

## FILM REVIEWS

# Hinduism and Buddhism

A BILL MOYERS SPECIAL

FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES  
AND SCIENCES  
1996. 58 MINUTES

**H**induism and Buddhism, the first part of Bill Moyers' conversations with Huston Smith in *The Wisdom of Faith* series, is not a systematic introduction to these two religions. Those teachers who eagerly watch it as a potential replacement for *The Long Search* series (which, filmed in the '70s, is getting a bit long in the tooth) will be disappointed. Rather, this film is largely about Huston Smith himself, and especially his memorable experiences about his own journey of discovery of the world's religions. Viewed in that

light, this film can be a valuable adjunct film for those students already somewhat familiar with Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly those students who are reading Smith's *The World's Religions*.

*Hinduism and Buddhism* is roughly broken into three topics: the place of art in India; Smith's discovery of Tibetan Buddhist multiphonic chanting; and Smith's experiences in a Zen monastery.

The conversation about art in India relies heavily upon cuttings from Smith's early film *India and the Infinite*, and Smith makes some exciting points. Throughout the ages, Smith points out, most Indians were illiterate, and therefore their sacred texts were sculptures, paintings, and temples. He then gives an analysis of the Shiva Nataraja sculpture to demonstrate what one of these texts says. Finally, and most movingly, Moyers urges Smith to recite a poem that Smith himself wrote about India, a poem about

the give and take between India and one of its British overlords.

The discussion then turns to Tibet, and after the briefest introduction to the Chinese takeover in 1959, Smith recounts his first experience with hearing Tibetan multiphonic chanting. The phenomenon itself, where a single Tibetan lama can chant three tones simultaneously, is fascinating, and the film gives some excellent footage of the lamas chanting. Almost as interesting is Huston Smith's excitement as he tells about running off to find a recorder and then confronting one of his MIT colleagues in musicology with the resulting tape. The absolute best part for students, though (and, I confess, for at least this teacher), is the footage showing three touring Tibetan monks, complete in their robes, playing basketball at the home of the Grateful Dead's Mickey Hart.

The final part of the conversation turns to Smith's experiences while staying in a Zen monastery. Once again, students unfamiliar with Buddhism or Zen get only the most cursory of introductions. Smith mostly gives a vivid description of his struggles with a koan and his *roshi's* rejection of all of his clever attempts to answer it ("You have the philosopher's disease!" his *roshi* tells him). After repeated failures and on the point of exhaustion, Smith finally blew up and said he was getting sick. The *roshi* then calmly said, "What is sickness, and what is health? Go beyond them both." Smith is visibly moved as he describes the illumination that hit him at that point, and this description of his koan experience ends up being an excellent explanation of what koans are all about.

So the question for teachers is, how (if at all) to use this film? I recommend using it as an adjunct film in world religions classes in the following way: showing the Tibetan part (about fifteen min-

utes) after Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism have already been introduced, and showing the Zen part (about fifteen minutes) after the class has already struggled some with Zen Buddhism. The Hindu section is less valuable, though it could serve as a bit of an introduction to the film series as a whole, or to Huston Smith (for students who are reading his text).

I did, in fact, show parts of it to my world religions class this semester with some interesting results. My students liked seeing this man they were spending so much time (and for some of them, trouble) having to read. They had expected him to be scholarly, but they hadn't realized, and were impressed by, his passion and his first-hand experiences in the religions he writes about. Several of them said that seeing him made reading his text more interesting.

Ultimately, I like the film for much the same reasons. I do think that the film has the best short description of Tibetan multiphonic chanting and the best explanation of Zen koans I've seen. Both of these are fairly narrow areas for an introductory class, though, and the film (again) just is not meant as a religious overview. But it is nice to hear Smith recite his poem about India; it is nice to see him excited about his discovery (for the West) of multiphonic chanting; it is nice to see him so powerfully moved by his wrenching experience with the Zen koan. Huston Smith comes across as a learned yet humble and religious man. Those kinds of people are always worth meeting.

Joe Gawrys

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