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## **Review of Seeing Like the Buddha. Enlightenment through Film by Francisca Cho**

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Book Review



***Seeing Like the Buddha. Enlightenment through Film***

By Francisca Cho. Albany, NY: SUNY, 2017. 190 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-6439-8 (hardcover), \$80.00US; ISBN 978-1-4384-6438-1 (paperback), \$20.95US.

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This is the fourth book on Buddhism in film to be published in English by university presses in the same number of years. As one might guess from the title, Cho's goal is very different from that of the others. The author advocates nothing less than using film as Buddhist practice and maintains that, if the method created and explained in the book is followed, enlightenment will be achieved.

Apart from the staggering ambitiousness of Cho's goal, which some are likely to see as nothing short of audacious, the book is veritably topical and potentially an important contribution to the growing study and academic applications of mindfulness. Many proponents of such current studies, including those in the growing area of mindful writing, apply the first of the four foundations of mindfulness in the *Satipatṭhāna Sutta*, that is, observance of the breath, to their experiential learning exercises. However, Cho's study might have more in common with the fourth foundation, contemplation of phenomena in phenomena, in this case film in all of its cinematic elements including storyline, mise-en-scène, etc., although she does not say this and her method is somewhat different. The *Satipatṭhāna Sutta* says that in considering phenomena in phenomena, we should keep in mind the five hindrances, the five aggregates of clinging, the six internal and external sense bases, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the four noble truths. Following this practice, watching a film would become a highly self-reflective exercise involving the application and remembrance of Buddhist theoretical principles. While not referring to these specific doctrines, Cho's method is to guide us progressively through films from lower levels of Buddhist attainment to the ultimate, always admonishing the reader and viewer to be mindful of the principle of emptiness (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*). The arrangement of films, chapters, and stages of attainment are based on her understanding of the arrangement of the architectural levels of the temple of Borobudur, which she explains is also designed to lead visitors to enlightenment as they ascend four galleries leading to the fifth attainment at the top of the stupa. The book's five chapters, not including the introduction and conclusion, correspond to these five thematic elements of Borobudur. Whether we agree with her assessments of the films, the idea that they correlate with elements of Borobudur, or the notion that enlightenment can be attained by watching movies (whatever our definition of

enlightenment might be), we must admit that the approach is remarkably novel and thought-provoking. The following summarizes her treatment of the films including the correspondences she suggests with Borobudur.

The introductory chapter builds the book's argument, describing how, according to sūtras, the Buddha's dharma body remains in the world, how his iconographic footprints emphasize his physical absence, how texts came to replace relics as objects of focus, and how all of these—relics, texts, and images—are equal in terms of Buddhist practice. Establishing this and what follows is important in justifying Cho's eventual point that film can also be considered equal to these. She then speaks of the importance of "seeing", not just localized viewing, but direct perception of the world. In this process, she says, it is difficult to see non-dual and formless emptiness, but that is our task. In the absence of the Buddha, the aforementioned substitutes are necessary. Even so, we must remember the emptiness of these substitutes, just as it is depicted by the absence of a Buddha image in the topmost stupa at Borobudur.

Chapter two is titled "The Karmic Narrative of *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*." Readers looking for a book of conventional film criticism should be reminded that what Cho does is interpret films using Buddhist ideas with the goal of progressing to enlightenment. Thus, the overt content of films and filmmakers' statements about them may very well be less important in the book's narrative than using films for Cho's stated purpose. According to Cho's analysis, the bottom section of Borobudur depicts karma, which she also says is considered the lowest set of teachings in Buddhist doctrinal classification systems, although it is unclear to me whether this is true in such systems. Cho points to numerous scenes and narrative elements in the 2004 Korean film of the chapter's title that reflect a Buddhist view of karma. Eventually, the main character, a Buddhist monk, struggles up a mountainside as he carries a Buddhist statue to its peak and installs it there. Cho explains that this is related to seeing what a Buddha sees. Accordingly, the panoramic view from the top of the mountain serves to "compress time" (47), which she says is an essential part of seeing as the Buddha. She describes the Buddhist statue that the monk, played by Kim Ki-duk at this point in the movie, totes to the summit as particularly meaningful in that it represents Avalokiteśvara, who, in iconography, is always listening to the cries of the world, an important point in the film for Cho's argument about seeing like the Buddha. Although this fact does not challenge the validity of this claim, the image the monk hauls up the mountain is in fact Maitreya, the future Buddha, who also listens to the suffering of the world and contemplates ways of saving sentient beings. Still, Avalokiteśvara does appear in the film, drawn on the side of the boat that transports people between the mundane and consecrated realms. I note that Cho uses the expressions "seeing of the Buddha" and "seeing as the Buddha" throughout the book and these are different things. In viewing a film, we are seeing the Buddha in one of his innumerable substitute manifestations, this, then, is an example of seeing of the Buddha. Through Cho's analysis we come to see like a Buddha sees, and seeing the karmic repercussions of past and past-life actions is the first step on this road to seeing as the Buddha. This being the goal, even though director Kim Ki-duk uses images from Korean Mahāyāna Buddhism in the film that he says mixes Buddhist and Christian themes, Cho can and does use

texts from the Pāli canon for her guided investigation, which she argues can be seen as contrasting to Christian analyses.

Chapter three is titled “The Meditative Discernment of *Nang Nak*”. *Nang Nak*, one of the most popular films in Thai cinematic history, was directed by Nonzee Nimibutr and released in 1999. It retells a ghost story from Thai folklore about a woman named Nang Nak who dies giving birth and afterwards haunts the village and her widower, Mak. The hero is a Buddhist priest who exorcises her spirit. In the scheme of the book, this film corresponds to the second gallery at Borobudur, both film and gallery, according to Cho, offering visions of emptiness by enticing viewers to be mindful of what they see. To make the point, Cho begins by reviewing various opinions of critics on what the film is about: a threat to patriarchal power, Buddhist nationalism, and so forth. The thrust of this review seems to be the assertion that the critics parallel the villagers in the film in their limited perception of what is going on. Only the calm eminent monk, Somdet To, and perhaps the author, has the eye of wisdom needed to banish suffering, theirs and ours.

Chapter four, titled “*Rashomon* and the Indiscernible Emptiness of Being,” treats the 1950 Japanese film *Rashōmon* by celebrated director Akira Kurosawa (1910–98). Cho traces the history of the movie’s storyline, beginning with two stories in the *Konjaku monogatari shū* (*Collection of Tales from the Past*) compiled, according to one theory, by an unknown Buddhist monk around the year 1100. These stories appear in a section of secular tales in the collection, which Cho says were used by priests to add interest to sermons. Much later, the famous Japanese literary writer, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927) transformed these into two short stories, “In the Grove” and “*Rashōmon*,” which Kurosawa further adopted for his film. Stating that Kurosawa’s rendering cries out for a Buddhist reading, the central point in terms of the book is that the director depicts what David McMahan calls symbolic fantasy. Cho says this corresponds to the third and fourth galleries of Borobudur, which depict meditative visions and cosmic lands, such as those found in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. Accordingly, in these visions time disintegrates, which the author says also happens in Kurosawa’s reshaping of, not just retelling of, the film’s events in different ways according to each character’s narrative. Through this disintegration, the viewer may come to realize the illusory nature of what is usually considered reality and thereby move closer to seeing like the Buddha.

Chapter five is called “The Depth of Shadows in *Maborosi*.” *Maborosi* (Hepburn: *Maboroshi*) made in 1995, is the first feature film of Korokazu Koreeda (born 1962), who is more famous for *After Life* (1998), *Nobody Knows* (2004) and *Still Walking* (2008), all of which, like *Maborosi*, deal with death, abandonment, and their after effects. While the author and numerous critics have compared Koreeda to influential director Ozu Yasujiro (1903–63), it occurs to me that *Maborosi* could also be likened to Ingmar Bergman’s 1982 film *Fanny and Alexander*, in the themes of death, shots of clocks indicating the oppressiveness of time, the drawn out funeral procession, and the light and darkness of the magic lantern, which becomes the film itself. Cho’s analysis centers on the incomprehensibility of life, symbolized by the unfathomable sea. She uses the late William LaFleur’s analysis of the seductive power of light in the film, but adds to it the observation that “the dominant visual characteristic of this film is the way it favors shadows” (88). We might add, in this vein, that between

acts the director includes several seconds of punctuating darkness. Cho also finds it important to her argument that the camera maintains a gap between the actors and the audience who watch voyeuristically as if from a distance. Cho describes these elements in terms of yin-yang philosophy, the *Daodejing*, *yūgen*, and *mūshin* (no mind), as LaFleur would also have it. She relates this to the empty stupa atop Borobudur, saying that nirvāṇa mandates a return to saṃsāra, tying this to the yin-yang dynamic (102). Thus, the reader is now approaching enlightenment.

Chapter six is “The Visual Cinema of Terrence Malick.” Malick is the director of *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The Tree of Life* (2011), and *To the Wonder* (2012), which serve as the focus of the chapter. These films correspond to the pinnacle of Borobudur, the empty stupa and finally trading in the experience of seeing of the Buddha for seeing like the Buddha. Cho quotes critics who agree that, rather than being plot driven, Malick’s films are contemplative moments. While Cho acknowledges that the films contain heavy Christian references and themes, they can equally be described in Buddhist terms (110). Here as elsewhere, we see that Cho is less interested in the overt themes and statements of the filmmakers than in guiding the audience to enlightenment by an alternative reading and viewing. She writes that such viewings take us beyond clear pronouncements of what things mean and that this is essential for seeing like the Buddha. Likewise, she points out that Malick’s films are given to unscripted moments, not by big-name actors but by many voices. This parallels decentering human experience, which she says is an essential element of seeing like the Buddha (112).

Chapter seven, “Descent into the World,” speaks of how taking the stairway leading away from the empty stupa at Borobudur is an important ritual practice for Buddhist pilgrims there. This is related to the book in that “The movement away from overt Buddhist signs draws our attention to film itself as a ritual practice, above and beyond its obvious capacities as an educational tool” (132).

This review is meant to convey my experience that this book offers a unique perspective backed by an ingenious and well-executed argument. If asked what I felt was missing, I would offer the following, perhaps as a suggestion for classroom discussion. First, it is not clear what Cho means by “enlightenment,” despite the achievement of enlightenment being the book’s goal. At times, it seems to equate with nirvāṇa and with emptiness. But we must ask for at least a brief explanation, if not also historical justification for this view. In my reading, the book assumes readers will know what enlightenment is. However, we find little agreement on the definition of enlightenment among academics or among Buddhist traditions. Is enlightenment the final goal, which is experiential rather than intellectual? Or is it the rather the intellectual understanding that then allows us to reach beyond it? Are there levels and stages of enlightenment as some texts describe? In the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example, the nirvāṇa of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* is not really final nirvāṇa. Accordingly, at least the millions of adherents of the *Lotus Sūtra* seem to believe that enlightenment is not one single thing. If that’s so, which stage does this book take us to? Cho’s discussion of the stairway leading back down from the empty top stupa at Borobudur might or might not imply a goal beyond enlightenment.

This tendency to treat enlightenment and nirvāṇa as a universally agreed upon state also appears in relation to other themes in the book, including Christianity and

Buddhism. In chapter one, Cho makes a hard distinction between the two, primarily based on whether the devotionism in each is actually to a physical historical being or to a principle that is ultimately empty. I would suggest that there exists a broad spectrum of views among the many traditions comprising both religions over centuries and across borders and that these cannot always be so easily defined or clearly contrasted.

While I like the idea of seeing films as having no single narrative or even no narrative at all, I do find some value in studying films in terms of their context and—dare I say?—*meaning*, according to the filmmakers. Not that the book denies this, but it occurred to me that many of the same points Cho was making could have been supported using doctrines that were actually related directly to the plot. Examples of this would be the *Heart Sūtra*, central to *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* and perhaps the *Lotus Sūtra* for *Maborosi*. I mention the latter because the award-winning writer of the original short story *Maboroshi no hikari* on which it is based, Miyamoto Teru (born 1947), is a long-time affiliate of Nichiren Shōshū, a school of Japanese Buddhism which holds the *Lotus Sūtra* in highest regard. Viewed from this angle, the phantom light in the film may be related to the phantom city in chapter seven of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The phantom city is an illusion created to give hope to destitute people, a point central to the story and the movie. It has also been interpreted as nirvāṇa, here seen as a resting place that is a useful illusion on the way to the treasure city, the ultimate goal. As such, some interpret the phantom city also as a non-Mahāyāna incursion into the sutra. Regardless of how one views the city, Cho's point about the unreliability of impressions could be made by referencing it, rather than importing etic views.

After reading Cho's book, I walked away with several key questions, including the following. Can we really achieve enlightenment by watching movies? Shouldn't we actually *stop* watching movies for this? What happened to compassionate acts of loving kindness and *vipassanā*? Do we need to be doing these too? And, does a guide to enlightenment require an enlightened master or can artists and academics lead us? Or is Cho claiming to be enlightened? I think that in the context of the book, it is good to have ambiguity and to let go of the search for answers to such questions.