

THE ART OF SELF-EMPTYING AND ECOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?*

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From a Zen Buddhist standpoint the intellect and its henchman, the ego, are the primary causes of all pollution.¹

— Graef, *The Foundations of Ecology in Zen Buddhism*'

The alienation and objectification of the environment – seeing the external world outside of our skins as separate from ourselves and therefore subject to limitless domination and exploitation – is one of the major causes of environmental injustice, species mass extinctions, pollution and other ecological crises. Deconstructing the very notion of the self, a notion referred to by Gregory Bateson (Macy 1990: 53) as ‘the epistemological error of Occidental civilisation’, and the healing of the self–other divide have become a moral imperative across a number of academic disciplines. Despite their differences, the schools or movements within the humanities in the West, such as environmental philosophy, social ecology, deep ecology, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, green cultural studies and ecocinema, to name but a few, all articulate ways in which the nonhuman can be integrated into the human world.

As a religion rooted in pre-modern Asian tradition and later disseminated to the West, Buddhism began to gain a firm foothold in the areas of western spiritual/religious ecology, environmental ethics and social activism in the second half of the twentieth century.² To date, much has been said about the ethical aspects of Buddhism such as *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and the practice of Bodhisattvas’ Path, as notably represented by the so-called Socially Engaged Buddhism or Green Buddhism, but the soteriological aspect of Buddhism has not been fully articulated with regard to its ecological relevance. This chapter asks how the soteriological aspects of Buddhism such as *kōan* practice, a type of meditation that incorporates a study of nonsensical narratives such as ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’, can help broaden an understanding of our relation to the world – a relation that may be more complex than our existing forms of knowledge can fully

encompass. A turn to Buddhism's soteriological aspect, especially *kōan* practice/study, may help as well to deepen our ethical and aesthetic visions of nondualism and biocentrism.³ Moreover, if Zen meditation practice can produce a fundamental transformation of consciousness that allows us to see that all things, sentient or non-sentient, are empirically interconnected and that nirvana is nowhere but here and now, thereby disenfranchising the exploitation of the nonhuman world, can we employ film as a vehicle for disseminating that experience and wisdom? In exploring this question, my proposal parallels Buddhist scholar Francisca Cho's call for a nonliterary, non-ideological, 'cultic way of viewing film', which likens filmic spectatorship experience to religious experience (1999: 170).⁴ I however want to expand the current scope of the nondualistic Zen experience/aesthetic and of film studies to articulate why such an endeavour is crucial from an ecological standpoint. Here, the term 'ecology' is not narrowly defined as a scientific study of the relationships among organisms in biota per se. Instead, ecology is taken more broadly to mean an ensemble of ways of seeing, which can serve as the critical, ethical and aesthetic foundation for new relations between *Homo sapiens* and the natural world (McLean and McMillan 2010: 162).

A major contribution that Zen can make to film studies – and then to society more broadly – is its nondualistic approach. Frequently, we dualistically compartmentalise, separating mindscape from landscape and spiritual discourse/practice from environmental discourse/practice. Consequently, one's meditation in the Zen hall is perceived as having nothing to do with the external or ecological world out there, and the 'mystical nonsense' of Zen practice, as some activists might put it, might even be considered a hindrance to environmental activism and social transformation, not to mention a waste of time. By the same token, going out into the woods to clean up waste or going onto the street to protest the hunting of endangered animals is considered a job reserved for animal activists. Similar compartmentalisation is also reflected in the way we conceptualise eco-films. While 'eco-films' – features or documentaries – refers to those that deal with ecological issues (such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Day after Tomorrow* and *Hoot*), films that probe spiritual crisis/salvation or question self-identity and reality (such as *Groundhog Day*, *The Matrix*, or *Zen Noir*) can be classified as spiritual, if not exclusively Buddhist. In calling this spiritual–ecological compartmentalisation into question, I argue that such a mentality is a residue of dualistic thinking that fails to see fluidity, interconnectedness, and continuity of things beneath their appearance. As a Zen practitioner and an ecocritic, I aim to flesh out the ecological dimension

of Zen meditation, *kōan* practice and Zen film, and/or develop a 'Zen ecological' reading of film. From a Zen ecological point of view, the spiritual dimension is not an otherworldly, transcendent one but fundamentally this-worldly and ecological. Moreover, Zen sees this-worldness as rooted in a connection to the present moment, which is characterised by emptiness, impermanence, vulnerability, eternal possibility, and the bliss that comes from recognising the self as inseparable from the other.

In this chapter, I use Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (1989) as a case study to demonstrate that a film devoted to Zen soteriology and to an aesthetic expression of enlightenment can be as transformative ecologically as it is spiritually. As a '*kōan* film', *Bodhidharma* intends to heal the ontological separation from the other and to awaken the audience to their underlying ecological connectedness by inviting them to view the film through 'deep meditation' (Tedesco 1994: 103) and to immerse themselves in the *kōans* presented in the film. *Kōans* refer to narratives that are used in Zen meditation practice to help students cut through egocentric, dualistic thinking. It is in this healing capacity that *Bodhidharma* subverts the mainstream viewer's cinematic expectation and experience as a form of visual consumption and entertainment, and makes a strong case for considering the possibility that cinema, one of the most powerful media of our time, can serve as an agent of transformation of ecological consciousness.

Filmic Practice as *Kōan* Practice

I hope people see my film through deep meditation, not with intellectual understanding.

—Bae Yong-kyun, '*A conversation with Bae Yong-kyun*'

The South Korean 'New Wave' which began in the 1980s is characterised by the emergence of socially conscious young filmmakers who have gained international recognition. During this period, the incorporation of Zen Buddhism and local shamanism in several Buddhist films such as Im Kwon T'aek's *Mandala* (1981), Chang Sonu's *Passage to Buddha* (1993) and Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* is often regarded as a nativist response to western cultural imperialism, rapid modernisation and materialism, and as a quest for cultural identity in the face of globalisation, as well as a form of resistance to the Hollywood film industry. The appearance of these Buddhist films that incorporate teachings of the Buddha and the lives of Buddhist monks also has to do with a growing concern about acquiring material

possessions, psychological insecurity and the search for a moral vision in modern South Korean society (Lee 2000: 61). As social commentaries, these films are often interpreted in the light of subaltern struggle (for example poverty) in modern South Korea, or as a perennial ethical struggle of a typical East Asian Confucian male subject between familial duty and the pursuit of spiritual liberation.⁵ Im Kwon T'aek's *Mandala* serves as an example. In this film, the theme of the quest for Buddhist enlightenment is designed as a prop to critique an individual's turning away from the collective suffering that is so powerfully present in the history of modern South Korea. In contrast to Im Kwon T'aek's film, Bae Yong-kyun's focus on Buddhism and monastic life is not simply a social commentary on modernity: it explores how filmmaking practice and film art can be a form of religious experience.

Against the grain of a dominant political, ideological reading of South Korean Buddhist films and particularly of *Bodhidharma*, Francisca Cho (1999: 170) argues for an alternative perspective on film that is a non-discursive, non-ideological, 'cultic' consideration of filmmaking and viewing that allows the audience to 'participate in a broader and distinctly non-logocentric tradition of religious signification'. According to Cho, the irrational, religious power of film (and art in general) lies in the overwhelming moments of presence in which our normal sense of the real is challenged and reoriented. The power of presence (what Nathaniel Dorsky [2003: 31] calls 'nowness') in film media is capable of challenging or reorienting the audience's sense of the real despite its illusory nature and, henceforth, gives art a religious dimension. And it is through this religious and cultic capacity – more specifically, the power of the ever present 'thus-ness' or Tathātā – that art, 'subjects us to ideological critique because it wills us to free ourselves' (Cho 2003: 108).

There has been a strong interest in intersecting film experience and religious experience on both artistic and scholarly levels (Lynden 2003; Torry and Flesher 2007; Plate 2008). For some filmmakers and theorists, 'film as religion' does not refer to the film's illustrative power to dramatise the lives of religious figures such as in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Rather, the film medium itself is a religious expression. This idea of filmic media as religious expression or experience derives from the capacity of the filmic apparatus to produce a certain religious effect. For example, the film scholar Gregory Watkins (1999) points out that the religious potential of film lies in its ability to erase a sense of ontological alienation. He further argues that a religious dimension in film has to do with a 'creative and disruptive approach to the normal and naturalised habits of the typical viewer' and that 'certain techniques in film can function religiously by erasing the distance we

normally feel between ourselves and the worlds we view' (Watkins cited in Cho 2008: 117). Finally, the San Francisco based avant-garde filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky (2003: 16) has observed a profound, lingering post-filmic experience, and this enables him to conceive of film as a devotional form that is capable of 'reveal[ing] the depths of our own reality', and 'open[ing] us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world'.⁶

Based on the aforementioned instances, while what constitutes religious effect or experience might vary, all of the examples seem to affirm the possibility of film rendering some form of religious experience. And if there is a powerful dimension of reality (whether God, cosmic consciousness, emptiness or the present moment) with which we have lost contact, both religion and film have the capacity to reconnect us or 'wake us up' to this underlying dimension of reality. Dorsky's treatment of cinema as a form of devotional practice harnessed towards a 'fuller sense of ourselves and the world' provides a conceptual framework with which to approach Bae Yong-kyun's film, especially in considering film as a Zen *kōan* study.

The plot of *Bodhidharma* revolves around three generations of Buddhist monks living in a decaying hermitage on Mt Chonan. Yong-nan (later Kibong), a confused young man, renounces the modern world and goes to study Zen with an ageing Zen master, Hyegok. Hyegok adopts an orphan boy, Haejin. A child of nature, Haejin wanders and explores all day on the mountain. Kibong is torn between familial obligation and a desire for spiritual awakening, a familiar existential dilemma for seekers of enlightenment in East Asian societies. After failing to answer the *kōan* assigned by his master, Kibong employs an extreme form of practice by meditating underneath a thunderous waterfall. He is rescued by his old master and, as a result, the master becomes sick and dies. Before he dies, he assigns Kibong a final task – to cremate his body and to return his remains to nature – as the last *kōan*. Having completed this task, Kibong decides to return to the modern world. He passes down the master's robe to Haejin, who throws it into an oven fire. The film ends with Kibong walking in a field with an ox on his return journey back to the world of 'red dust'.

Despite Bae's denial that his film has anything to do with Zen, *Bodhidharma* is nonetheless an unapologetic defence of Mahayana Zen Buddhism and, more precisely, of *kōan* practice. The title of the film derives from a famous *kōan* collected in *The Gateless Gate* (Chinese: *Wumen guan*). In addition, in the opening titles Bae dedicates his film, 'To the disciple who asked him about the Truth[;] without a word he showed a flower' – another *kōan* reference to Mahākāśyapa, one of

Shakymuni Buddha's earliest principle disciples. In this light, Tony Rayns' critique of *Bodhidharma* as an almost programmatic account of 'the way of Zen' is not completely unjustified. References to *kōans* are ubiquitous: the master's long lecture on the *kōan* practice, familiar Zen images such as reflections in water, the moon, the blue sky, the ox, the 'moo-ing'/Mu sound, and so on. Nevertheless, such a programmatic presentation may be said to be an indispensable strategy in the era of global spectatorship. Moreover, *Bodhidharma* provides an opportunity to reconceive cinema as a site of *kōan* practice.

What are *kōans* and *kōan* practice? *Kōan* practice or study pertains to the incorporation of *kōans* in Zen meditation training. The purpose of using *kōans* is to help suspend momentarily the discursive intellect operating in a dualistic mode, in order to trigger an ineffable state of 'awakening' (Japanese: *Satori*) beyond the reach of all 'dualistic thinking' (Foulk 2000: 15). *Kōans* are made of questions, phrases, dialogues or stories that appear to be nonsensical and often paradoxical to the mind. Meditating on a *kōan* forces one to enter a concentrated state of mind called *samadhi*, where body, mind and the external world begin to integrate, and an attachment to the self begins to weaken. If that state can be sustained, paradox or contradiction can be resolved through an intuitive grasp of the nondualistic or 'empty' aspect of reality.

Meditating on *kōans* allows a practitioner to see fundamental reality as Zen masters see it, and thus from the perspective of an awakened, empty mind. The state of emptiness is aptly described by the cognitive scientist Francisco J. Varela as 'egoless', a feeling that suggests an 'actual experiential sense of no one home' (cited in Lussier 2008: 41). Paradoxically, the feeling of 'no master in the house' imparts a profound sense of connectedness to the universe, where the fear and attachment that govern much of our lives vanish. In this sense, Zen meditation contributes to a sense of personal wellbeing and happiness. More importantly, it is an agent of ecological consciousness, because the experience of enlightenment enables us to see all things, sentient or non-sentient, as empirically and intrinsically interconnected, and that nirvana is nowhere but here and now and is inseparable from our phenomenal world. This imparts a deep spiritual security, deepens our aesthetic visions of nondualism and egalitarianism, and disenfranchises any uncompassionate deeds as well. As indicated by a recent study, advanced meditation practitioners attain a particular mental state, 'a non-referential state of loving kindness and compassion' (Austin 2006: 48).

To facilitate the discussion of *Bodhidharma* as a *kōan* film, I look at it from the following angles: the movie theatre as Zen meditation hall,

the director as Zen practitioner and artist, the audience as meditation participants and the characters as representing different stages of a Zen journey. First, one can easily conceive a movie theatre as a secular Zen meditation hall: it is a dark place in which each attendee takes a seat. The attendees are supposed to remain in solitude (and silence their cell phones!) and prepare to concentrate for a substantial length of time on fixing their minds on the movie screen (mindscreen), the contents of which range from personal reminiscences through subconscious or unconscious aspirations to public memory and more. After the movie (meditation) is over, some might experience a post-cinematic (post-meditation) effect for several days. Some might have a transformative experience with cinema and meditation for the rest of their lives.

From the standpoint of the director, the making of *Bodhidharma* is a form of Zen mindfulness, meditation and working on *kōans*. *Bodhidharma* was a ten-year labour on the part of the filmmaker who wrote, directed and edited the film entirely by himself. The parallel between filmmaking and working on a *kōan* is made manifest as Bae (Tedesco 1994: 106) compares filmmaking to that of *kōan* study when he says, 'the process of creating that movie was like holding a *kōan* in one's mind' (cited in Cho 1999: 170). As Hyegok explains in the film, the '*kōan* is a tool to cross the sea of passion and illusion so as to discover the roots of the true self'. Hyegok instructs his student (and the audience) how to work on a *kōan*: 'If you think about this *kōan* day and night, if you concentrate on meditating, you will understand and come to Enlightenment'. Filmmaking for Bae is analogous to working on a *kōan*. Instead of sitting on a cushion to meditate on a *kōan*, Bae chooses film as his medium and means of meditation. And Kibong can be seen as the director's cinematic alter ego: Bae is to film as Kibong is to his *kōan*. Yet for the director, the task involves not only his own devotional practice, but also crafting a cinematic effect on his audience. Here the filmmaker acts as a Zen gardener to create an environment (Zen garden) so that viewing the film becomes a Zen experience. And this brings us to the notion of the audience as participants in cinematic Zen.

Rhim Hye-kyung (2009: 5) observes that *Bodhidharma* exhibits 'a mathematical precision of dramaturgies – of story, light, sound, [and] music'. This aspect of Bae's craftsmanship is aimed at creating a meditative effect, a prerequisite for *kōan* study, on his audience. As already noted, Bae hopes the audience experiences this film through deep meditation instead of a mere intellectual understanding. The slow-paced, minimal narrative of *Bodhidharma* is intentional so that viewers (participants in this cinematic *kōan*) enter a different mode of consciousness in

which thinking is gradually suspended and other cognitive functions are stimulated.

Take the opening sequence as an example. The slow camera movement, nonlinear juxtaposition of images such as of a Zen master and a toad, and sparse yet poetic verses set a tone for entering an alternative mode of consciousness. It creates a meditative effect by emphasising what Dorsky calls the vertical aspect of time in cinema, or 'nowness' (2003: 33). In this vertical axis of time, the spatial dimension of nowness or presentness comes to life. Switching to a more alert, meditative mode of viewing, the mind becomes more receptive to a spatial, fluid and interconnected dimension of life in the moment that is often ignored and dismissed by linear, rational thinking. The juxtaposition of images of nature and humans – the dilapidated windows, the imagistic presentation of a teacup, the slow walking frog, the child touching the dead cicada, the old monk – signifies the organic, interanimating and coevolving processes of life, old age, death and emptiness. Here the montage serves as a visual device to render a sense of ecological interconnectedness and identification between the boy's encounter with the dead body of a cicada and the living frog and Hyegok's articulation of 'emptiness', that which 'does not come into being, does not die'. With this juxtaposition of the organic flux of life and emptiness, we are invited into the world of *kōan* with its intimate yet impersonal sense of beauty that does not arise from the realm of personal, discriminating consciousness, but from the holistic, meditative state of mind without the rigid conceptual compartmentalisation that creates a subject-object division. Rather than reducing nature to 'nature' – an all too familiar theoretical move of postmodernism – the film moves in the opposite direction, dissolving the human into the flow of natural processes.

The three main characters in *Bodhidharma* might be said to represent three different stages of life. They can also be interpreted as corresponding to the so-called three gates of Zen or the three stages of Zen ecopsychological development.⁷ The first stage is 'seeing mountains as mountains; seeing water as water'. This stage designates a stage prior to beginning a Zen journey, wherein one sees the world via an egocentric consciousness and with an unquestioned sense of the boundary between skin-bound subjectivity and external objectivity. The second stage is 'seeing mountains not as mountains; seeing water not as water', in which one embarks on the Zen journey and gives rise to ontological doubts about the status of both self and world. The last stage is 'seeing mountains only as mountains; seeing water only as water', the stage where one has realised that one's ultimate identity is no different from that of mountains and water, a stage of self-other integration. The

first and last stages are deceptively similar but profoundly different in terms of their relationship to the other and the natural world.

Let us first discuss the representation of stage one in *Bodhidharma*. The portrayal of childhood signifies ‘ignorance’ or ‘delusion’ (Sk. *avidyā*): the ego is ‘the discrete, self-consistent, self-individuating, and self-directing centre and end of the individual personality’ (Brown 1994: 126). Consequently, children suffer. Such suffering (Sk. *dukkā*) is a ‘function of that primordial ignorance, which imputes a false self-derived and self-contained identity to persons and things’ (ibid.). Not knowing his mother, the character Haejin represents a Zen trope for one’s ignorance of one’s original identity, resulting in fear and attachment. Despite playfulness and spontaneity, children inflict suffering upon others – Haejin injures a jay, which winds up dying – and are victims of such violence (lack of enlightenment) themselves – Haejin is bullied by children who repeatedly submerge him under the water.

Haejin’s alienation is illustrated in one scene where he finds the milk tooth that the old master had pulled out from his mouth. Spotting Haejin picking up the tooth and putting it in a little box, the master seizes this opportunity to educate the boy about non-attachment: ‘This is separate from your body, but you still feel attached to this tooth. Was it because it was formerly a part of you?’ Not waiting for Haejin to answer, Hyegok himself replies, ‘In fact, there is no difference between this tooth and a pebble on the road’.

Kibong represents the second stage of the Zen journey, which is characterised by a self-reflexive sense of separation. This stage has been addressed in many *kōans* to heal one’s ontological sense of separation. Struggling with his existential crisis, Kibong leaves his blind mother behind to take up the monastic life in pursuit of enlightenment. To capture the process of Kibong’s psychological transformation, the director employs the figure of an ox, a symbol of self-nature in pre-modern Zen literature. Here Kibong’s *zazen* (sitting meditation) is intercut with a scene in which an ox struggles to break out of the ranch. The ox’s struggle represents Kibong’s psychological agitation and his desire for liberation. The wandering ox emerges in the cremation scene at the end of the film, watching Kibong with what appears to be tears in its eyes to suggest the animal’s mental state over the sight of cremation. As an aside, I would suggest that the ox has been transformed from an allegorical creature (as is often seen in the well known ‘Ten Ox-herding Pictures’) into a concrete, physical being endowed with emotions and consciousness.⁸ In other words, spiritual emancipation is not represented as an individualistic, transcendent, triumphant or heroic act, but as an erasure of isolated individualism, as seen in both

the representation of Kibong covered with the ashes of his master and the burnt wood, and the participation of the ox, the jay, Haejin and the surrounding environment. After his master's body has been burned, Kibong collects the ashes and scatters them over the river to feed the fish. He then lets the rest of the ashes be blown away by the wind till the last traces of the master are gone and integrated into the environment, morphing into another kind of existence as food or dust. Kibong's journey of liberation in this climactic scene suggests that enlightenment is a realisation of one's own embeddedness in an ecological cycle and that one's enlightenment is in fact a co-enlightenment with all beings and nonbeings.

The Importance of Being Undramatic: Cinematic Representation of Emptiness/ Enlightenment

From the Zen standpoint, language cannot solve the problem of the destruction of the natural world because language itself perpetuates our sense of separation. This vicious regress can only be resolved by devising alternative modes of cognition and expression. And one of these, at least potentially, is film. But film cannot perform this crucial function unless it frees itself from the last vestiges of conventional narrativity – story – which depends on language.

In *The Horse Who Drank the Sky*, Murray Pomerance (2008) claims that cinema is in a state of crisis as a result of the failure of the viewing experience. The common habit of casual viewing derives from the belief that 'the story is what counts, that anything vital is *told* as such, that the *sequentiality* of events is what we should pay attention to' (2008: 34). Challenging the centrality of narrative and arguing that film 'also illuminates and makes possible the conjunction of picture and sound', Pomerance (*ibid.*: 125) cites George Choin's analysis of a scene in Jacques Tati's *Trafic* (1971) to illustrate the idea of an 'acousmatic moment' and advances, 'Could not the entire narrative of a film also be understood as a ligature or scaffold for the suspension and illumination of a single particular moment?'⁹ Here, Pomerance's understanding of the function of the narrative resonates with that of *kōan* narratives.

Tati's *Trafic* is a satire of twentieth-century car culture. In a nutshell, it tells the tale of a simple trip taken by a designer for a major French automotive firm from Paris to Amsterdam for an international auto show. The trip becomes increasingly complicated due to a series of events such as flat tyres, breakdowns, traffic jams, etc. Yet somewhere in the middle of the film, there comes a pastoral moment that intrudes

on the busy flow of dazzlingly modern, industrial life, where technology runs amok. While an explicit critique of modern lifestyle is conveyed here, a reference to Zen, *kōan* and *satori* (or Zen enlightenment) is also being made:

The driver . . . had to spend an uncomfortable night in a garage shed right in the middle of the countryside. He walks out in the morning . . . And what does he see, through an opening in a clump of trees, all the way at the extreme back of the frame, happily positioned in the grass? A cow, an actual, little, postcard or colouring-book cow . . . No sooner has he glanced at the animal and turned his head back – he hardly looked at it, didn't really see – when a sonorous 'Moo' makes him turn his head again, and it's only now, we might say, that he realises the presence of this cow, now become silent. Moreover, the animal is too far off for one to actually see it moo. It's the sound alone that informs us. That's it, it's so small, it's like a little *satori* [enlightenment]. (Choin cited in Pomerance 2008: 125)

Here, Pomerance appropriates Choin's Zennist analysis of this pastoral scene to demonstrate the hierarchical reversal of sequentiality and a particular moment; that is, the idea that the purpose of the entire storyline of a film could be understood as a function to showcase one particular moment.

The sonorous cow's 'Moo' makes an apparent phonetic reference to the famous 'Mu' *kōan* (Sekida 1996: 27–30). According to the 'Mu' *kōan*, a monk asked Jōhsū, 'Has a dog the Buddha Nature?' Jōshū shouted a word: 'Mu'. Though a more appropriate way to comprehend the answer is through seeing it as a pure utterance of the sound *mu* (or 'moo'), at the semantic level, the word *mu* means 'nothingness' or 'emptiness', and by answering 'emptiness', this *kōan* points to the dimension of mind beyond our ordinary discursive consciousness. The reason it is so difficult to pinpoint what emptiness is and to express it, has to do with the fact that it is not an idea or concept but a state of mind, which is often characterised as 'empty-minded'. Just like the 'Mu' *kōan*, the storyline's purpose can, in a sense, be understood as paving the way for a momentary experience of hearing that merges with the experience of emptiness (or empty-mind). In other words, the 'moo' in *Traffic* brings the character back to a particular acousmatic moment, where he becomes aware of the existence of the nonhuman other.

On watching *Traffic*, one realises that the moment of the cow's mooing discussed by Choin seems too casually arranged, undramatically presented and fleetingly insignificant to be worth paying much attention to. Yet this perfunctory placement of the cow and its alleged insignificance are worth meditating on from the perspectives of both

environmentalism and Zen. From an ecological perspective, *Trafic* tells of a disproportionately modern, technological life and of humanity off on its own, out of touch with all other living beings. From a Zen standpoint, the cow's moo-ing (a homophone of *mu*) reveals yet another dimension of our reality that has been dismissed altogether.

While we can compare and contrast the way cows and their moo-ing are represented in both films, it is more instructive to compare the cow in *Trafic* with the old monk in *Bodhidharma* in terms of the director's portrayal of emptiness: they propose two different representations of emptiness and they both render it in a light, not too serious, manner. When it comes to representing Hyegok's enlightened state of mind, Bae employs a certain camera technique to de-dramatise the character instead of portraying him in a highly dramatised, sublime form. When Hyegok and Kibong both sit on rocks that rise above the river surrounding them, Hyegok tells Kibong about enlightenment. As he continues, the camera zooms in. The director uses a medium close-up of Hyegok's profile but does not give him an individuated characterisation. Instead, the out-of-focus shot blurring Hyegok's head, which occupies the foreground, becomes the foil for the sharply focused shimmering water in the background when he says: 'It will be perfection . . . It will be free of all obstacles and total freedom will prevail' (see Figure 13.1). This use of focus portrays enlightenment as the disappearing of personal identity



Figure 13.1 Hyegok in *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (Still courtesy of Mr Bae Yong-kyun)



Figure 13.2 Haejin in *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* (Still courtesy of Mr Bae Yong-kyun)

into a background (for example the river) that comes into focus. This still shot forms a strong contrast with the still shot of Haejin (Figure 13.2), where the focus is placed on the human character. While Hyegok sits upright, Haejin bends forward in sleep, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for an unawakened state of mind. Therefore, this Zen film not only contributes to the repertoire of 'devotional cinema' but also illustrates a connection between Zen and ecology and should be considered as a spiritual eco-film.

A Tentative Closure: Towards a Soteriological-based Zen Ecological Thinking

The experience of Zen practice provides an empirical and conceptual basis for the environmental ethical claims that are not based on human supremacy, or even human separateness from nature. In its application to film, Zen enables us to reconceptualise the cinema as an occasion for the audience to engage in *kōan* practice, as exemplified in Bae Yong-kyun's *Bodhidharma*, and through this practice it can undergo a cognitive shift that purely verbal media cannot bring about. In its subversion of viewer expectations, *Bodhidharma* defies the psychology that underlies our current way of life, which seeks to overcome alienation

by intensifying separation and control: 'holding on' instead of 'letting go'. Each image in the film is calibrated to elicit a specific psychological impact, a more mindful, meditative mode of viewing and an engagement with the moment, rather than deliverance into narrative. An I-thou mutual identification is found when the dying Hyegok, the old Zen monk, tells his disciple Kibong that: 'I am insubstantial in the universe. But in the universe, there is nothing which is not me'. This formulation poses a radical challenge to western or modern anthropocentrism and I take it as a statement of Zen ecology. It also undercuts the isolating individualism that consumerism falsely promises to overcome. This is the Zen way of healing, and, as this chapter is intended to suggest, cinema, like the Zen *kōan*, has proven to be a plausible device for guiding us back into the world that is inseparable from ourselves.

Notes

I would like to thank the editors, Guinevere Narraway and Anat Pick, for their comments. Also this paper is much indebted to Kurt Spellmeyer, an English professor at Rutgers University, senior Zen teacher and founder of Cold Mountain Sangha, New Jersey.

- 1 In this chapter, I use Zen (Japanese) instead of the less well-known Chinese term 'Chan'.
- 2 In the last several decades, there emerged a so-called 'engaged Buddhist' movement in Asia and the West. For more information on the new developments of Buddhism, see King (2006).
- 3 From the perspective of soteriology, religion can be divided into two basic forms: autonomous/enlightenment and soteriological/salvational. In this chapter, I am referring to the former. See Isshii (2007: 44).
- 4 For Cho, the term 'ideology' used here refers to a 'mental act or cognitive form of signification' (1999: 177).
- 5 Rhim Hye-kyung proposes that 'there is a strong social concern' in *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?*, which prompts the audience to ask 'why Kibong is recruited from the slum milieu; how is this related to his criticism of his master for staying in the mountains, and his final departure from the monastery into the world?'
- 6 I would like to thank Anat Pick for this reference.
- 7 The three gates of Chan/Zen originate in the Tang Dynasty from the famous saying by the Chan Master Weixin: 'Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters' (cited in Watts 1957: 127).

- 8 The 'Ten Ox-herding Pictures', or the 'Ten Bulls', are illustrations accompanying a series of short poems to depict the stages of a Zen practitioner's progression towards enlightenment. The pictures first appeared in the twelfth century in China, as drawn by the Chinese Zen master Kuo-an Shi-yuan. See Reps and Senzaki (1985: 164–87).
- 9 An acousmatic sound is a kind of 'diegetic sound [that] approaches us from offscreen'. See Pomerance (2008: 112).

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