

A Milestone Film & Video Release

Bae Yong-kyun's

Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left For The East?



A Milestone Film Release

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Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left For The East?

(*Dharmaga Tongjoguro Kan Kkadalgun?*)

- Official Selection: Cannes Film Festival, “Un Certain Regard”
- Winner: Golden Leopard (first prize), Locarno Film Festival
- Selected as one of the “Ten Best Films of All Time” by three critics in *Sight and Sound* Magazine’s 1992 international poll

1989. Korea. 135 minutes. 12,150 feet. Color. 1:1.66.

American Release: February 12, 1993, Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM

American Theatrical Premiere: September 24–30, 1993, Walter Reade Theater, New York

A Milestone Release from the Connoisseur Collection

Credits:

Production Company: Bae Yong-kyun Production
Producer:..... Bae Yong-kyun
Director:..... Bae Yong-kyun
Cinematographer:..... Bae Yong-kyun
Screenplay: Bae Yong-kyun
Editor: Bae Yong-kyun
Music: Chin Kyu-yong

Cast:

Hyegok..... Yi Pan-yong
Kibong..... Sin Won-sop
Haejin..... Huang Hae-jin
Superior Ko Su-myong
Fellow Disciple..... Kim Hae-yong

“The film doesn’t deal with God but with people who suffer — prisoners of the links created by birth and death. A film thus which relates to us all.”

—Bae Yong-kyun

Synopsis

“To the disciple who asked about “Truth,” without a word, he showed a flower.”

High above a modern, crowded city, the remote monastery on Mount Chonan is occupied by three people: the elderly monk Hyegok, the young monk Kibong and the orphaned child Haejin. Hyegok brought the boy to the monastery, after a trip to the city temple for medical treatment. One day, Haejin throws a pebble that downs and wounds a jay; he guiltily tries to nurse the crippled bird back to health, but it dies. From that day on, another jay watches Haejin from trees and rooftops.

Haejin begins to ask questions about “the world” (meaning the urban society he came from) and Kibong finds himself remembering episodes from his own past, when he was an ordinary man named Yongnan. He recalls his guilty abandonment of his blind mother when he entered the priesthood, his flight from the chaos of the city, and the words of the kindly superior at the city temple who sent him to learn from the austere Hyegok. He also recalls the decision of a co-disciple to return to the mainstream of life.

One night a cow breaks free from its shed near the monastery and starts roaming the woods. Hyegok guides Kibong's meditations, giving him the gift of a *koan* [Zen riddle]. Haejin meanwhile helps with the monastery's domestic chores. When the boy discovers that maggots are consuming the corpse of the jay, he gives it a proper burial and then cleanses himself in a rock pool. Later, he follows the roaming cow to another rock pool where he falls asleep and dreams.

Hyegok falls ill and prepares for death, giving Kibong precise instructions for the cremation of his body. On the night that he dies, there is a musical ceremony at the city temple involving a woman shaman. Kibong carries Hyegok's body to a high mountain clearing and burns it. Haejin, the jay and the cow watch the pyre from a distance.

Kibong maintains a vigil until the embers have cooled. He scatters Hyegok's ashes over the mountain and in the pools and streams. Kibong entrusts Hyegok's few possessions to Haejin and leaves, promising that another monk from the city temple will come to replace him. When he has gone, Haejin decides to burn Hyegok's possessions. The jay, still watching him from the temple roof, flies away. Kibong leads the cow across the marshlands at the foot of the mountain.

— Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*

From "The World of Zen that Cannot Be Described Through Words"

by Daishin (Head Priest) Adachi, Rinsaishu Daihonzan Enkakuji Buddhist Temple, Japan

An old song says: "Buddhism is not unlike the threads of a willow tree. Try to articulate it, you cannot. Try to separate them, you cannot." To attempt to solve and attain the truth of this Buddhist philosophy is the spirit of Zen. The world of Zen cannot be explained through words, so a method beyond words called *shiketsu* [poetry praising Buddha] is employed ... to express the heart of Zen.

The auteur of this film has employed the dynamic, never-before-attempted method of filmmaking to portray Zen in an expressive, poetic manner... The method of presenting the Zen world through the depiction of the everyday lives of three monks is appropriate and reminds us of the famous words of [sculptor] Isamu Noguchi: "Zen is a tool of living."

This film, ending in the death of the eldest monk, fully captures the essence of Zen (in other words, eternal life and true freedom) and fulfills the director's intentions marvelously... I would recommend all Buddhists in Japan to see it, regardless of sect... This film has obviously emerged straight from the director's heart and it possesses an overwhelming energy that results from the eight years he has spent creating the film in his mind. The self-proclaimed desire of Bae Yong-kyun to build a temple through his film can be said to be fully realized.

Director's Biography

Bae Yong-kyun was born in 1951 in Tae-Gu, Korea. As a young child, Bae dedicated himself to his two loves: painting and cinema. By the time he was 14, he had decided that someday he would make a movie. Bae went to the movies constantly as a youth, seeing one film more than fifty times. He especially loved and was influenced by the films of William Wyler, David Lean and Robert Bresson. Throughout his troubled adolescence, Bae studied Buddhism and Asian philosophy. In an interview, he said of that period, "Hermann Hesse saved me." For over a year during high school, Bae fled home and lived in absolute solitude as a hermit in the mountains.

After high school, Bae entered the Faculty of Fine Arts where he studied painting and art history. As a painter, Bae was strongly influenced by the French impressionists and surrealists. He also showed

an uncommon talent for poetry and photography. Bae received his Doctorate and presently teaches painting at the Faculty.

Bae met his wife, fellow artist, Min Kyoung-myung while studying at the Faculty of Fine Arts. She worked closely with him on the planning and editing of *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*

Background

In 1976, Bae worked as assistant director to Yoo Hyun-mok on *The Flame*. His experience on the project convinced Bae that he needed to find an independent and personal route to shoot his own film. To prepare himself, Bae studied film technique from books. *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* was Bae's first solo film project. He began the screenplay in 1981 and immediately began to prepare to film — scouting locations, and assembling equipment. The scenario was written in the form of a novel and was ten times as long as the average Korean screenplay. As Bae recalled in an interview, "Each image was described precisely, the slightest movement of a knife, the atmosphere. Everything was written out."

Bae wanted to make a film that deliberately rejected the dominant Western (and especially U.S.) influence that characterizes much of the mainstream Korean film industry. To do so, he put aside the usual methods of filmmaking. He cast non-actors in all the key roles, because he found them more open to direction. Bae pursued his art to such a degree of perfection that he often filmed only two or three shots in a day. Bae filmed over the course of three years — sometimes shooting as many as 50 takes of a single scene. The editing of the film took another year and a half of painstaking work, as Bae cut the film by sight, without an editing table.

The title of the film is a *koan*, a riddle asked that has no immediate or clear answer. Traditionally, the Zen master poses the *koan* to the student to force him, through contemplation, to greater awareness of reality. The film's name refers to Bodhi-Dharma (or Bodhidharma), a monk (AD 440?-534?) who traveled from India to the far East to preach a doctrine of Enlightenment based exclusively on meditation. Bodhi-Dharma's teachings spread Zen Buddhism through China, Korea and Japan. Zen differs from the nine other principal schools of Buddhism because it bases the attainment of Nirvana on the use of introspection and intuition to transcend conscious thought, rather than through the study of the Pali scriptures. Legend has that the Indian monk also brought the far East its most popular beverage. To keep from falling asleep while meditating, Bodhi-Dharma cut off his eyelids, and where they fell, tea bushes grew.

Director's Statement:

The action takes place around a monastery where an old Zen master lives. The central interest of this work is absolutely not Zen in of itself — in effect, Zen assumes the role in this film of an environment of profound significance. I chose this setting because it is of great interest and beauty and is perfectly suited to express my search for life's meaning.

Zen is not a theology of supernatural revelation and one can scarcely find any religious dogma in it. I am persuaded, however, that in Zen there is an awareness of the universal problem of humanity — the search for the existence of the Self and the enlightenment of the soul.

The teachings of Zen Buddhism allowed the Far East to develop its own culture and esthetic, but Zen also influenced many Western thinkers. One can discover examples in existential philosophy (especially in the writings of Martin Heidegger), in the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung, in surrealist art and in contemporary music and art.

I am also deeply interested in Erich Fromm's assertion that the way of Zen is in harmony with the goals of Western psychoanalysis — self-fulfillment. I am convinced that, contrary to the extremely rational methodology of psychoanalysis, Zen allows the discovery of the reality of things and the foundations of the soul (we could say archetype of the Self) by means of pure intuition. This discovery becomes possible when we have totally emptied ourselves of all the concepts that crowd our consciousness. In this way, Zen is sometimes illogical and irrational — it seems to escape our understanding, but that doesn't mean that it is pure mysticism. Although it often appears mystical to us, it is undoubtedly at the source of deep artistic inspiration.

I would like the audience to see the film without preconceived knowledge or ideas.

From "Cinemaya: The Asian Film Magazine"
Review of *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* by Rhim Hye-kyung

Is the director of this film a radical anachronist, swimming against the tide of the post-industrial society? Is he a Herculean figure, waging a lone battle against the cultural imperialism of the West? Or is he the mystic practicing Zen with the camera?

Bae Yong-kyun has focused attention on Korean cinema by winning the Grand Prix at the Locarno Film Festival this year — the first ever director's award in the 70-year history of Korean filmmaking. It is also a landmark in independent filmmaking in Korea, for the director has not only financed the film himself, but also written, directed, shot and edited it single-handedly. Thirty-eight, and a university teacher of fine arts, Bae Yong-kyun studied Zen for eight years and spent long years in self-preparation and training in the various aspects of filmmaking before embarking on the project.

In the heart of the mountains, at the edge of the Korean peninsula, live three generations of monks in an old temple: Hyegok, the old Zen master, Kibong the young apprentice and Haejin, the orphan who has been adopted by Hyegok. The nature of existence is perceived differently by each of them. Hyegok, in his eighties, knows that he will soon die. Kibong, on the other hand, still clings to the worries of everyday reality, his unfinished duties towards his poor family, and possibly to society. Haejin, only about seven years old, accidentally learns of the facets of existence — of life, death and suffering — when he unintentionally injures and kills a bird. While cremating the dead body of his master, in the deep black night that turns into flames and ashes, Kibong grasps the meaning of reality: birth and death are one, for we come to the world from/with nothing and go back to nothing. The next day Kibong, enlightened by the death of the master, makes his way back to the world, across the river and wet rice-fields, the symbol of human survival.

There is no room in this film for the superfluous; there is a mathematical precision of dramaturgies — of story, light, sound, music. The overwhelming scenic beauty is indeed the contemplative; but unlike Ozu, where tranquillity implies a sadness at the transitory nature of human existence, Bae's film is a vivid and affirmative engagement in the recognition of this reality. Bae, like Tarkovsky, is a visionary...

Zen Buddhism is only the setting for the film; the focus lies in the search for a forgotten life and nature in modern society and the search for the roots of Korean culture and spirit. In Korea, unlike in Japan where Zen Buddhism was adopted in the 12th century by the ruling Samurai class, the religion introduced in the 7th century spread among the common people. Some viewers may miss the strong social concern of the film; there is the temptation to interpret the film in mystical, metaphysical terms. The film, in fact, does prompt one to ponder on 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? But the overall message of the film is clear: love should triumph over selfishness in the world and peace should take root within ourselves. However, this can only sound trite in comparison to the moving beauty and lyricism of the visual images in the film.

Milestone Film & Video

“Since its birth the Milestone Film & Video Co. has steadily become the industry’s foremost boutique distributor of classic and art films — and probably the only distributor in America whose name is actually a guarantee of some quality.”

— William Arnold, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

Milestone is a boutique distribution company with more than 13 years experience in art-house film distribution. The company has earned an unparalleled reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to Milestone’s rediscovery, restoration and release of such important discoveries as Mikhail Kalatozov’s award-winning *I am Cuba*, Jane Campion’s *Two Friends*, and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, the company now occupies an honored position as one of the most influential independent distributors in the American film industry. In 1999, the *L.A. Weekly* chose Milestone as “Indie Distributor of the Year.”

Amy Heller and Dennis Doros started Milestone in 1990 to bring out the best films of yesterday *and* today. The company has released such remarkable new films as Manoel de Oliveira’s *I’m Going Home*, Bae Yong-kyun’s *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*, Hirokazu Kore-eda’s *Maborosi*, and Takeshi Kitano’s *Fireworks (Hana-Bi)*.

Milestone’s re-releases have included restored versions of Luchino Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers*, F.W. Murnau’s *Tabu*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *Grass and Chang*, Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *The Mystery of Picasso*, and Marcel Ophuls’ *The Sorrow and the Pity* (a Woody Allen presentation). Milestone is also working with the Mary Pickford Foundation on a long-term project to preserve, re-score and release the best films of the legendary silent screen star. In recent years, Milestone has re-released beautifully restored versions of Frank Hurley’s *South: Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance Expedition*, Kevin Brownlow’s *It Happened Here* and *Winstanley*, Lotte Reiniger’s animation masterpiece, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, Michael Powell’s *The Edge of the World* (a Martin Scorsese presentation), Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Wide Blue Road* (a Jonathan Demme and Dustin Hoffman presentation), Conrad Rooks’ *Siddhartha* and Rolando Klein’s Mexican classic, *Chac*.

Since its beginning, Milestone has had a fruitful collaboration with some of the world’s major archives including the British Film Institute, UCLA Film & Television Archive, George Eastman House, Museum of Modern Art, Library of Congress, Nederlands Filmmuseum and the Norsk Filmintittutt. In August 2000 the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York premiered Milestone’s 10th Anniversary Retrospective. During the New York run and the nationwide tour that followed, all revenues from retrospective screenings were donated to four major archives in the United States and England to help restore films that might otherwise be lost.

In 2003–2004, Milestone will be releasing an important series of great silent films restored by the world’s foremost film historians and preservationists, Photoplay Productions. These stunning

versions, never before available in the United States, include the horror classic *The Phantom of the Opera*; André Antoine's early neorealist adaptation of Emile Zola's *La Terre*; and an astonishing historical epic of Polish independence by Raymond Bernard, *The Chess Player*. Video highlights for this year also include a special DVD series of incredible animation including *Cut-Up: The Films of Grant Munro*; *Norman McLaren: The Collector's Edition*; and *Winsor McCay: The Master Edition*.

In theaters, Milestone will be releasing Tareque Masud's remarkable *The Clay Bird* from Bangladesh and *The Big Animal*, directed by and starring Jerzy Stuhr, from a script by Krzysztof Kieslowski.

Milestone received a Special Archival Award in 1995 from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I am Cuba*. Eight of the company's films — Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, F.W. Murnau's *Tabu*, Edward S. Curtis' *In the Land of the War Canoes*, Mary Pickford's *Poor Little Rich Girl*, Lon Chaney's *The Phantom of the Opera*, Clara Bow's *It*, Winsor McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur*, and Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack and Marguerite Harrison's *Grass* — are listed on the Library of Congress' National Film Registry.

Cindi Rowell, director of acquisitions, has been with Milestone since 1999. In 2003 Nadja Tennstedt joined the company as director of international sales.

"Milestone Film & Video is an art-film distributor that has released some of the most distinguished new movies (along with seldom-seen vintage movie classics) of the past decade"
— Stephen Holden, *New York Times*

Special thanks to Jochen Girch and Marie-Do de la Patellerie of Brussels AVE