

A BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI FILM

# LITTLE BUDDHA



"Our society is dedicated almost entirely to the celebration of the ego, with all its sad fantasies about success and power, and it celebrates those forces of greed and ignorance which are destroying the planet."

*Sogyal Rinpoche. Buddhist Monk who plays Kenpo Tenzin in LITTLE BUDDHA*

"Today's cinema audience is in general so used to action, violence and sex that, let's hope, they will find the film interesting to see if there is room for something different, something more spiritual, something that makes them stop and think. Or not even stop, but abandon themselves to emotions that are connected to spiritual values."

*Bernardo Bertolucci. Director of LITTLE BUDDHA*

The two quotations above give you some idea of the ways in which the film LITTLE BUDDHA is different from other films that you may have seen. Read the two quotations very carefully then answer these questions and complete the tasks:

1 What does Sogyal Rinpoche say is wrong with the world today?

- 2 Sogyal Rinpoche says that greed and ignorance are destroying the world. Think carefully about what you would hope from your life - what are your dreams and desires? When you have done this, look at your list and see how many of the ideas that you have written down have to do with getting "things" such as cars etc. How do your dreams and desires fit in with what Sogyal Rinpoche is saying?
- 3 Bernardo Bertolucci talks about the types of films that we normally watch. What are the last three films that you have seen? Do they fit Bertolucci's description?
- 4 What makes you go to see particular types of films?
- 5 When you have seen LITTLE BUDDHA try to write down the ways in which it is different from other films that you have seen.

## E N T E R T A I N M E N T   A N D   M E S S A G E S

You have already listed the ways in which LITTLE BUDDHA is different from other films that you have seen. To take this idea further, you could ask yourself the question "what are films for"? Are they simply for entertainment or can they help persuade us to think differently?

Recently there has been much in the media about banning certain videos and films because they are too violent.

1 How many films have you seen which you think are trying to give you a message, trying to persuade you to think differently? What were they? What messages were the films trying to give you?

2 Have you seen any other films which have had a religious message? Do you think that film is the right medium to choose to spread such a message? Should film be purely for entertainment?

## LITTLE BUDDHA - THEMES

The film LITTLE BUDDHA tells two stories which are intertwined - the story of Jesse Conrad, a young boy living in Seattle who is identified by a Buddhist monk as being the reincarnation of Buddha and is taken to Bhutan along with his father to see if he really is a "Little Buddha". The second story is that of Prince Siddhartha and the birth of Buddhism.

When you have seen the film, you should try to answer the following questions:

- 1 Why do you think that the film makers chose to show the two stories side by side?
- 2 Could you see any relationship between the two stories?
- 3 In what ways are both of the stories about a journey?
- 4 When Jesse arrives in Bhutan he discovers that there are two other candidates for the title of 'Little Buddha'. What effect does this have on the story?

## QUESTIONS ON THE STORY

- 1 Why does Lama Norbu go looking for Jesse?
- 2 Why do you think that Jesse's father is suspicious about Lama Norbu when he arrives at the house?
- 3 What makes Jesse's father change his mind about Lama Norbu?
- 4 What makes Prince Siddhartha want to go out into the world and cast off his riches?
- 5 Why do you think that Jesse likes Lama Norbu and wants to hear the story of Prince Siddhartha?
- 6 Was Prince Siddhartha's father right not to show him the bad aspects of life?
- 7 How has Jesse and his family changed at the end of the film? What do you think has made them change?

## LITTLE BUDDHA AND THE STORY OF PRINCE SIDDHARTHA

One of the two stories told in the film LITTLE BUDDHA is that of Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha. Obviously, given the amount of time that a film maker has to tell a story, certain aspects of Buddha's life have been left out of the film.

Below is an outline of the life of Prince Siddhartha. Read it carefully and then think back to the film. Underline the parts of Prince Siddhartha's life that were used in the film. Try to think why these parts were included and other parts missed out. How did the aspects of Siddhartha's life that were chosen to be in the film reflect the experience of Jesse and Lama Norbu?

Siddhartha was born to Queen Mahamaya and King Shuddhodana who was King of the Shakyas. At the boy's birth prophets predicted that he would either be a universal monarch or a

Buddha. His father wanted him to be a universal monarch and bring him honour and descendants, not leave the palace and renounce his birthright to become a Buddha. He tried to steer his son away from sights and experiences that would make him question his high station in life, the boy was kept continually in the palace and was not allowed to see poverty or unhappiness. The prince gradually became bored with his life of luxury and went outside the palace where he saw sights that affected him deeply, he saw elderly people stricken with age and sickness, learned that people die and saw how badly employees of his father were treated, slaving away under the hot sun. He also saw a holy man who had renounced his possessions in life in order to pursue a life of spiritual reflection.

By the time Siddhartha was twenty nine he had a wife and a son. He knew he would have to leave them. He felt that he had to triumph over the enemies of happiness: old age sickness and death and find a more meaningful existence. He gave up his wealth, kingdom, influence and even his wife and child to search for something more worthwhile.

He left the palace and became a beggar owning nothing but the rags he stood up in. He found a teacher named Master Arada who instructed him in the various levels of meditative absorption. In time Siddhartha learned all the Master Arada could teach him and he still felt far from total liberation, so he moved on. He took tuition from Rudraka Ramaputra who taught him one further level of meditation but he still felt that complete liberation eluded him. Siddhartha felt there was no more he could learn from his teachers and although they had asked him to remain and teach other students he decided nothing would keep him from taking the final steps to enlightenment. Siddhartha tried asceticism to purge himself of the transient attachments of birth, old age and sickness. He gave himself over to relentless hardship and pain through fasting until he had to gain enlightenment or die. A group of followers helped him through this time when he was too weak to wash, stand or feed himself. After six years of fasting, Siddhartha was close to death. Since had had not gained enlightenment through living a life of luxury or of hardship he chose the middle path and began to eat and regain his strength.

After Siddhartha had resumed eating a little food and was stronger he made a seat from grass under a tree and made an oath not to stir from the seat until he had become liberated. It was on this spot that he finally gained enlightenment. All knowledge of the human condition was made clear to him as was the memory of his previous lives. The clarity and oneness of his mind increased and became completely unobstructed. All the knowledge of the universe and it's workings became his.

The rest of his life Siddhartha taught the Dharma, he taught the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. He amassed many thousands of disciples all longing to hear the words of the enlightened one. Many of them advanced on their path towards enlightenment through his words.

## QUESTION

When you have completed this exercise, read the life of Siddhartha again. In what ways is it similar to the life of Christ and in what ways is it different?

## WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

While it is not vitally important to understand everything about Buddhism in order to enjoy LITTLE BUDDHA, some background knowledge might be useful.

Buddhists believe that we have many lives and that death is not the end but merely a journey to another life. A Buddha goes through many human and non-human lives before he gains enlightenment and becomes a Buddha. During these lives he is known as a Bodhisattva. The duties of a Bodhisattva is to eliminate the suffering of all beings and help them on their way to Nirvana. All people have the potential to become Buddhas.

The purpose of Buddhism as a religion and a teaching is to help people understand the experience of life and death, and to overcome unhappiness. Buddhists believe that the purpose of life is to study the Dharma, (the teachings of Buddhism) in order to eventually obtain Nirvana.

Buddhism, like many other religions which have developed over time, has many different schools and traditions. It is not uncommon to hear about Zen Buddhism, Theravada or Mahayana. They differ only slightly however, and are still founded on the same principles. Buddhism began in the East and has now spread to the West.

There is no concept of a creator God in Buddhism, nor is there any special initiation to become a Buddhist, although to become a priest ordination is necessary.

A Buddhist can best be described as one who:

1 takes the Buddha, the Dharma (teaching), and the Sangha (generally the Order of monks, nuns and ordained Buddhists) as guides to life and thought.

2 makes an effort to live according to the Buddha's teaching, i.e. Not to do any evil,  
To cultivate good, To purify one's mind.

The Dhammapada 183.

## QUESTION

Once you have read the outline of what Buddhism is about as a religion, try to say how it is similar to or different from other religions that you have studied.

# FUNDAMENTAL BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

The main difference between Buddhism and western religions is that it is not a revealed religion, its beliefs do not rest on divine or supernatural happenings in history. It is a religion purely of human experience. There is no 'message' to be believed in order to be saved, it is a series of steps the follower must reason out for himself.

There are simpler concepts such as generosity, moral conduct, mental concentration, heavenly rebirth and the law of cause and effect (karma), that are normally taught to novices. All the above are essential characteristics of a Buddhist. The teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are usually reserved for members of the Sangha and advanced lay people. These are eternal truths that transcend the lives of men and Buddhas. They existed before Buddhism became recognised.

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

### **1 Dukkha**

It means suffering, impermanence and imperfection. No one is exempt from these. Dukkha means the human state, it is the imperfect, impermanent human condition. It suggests the only happiness we feel is transitory and that we still cannot escape human suffering.

### **2 Samudaya - the cause of Dukkha**

This is the craving we have for physical or mental pleasures. These are fleeting and not permanent. It can be described as the greed, desire, thirst, or craving that exists in humans to find pleasure. It always exists, when one desire is satisfied, the craving begins again. Samudaya and Dukkha summed up are the cycle of craving and lack of fulfilment that is human.

### **3 Nirodha - the cessation of Dukkha**

If Dukkha follows craving and Dukkha must be eliminated, craving must be transcended and removed. The cycle of constant want and disappointment must be broken in order to gain enlightenment. The state of cessation of Dukkha is Nirvana. Nirvana is the end of greed and craving. All the teachings of Buddhism lead towards the realisation of the state of Nirvana in the human lifetime.

## 4 Magga - the path leading to the cessation of Dukkha, the Noble Eightfold Path

The middle path between a life of luxury and greed and one of austerity and self-mortification is the path to enlightenment. Both these extremes must be avoided. This truth is the one that changes Buddhism from a philosophy into an active religion. A follower must be as diligent in his/her practice as in his/her study. It provides a solid example of how to lead life in the Buddhist religion.

### QUESTION

How are the Four Noble Truths shown in the film LITTLE BUDDHA? Try to think of particular scenes which illustrate each of the truths.

## REBIRTH, REBECOMING AND THE CONTINUITY OF LIFE

The concept of rebirth and rebecoming are central to the teachings of Buddhism. All human beings experience Dukkha and all beings must overcome the thirst and craving for pleasure and realise Nirvana by living according to the Noble Eightfold Path. Nirvana is a rebirth of sorts because it is the end of greed and want, the end of Dukkha.

According to the Buddhist teaching a living being is a 'grouping of constantly changing physical and mental forces or energies'. At death some of these come to an end, but the majority continue to a new life, this is rebirth.

It is incorrect to use the term reincarnation to describe the movement from one life to another in Buddhism because it implies the migration of the soul from one body to the next. Rebirth is not the taking of the personality to a new body, remembering who you were and being able to recognise yourself after death, it is a subtle change that happens continuously throughout life and at death. The biological body is regarded as the temporary home of the life forces. There is no interval between death and rebirth.

### QUESTION

Do you remember the story that Champa tells at the beginning of the film about coming back to the world in another form? Can you write it down and then think about what the story is trying to tell us. Why is the idea of rebirth important for the story of LITTLE BUDDHA?

### CONCLUSION

Try to write a description of the film LITTLE BUDDHA. As well as saying what happens in the film, you should try to say what the message of the film is. Also, write down what you thought of the film, what you liked about it and what you did not.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

BUDDHISM FOR SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES SERIES by Anil. D. Goonewardene 1989  
Available from The Buddhist Society, 58 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PH.

ENTERING THE STREAM An Introduction to the Buddha and His Teachings, The Companion Reader to the Film 'Little Buddha'. Edited by Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn. Rider Publishing 1994.

There is far more to the understanding of Buddhism than could be contained in this guide. Many of the concepts in the guide are highly condensed and should be considered only as a foundation for further work. We recommend the above sources of further information.

Written by Ian Wall. Produced by Film Education for Buena Vista International (UK) Ltd. (Buena Vista International (UK) Ltd. 1994.