

# BUDDHISM IN AMERICAN CINEMA

March 23, 2019

## RELEVANT READINGS

- ❖ Ronald S. Green, "Dependent Origination: *I Heart Huckabees*," in *Buddhism Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 43-55.
- ❖ David L. Smith, "'Beautiful Necessities': *American Beauty* and the Idea of Freedom," in *Buddhism and American Cinema*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2014), 199-214.
- ❖ Sharon A. Suh, "Zen Appetites: Consuming Religion and Otherness through Film," in *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 59-76.
- ❖ Richard C. Anderson and David A. Harper, "Dying to Be Free: The Emergence of 'American Militant Buddhism,'" in *Buddhism and American Cinema*, 133-155.
- ❖ Eve Mullen, "Buddhism, Children, and the Childlike in American Buddhist Films," in *Buddhism and American Cinema*, 39-52.
- ❖ Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

### “FILMS WITH BUDDHIST THEMES?”

	Featuring Buddhist images	Claiming to convey Buddhist teachings	Containing Buddhist messages
<i>Little Buddha</i> ; <i>Kundun</i> ; <i>Seven Years in Tibet</i> ; <i>Zen Noir</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>The Last Samurai</i> ; <i>Bulletproof Monk</i>	✓	?	✗
<i>The Big Lebowski</i>	✗	✓	? (✗)
<i>I Heart Huckabees</i> ; <i>The Matrix</i> ; <i>Fight Club</i>	✗	✓ / ?	✓
<i>Star Wars</i> , I-VI	✗	?	✓
<i>American Beauty</i>	✗	✗	✓

### INFLUENCED BY, OR SOMEWHAT TINGED WITH, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

- ❖ *I Heart Huckabees* (2004): no-Self; dependent co-arising; middle way between eternalism and nihilism
- ❖ *American Beauty* (1999): *tr̥sna* and *samsāra*; mindfulness and Zen aesthetics; “nonattainment”
  - ❖ Ricky Fitts (character): “Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world I feel like I can’t take it...and my heart is going to cave in.”
  - ❖ Alan Ball: “I think you have to have a deep and fundamental acceptance of mortality to really be able to see what’s beautiful in life, because beauty and truth are inextricably connected.”  
[http://spiritualteachers.org/alan\\_ball.htm](http://spiritualteachers.org/alan_ball.htm)
- ❖ *Groundhog Day* (1993): *samsāra*
- ❖ *The Big Lebowski* (1998): ?

## “AMERICAN MILITANT BUDDHISM” (RICHARD C. ANDERSON & DAVID A. HARPER)

❖ *The Matrix* (1999): illusion/delusion; karmic patterns and samsara

- Blue pill red pill <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-rKWkVecJ4>
- There is no spoon  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAXtO5dMqEI>

❖ *Fight Club* (1999): duhkha, trsna/attachment, illusion/sleep vs. awakening

❖ *The Last Samurai* (2003): impermanence

❖ *Star Wars*

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDoY\\_zXf7uQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDoY_zXf7uQ)

## ORIENTALISM (EDWARD SAID) & “NEW AGE ORIENTALISM” (DONALD LOPEZ)

❖ *Little Buddha* (1993)

❖ *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997)

❖ *Kundun* (1997)

❖ *Zen Noir* (2004)

❖ “Orientalism can be defined briefly as exaggerations, made purposefully or not, of Asian traditions and culture, exaggerations that can be patronizing and damaging to the studied peoples.” (Mullen, 41)

- “play of opposites” (from “nostalgia of ourselves” to its reverse; from “the West vs. the [Middle] East”, to “the West vs. the rest”)
- Self-aggrandizement of the (western) rescuers
- Gaining of authority or control over the eastern others
- Justification of that authority

## THE “ORIENTAL MONK”

(JANE NAOMI IWAMURA)

- ❖ “The Oriental Monk made his on-screen debut in D. W. Griffith’s classic *Broken Blossoms or the Yellow Man and the Girl*” (Iwamura, 13)
- ❖ “his spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, his manner of dress, and—most obviously—his peculiar gendered character” (Iwamura, 6)
- ❖ “This gendered character is both masculine—as in the Oriental Monk is always male—and feminine—as in the Oriental Monk is always gentle, calm, and not aggressive in a Western masculine fashion, thus, non-threatening to American men.” (Klassen, 144)
- ❖ “it is the Euro-American [read: white] neophyte who stands to not only inherit the role of head Buddhist, but also to do so in a more effective manner than his or her master” (Suh, 75)

## THE “HYPERREAL”

(JEAN BAUDRILLARD)