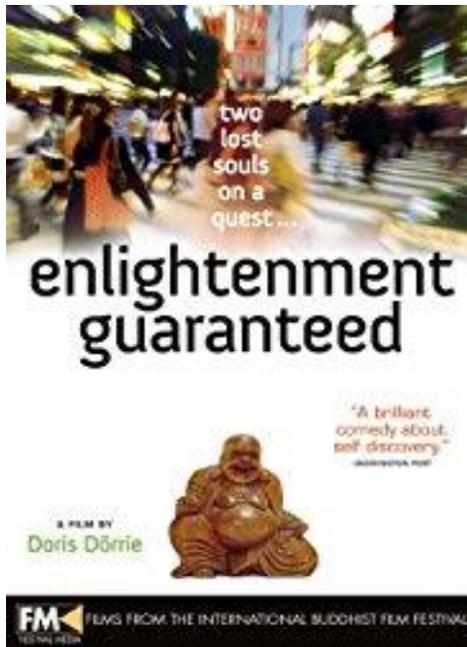
This film is not a stylistic breakthrough or a bold artistic statement. But it is rare because it is so well-made. The universal reason people attend movies is in the hopes of being told an absorbing story that will move them. They would rather be touched emotionally, I believe, than thrilled, frightened, or made to laugh. Yet there are few things more deadening than manipulative sentimental melodramas -- what Variety likes to call "weepers."

"Departures" plays fair. It brings four main characters onstage (and the sweet old couple from a bath house). We know and understand them. We care about them. They are involved in an enterprise we probably knew nothing about. It touches on death, a subject of general fascination. There is nothing contrived about its problems; they belong naturally to the narrative. It doesn't drag its feet and bewail fate, but even permits itself some laughter, which is never out of tone. It functions flawlessly.

Because the audience at Ebertfest doesn't choose the films and often knows nothing about them, some of the members must have been uneasy to discover they were watching a Japanese film about undertaking. They seemed to become quickly involved. I heard the sounds of emotion in the dark. They cheered at the end because they had seen a film that was excellent at achieving the universal ends of narrative. How often does that happen?

"Departures" won the 2009 Academy Award for best foreign language film. Also in my Great Movies Collection you will find pieces on "Ikiru" and "Tokyo Story."

Retrieved from: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-departures-2009>



Enlightenment Guaranteed (109 min; 1999)

Original Title: Erleuchtung Garantiert

Director: Doris Dörrie

Cast: Uwe Ochsenknecht; Gustav-Peter Whöler; Petra Zieser

Storyline:

Two very different brothers get together for a temporary stay in a Japanese zen monastery. The trip from Germany to Japan brings up some unexpected quests they have to manage. Soon both really have to leave their ordinary lives behind and are on a voyage to themselves. *Written by Oliver Heidelberg* ([IMDb website](#))

Film Review by Variety

Modern and traditional Japan both play a part in helping two German brothers overcome their midlife crises and find peace within themselves in the disarming comedy “Enlightenment Guaranteed.” Downsizing from her usual production standard to a modest budget of just over \$1 million and shooting on digital video with a minimal crew, veteran director Doris Dorrie has put together what may be her most engaging film in years. While it could benefit from cuts to the protracted midsection, the comedy’s universal themes and accessible humor should secure it a modest international profile. *By David Rooney*

Film had its offshore premiere as part of Rotterdam’s Japanese program, No Cherry Blossoms, in the Bridge in the Rain section examining visions of Japan by Western filmmakers. What distinguishes Dorrie’s approach is the fine line the director-screenwriter negotiates between the satirical and the respectful, taking a nonpatronizing view of consumerist, technological Japan and of the serene austerity of a monastery. This balance gives the comedy a gentle flavor even in its broader moments.

The two brothers couldn’t have less in common. Uwe (Uwe Ochsenknecht) is an indifferent family man and kitchen salesman; Gustav (Gustav Peter Wohler) runs a feng shui consultation service and is a follower of Eastern disciplines. Abandoned abruptly by his exasperated wife, Uwe turns in desperation to his brother for help just as Gustav is preparing to go on a retreat to a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan. Uwe begs to go with him rather than face the misery of sudden singledom alone.

Jaunty opening reels are full of snappy, well-scripted comedy played out in crisp, short scenes and graced with the director’s customarily cynical yet affectionate observations, particularly of

the brothers' spouses. When the action shifts from Germany to Japan, the approach changes, adopting a looser, more improvised feel.

Spending a night in Tokyo before traveling by train to the countryside monastery the next day, the brothers hit the town for a drink and lose their bearings. Unable to find their hotel, they blow what little cash they are carrying on a cab ride in the wrong direction, lose their credit cards in bewilderingly complicated cash machines and find themselves homeless for the night, forced to sleep on the street in boxes.

This experience of comfort-free living prepares them for the no-frills accommodations offered by the monastery. But here, things get even tougher as they attempt to adapt to 4:30 a.m. wake-up calls, long periods of silent meditation, frustratingly complicated dinnertime rituals and hours of arduous cleaning as a means of cleansing the heart. Roles are reversed to a certain extent as Gustav, despite all his studious devotion and preparation, buckles under pressure, while uninitiated Uwe, who is merely along for the ride, proves surprisingly adaptable to the rigors of monastery life.

While this section remains amusing and admirably avoids all the obvious avenues of culture-clash humor, it lacks economy. Tightening by 10 minutes or so could considerably improve the film and heighten the sense of almost imperceptible transformation as the two brothers lighten up, offloading emotional baggage and gaining a new perspective on who they are and where they're at in life. The experience enables Uwe to face the future as a single man and to account for his mistakes, while Gustav is able to come clean calmly about his sexuality in a sweet scene that's appealingly played as almost a throwaway.

Dorrie has used the ease and flexibility of video to make a fluid, unconstrained comedy that constantly reshapes its tone and rhythm according to the situation. Transfer to 35mm is fine, but the visual quality of digital video is incorporated via a diary Uwe shoots of the trip, which provides the occasion for direct-to-cam commentary from the brothers about their experience.

Ochsenknecht and Wohler are a strong double act, displaying exemplary comic timing and making the brothers a problem-plagued but likable pair.

Enlightenment Guaranteed

Germany

PRODUCTION: A Constantin Film release of a Bernd Eichinger presentation of a Megaherz production. (International sales: Cinepool World Distribution, Munich.) Produced by Franz X. Gernstl. Executive producer, Louis Saul. Directed, written by Doris Dorrie.

CREW: Camera (color, digital video-to-film), Hans Karl Hu; editors, Inez Regnier, Arne Sinnwell; art director, Ruth Stadler; sound (Dolby Digital), Chris Price. Reviewed at Rotterdam Film Festival (No Cherry Blossoms: Visions of Japan), Jan. 29, 2000. (Also in Berlin Film Festival -- New German Films.) Running time: 108 MIN.

WITH: **With:** Uwe Ochsenknecht, Gustav Peter Wohler, Anica Dobra, Ulrike Kriener, Heiner Lauterbach.

Retrieved from: <https://variety.com/2000/film/reviews/enlightenment-guaranteed-1117778668/>