

Buddhism

Footprint of the Buddha

This third episode of the widely-acclaimed BBC Long Search series, if used with some caution, can serve as a good introduction to Theravada Buddhism that is suitable for both high school and introductory college courses. Filmed entirely on location in Sri Lanka, *Footprint of the Buddha* conveys some of the essentials of Buddhism through the interpretive eyes of a university professor of anthropology and a distinguished monk: the three refuges, the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, the two bodies of the Buddha, the importance of stories of the Buddha's former lives, and the various practices of the laity and the monks. There is some stunning visual imagery here, from the enormous Buddha sculptures at the ancient capital of Polonnaruwa to the morning rounds of the *bhikkhus* walking from village to village to beg for their daily meal and the austere forest hermitages in remote corners of the island. The bulk of the video focuses on the step-by-step ritual initiation into the *Sangha* (spiritual community) of a young boy, the daily walk to beg alms, and the annual *kathina* celebration at the end of the rainy season during which the laity donate new robes to the Sangha.

While commentator Ronald Eyre's attempts throughout to grapple with the idea that Buddhism is a "religion" without any notion of a supreme god may be annoying to the specialist in Buddhist studies or Asian religions, a number of his homespun analogies for Buddhist concepts have proven amazingly effective with first-year college students. Particularly popular is Eyre's explanation of *dukkha* (he never uses the Pali term itself) not as "suffering," as it is usually rendered into English, but as "impermanence" or "instability," using the image of himself sitting absolutely still in a chair. In an hour, he explains, he'd still be comfortable; in twenty-four hours, he'd be in pain, in two hundred years, just dust and bones, all while seemingly sitting still. His analogy of the Sangha/laity distinction as akin to the relationship of a British football team to its fans—the fans can watch the game, but only occasionally are they let onto the field—generally elicits a few groans from the audience.

As with most of the segments dealing with non-Western traditions in the Long Search series, this episode presents both sweeping generalizations and a particular subset of voices within the tradition itself that need to be addressed directly in discussing the film with students. No effort is made, for example, to present Sri Lanka as only one among many very different Buddhist cultures; one must point out to students, before or after viewing this video, that Sri Lanka represents but one corner of the specifically Theravada Buddhist world, and what Eyre's informants tell him about Buddhism would not necessarily be echoed in other Buddhist cultures. As with the Long Search segment on Hinduism, to cite another example, all of Eyre's

Sri Lankan informants (with only brief exceptions)—the anthropology professor and monks—are English-speaking and thoroughly "Protestant" or "reformist" in their interpretations of Buddhism. Much recent scholarship has shown, for example, that the very problem dogging Eyre throughout—that the Buddha is merely an extraordinary man and Buddhism basically concerned with "molding character"—is largely a result of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reconstructions of Theravada tradition in conjunction with the beginnings of Pali and Buddhist studies in the West. The film's brief foray into possession rituals at a rural temple hints at the complexities of living Buddhism in Sri Lanka, but the scene concludes with a comment from the monk that "I have nothing to do with that."

With the caveats above in mind, *Footprint of the Buddha* can serve as a useful introductory piece on Theravada Buddhism for a high school course or introductory college course on world religions. ■

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