

CHAPTER I

Seeing Like the Buddha

Erasing the Buddha

The objective of this book is to demonstrate that films can take on the role that has been played by traditional Buddhist icons and images. Film can articulate Buddhist teachings and, more significantly, put them into practice. This means taking film seriously as a medium for cultivating certain ways of being in the world that have previously been attained through ritual and contemplative practices. Both traditional and filmic practices can be put under the rubric of “seeing like the Buddha,” which is intimately tied to the desire of Buddhists to see the Buddha himself. As a founded religion, Buddhists express devotion and piety toward the historical Siddhārtha Gautama of the Śākya clan (Śākyamuni). This means keeping him alive through images and narratives about his life, similar to the way Jesus is kept in mind by Christians. And parallel to Christology, theoretical understandings about the nature of the Buddha as both a historical and transcendent being have allowed Buddhists to “see” him in multiple ways, as well as in multiple things. But throughout Buddhist history, the project of seeing the Buddha has entailed a mandate to see *like* the Buddha, which, paradoxically, erases the individual form of Siddhārtha. The emphasis shifts from *what* is seen to *how* one sees, which in turn renders art and aesthetic experiences into equivalents of the Buddha himself.

This drift toward erasing the Buddha in favor of seeing like the Buddha is the central aesthetic and soteriological theme of this book, and the organizational principle behind the films that have been selected for

discussion. The progression of films increasingly loses references to and images of all things Buddhist until “the Buddhist film” is instantiated in ostensibly secular works. This pattern is modeled after a particular dynamic in Buddhist history. This is not to deny that the Buddha’s image is revered, preserved, and perpetuated by Buddhists even now, some twenty-five centuries after his death. Depictions of the Buddha are governed by iconographical conventions such as hand postures (*mudras*) that signify certain activities or moments in the Buddha’s life, and the thirty-two marks (*lakṣaṇa*) of the great man such as the fleshly protuberance on the top of the Buddha’s head (*uṣṇīṣa*) and the imprint of wheels on the soles of his feet.¹ There are other kinds of Buddhist icons such as representations of bodhisattvas (Buddhas-to-be) and *maṇḍala* Buddhas that are endowed with fixed symbolic attributes. But there are also “open form” images that exhibit the layering and substitution of motifs (Shimizu 1992, 207). In such images, the Buddha is “present” primarily as a reference point that deliberately raises the question of what and whom else can be seen as the Buddha.

Itō Jakuchū’s (1716–1800) painting entitled *Yasai Nehan* (“vegetable nirvana”), for example, takes the traditional image of the reclining Śākyamuni passing into his parinirvana and replaces him with a daikon radish surrounded by other vegetables that stand in for the various elements of this iconic scene. Eight corn stalks take the place of the Śāla trees under which the Buddha died, and the daikon radish is surrounded by an array of turnips, gourds, mushrooms, melons, chestnuts, and other vegetables to form the assembly of mourners who witness the Buddha’s passing. Jakuchū’s well-attested Buddhist piety eliminates the possibility that the painting is a mere parody, and the image must be understood in the context of Japanese Buddhist and culinary history. Relevant factors include the tradition of monastic vegetarianism, the association of the daikon with the pure and rustic life, and quite importantly, the Tendai Buddhist creed that even plants and trees attain Buddhahood due to the inherent Buddha-nature in all things. It is this notion that “allowed the interchangeability between the original subject (Śākyamuni) and other subjects, be they poets or mendicant monks”—or even vegetables (Shimizu 1992, 211).

The doctrine of Buddha-nature was not espoused by all Japanese Buddhists, let alone the entire Buddhist world, but it is dominant in the Mahāyāna-leaning regions of East Asia and Tibet.² The concept of Buddha-nature originates in the bivalent Indian Buddhist idea of



FIGURE 1.1. Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800), *Yasai Nehan* (“vegetable nirvana”), ca. 1792. (Courtesy of Kyoto National Museum)

tathāgatagarbha, which translates both as the “embryo of enlightenment,” in the sense of the incipient and potential Buddhahood *within* all beings, and also as the “womb of enlightenment,” in the alternative sense of a space that *contains* all beings. Both readings affirm that everyone is a Buddha, either in the future or as a present reality due to the fact that all beings are already contained within the womb of Buddhahood.³ According to the *Śrīmālādevīsīmhanāda Sūtra* (“The Lion’s Roar of Queen Śrīmālā”), when the *tathāgatagarbha* is covered by defilements then it is in an embryo state, and when it is not covered by defilements then Buddhahood is a present and actualized reality (Wayman and Wayman 1974, 45). The critical idea here is that even when it is covered with defilements, the *tathāgatagarbha* is nevertheless present. “Buddha-nature” is actually a translation of the term *buddhadhatu* (“Buddha element”), which is one of many synonyms for *tathāgatagarbha*, and which emphasizes this idea that it is a quality possessed by and present in all things.

Tathāgatagarbha thought is closely linked to the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which deems that the dependently arising nature of all phenomena makes everything empty of inherent essence and identity. To be empty of an inherent essence may sound negative, but it is understood as the quality that enables beings to transform into a Buddha—Buddhahood is possible precisely because suffering and delusion are not inherent to human being and existence. This openness to becoming and change in a felicitous direction may be understood as the quality of the Buddha himself—the *tathāgatagarbha*. Understanding the truth of emptiness is “a necessary precondition of the realization of *tathāgatagarbha*” and the idea of *tathāgatagarbha* in turn corrects “a one-sidedly negative perspective” on the teaching of emptiness (King 1991, 16). Functioning as positive and negative formulations of the same insight, respectively, Buddha-nature and emptiness both erase the separation between the enlightened realm of nirvana and the tainted world of samsara, at least in their earlier interpretation as incalculably distant spatial and temporal domains. This also eliminates the distinction between the Buddha and other beings, and sanctions the idea that even “secular” aesthetic works can function as serious religious practice. This history is notable because it refrains from some characteristic anxieties regarding religious images in our more immediate monotheistic traditions.

Strictures against representing the divine in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are quite familiar to us, of course, but this is not to suggest a simplistic contrast between an image-affirming Buddhism versus

image-fearing monotheisms. The Buddhist world has also had its episodes of aniconism and iconoclasm but this similarity needs to be qualified with the particular reasons why Chan/Zen monks, for example, counseled against the use of religious images.⁴ Zen iconoclasts embrace a semiotic worldview different from theists, as I have discussed elsewhere (Cho 2009), and although they express the familiar warning not to mistake the image for what it signifies, the same semiotics is used by other Buddhists to *affirm* the identity between artistic representations and the original reality. This ability to pivot seamlessly between iconoclasm and iconolatry is, paradoxically, the manifestation of a single logic. Some Buddhists reject images on the grounds that they are empty of any inherent qualities and suitability, and other Buddhists—sometimes the same person on a different occasion—embrace and sanction images *because* of their inherent emptiness.⁵ We can begin to parse the reversibility of the two positions by remembering that the purpose of the Zen attack on religious icons is to point out the sacred in the *profane*, such as the world of vegetables. The objective, in essence, is to get past the nirvana-samsara distinction and its apparent opposition. This is diametrically opposed to theistic iconoclasm, which zealously guards the separation between the worldly and the divine.

Such differences lead to an interesting contrast when it comes to images of the Buddha and images of Jesus Christ. Depictions of Christ and the controversies they engender help make this contrast clear, and they might be summed up as an underlying anxiety about historical fidelity—given that Christ is understood as the flesh-and-blood embodiment of the divine who walked the earth at a particular place and time. This historical nature is a critical stipulation about who Christ was and central to the logic of his redemptive power. Śākyamuni was also a historical being but the early Buddhist tradition—as evident in the Pāli texts of the Theravāda school—prioritizes the Buddha's teachings over his personhood. In contrast, his historical form-body (*rūpakāya*) is relegated to the realm of the ephemeral and the illusory, to which Buddhist thought consigns all of phenomenal reality. When the Buddha's follower Vikkali complains that he has not seen the Buddha in some time, the Buddha famously responds: "One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma" (S III.120). This passage asserts the importance of the Dharma (Pāli: Dhamma)—that is, the Buddha's teachings—over the person of the Buddha himself. This leads to a distinction between the historical Buddha, who cannot remain in the world, and the Dharma-body

(*dharmakāya*) that does. This is a common explanation for early Buddhist aniconism: the recognition of Śākyamuni's impermanence dissuaded his followers from producing images and fixating on him in favor of looking instead to the body of his teachings. We will return to the permutations and implications of this Buddhology below.

A more succinct and illuminating exercise for the moment might be to compare Jakuchū's *Yasai Neban* to the 1999 photographic installation created by the Jamaican-born artist Renée Cox called *Yo Mama's Last Supper*. Like Jakuchū's depiction of the Buddha's parinirvana, Cox takes on a significant hagiographical moment—this time in the life of Jesus Christ—that is overtly modeled on Leonardo da Vinci's iconic painting of the Last Supper. The composition is actually made from five photographic plates, with Cox herself, who is black and female—and nude—portrayed in the center image as Christ. In each of the two photographic plates on either side of the center piece, a triad of males aggregate into the twelve



FIGURE 1.2. The artist Renée Cox substitutes for Christ in *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, 1999. (Courtesy of Renée Cox Studio)

disciples—following da Vinci’s own compositional structure—except that eleven of them are black and a lone white male sits in the position of Judas. The exhibition of *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2001 led then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani to call for a decency commission to regulate publicly funded museums. There were also expressions of outrage from religious voices such as the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (*New York Times*, “Affronted by Nude ‘Last Supper,’ Giuliani Calls for Decency Panel,” Feb. 16, 2001).

The expressions of shock and accusations of anti-Catholicism are interesting for their inevitability, on the one hand, and the way they distract from the substantive social and theological issues the photograph provokes, on the other. Cox made this explicit in her response to critics by invoking her Catholic school education and its teaching that all humans are made in the image of God. This prompted the rebuttal that it was simply the offence of her nudity—“There would be no problem if



FIGURE 1.3. The plate just right of the Cox/Christ image depicts a white Judas in the triad of disciples. (Courtesy of Renée Cox Studio)

you had kept your clothes on,” stated William Donohue, President of the Catholic League (*New York Times*, “‘Yo Mama’ Artist Takes on Catholic Critic,” Feb. 21, 2001). But this reply conveniently deflects the historical contradictions (and political tensions) in the alternatively accepted norm of the blond-haired and blue-eyed Christ. As a historical being Christ had a certain face and complexion, but social power determines what he looks like and creates difficulties for the purported catholicity of Christian salvation. Cox’s work pointedly raises these problems and the expressions of outrage in response to it underscore them even more.

Tensions centering on historical fidelity in the representation of Christ continue in the realm of film. As soon as film became a mass industry in the United States, people began imagining its educational and religious possibilities. A 1910 essay by the Reverend Herbert Jump, “The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture,” counseled Christians not to be put off by the novelty of the medium or the secularism of the industry, pointing out the potential of movies to function as lively sermons. Jump pays particular attention to the engaging qualities of film: “[T]he picture that is literally moving, that portrays dramatic sequence and life-like action, possesses tenfold more vividness and becomes therefore a more convincing medium of education” (2002, 218).⁶ As this essay portended, the power of film for religious ends has not been lost on Christians. One recent and famous realization of this is Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which was treated by Christians as a sermon and a religious meditation in much the same way that paintings, sculptures, and Passion narratives have been experienced since the medieval period.⁷

The Passion was engulfed in controversy, however, because of the way it inflames anti-Semitism. In this, the movie continues a long-standing legacy of both theological readings and artistic depictions that blame Jews for Christ’s crucifixion. Hence, much of the pushback on the film consisted of challenges to its historical accuracy on multiple counts—not only the actions of Jews, but the languages spoken, the nature of the torture and crucifixion, and the personality of Pontius Pilate. These rebukes were induced by Gibson’s own claim to tell the story of Christ as it “really” was, which reinforces the sense of realism that film dramatizations already possess. New Testament scholar Paula Fredriksen writes, “For better and (probably) for worse, Christianity in America is mediated as much through popular media as through the traditions and institutions of our various churches. Convictions both about the Bible and about Christianity can be as heart-felt as they are uninformed.”⁸ In Fredrik-

sen's estimation, Gibson problematically purveys the standard Hollywood blockbuster commodity, with its gratuitous violence and simplistic "good versus evil" action, in the guise of religious history.

Accuracy becomes a big question because historical claims are intimately tied to spiritual and moral ones in the Christian conception of Jesus. His story is linked to that of others, and when it comes to the Passion, Adele Reinhartz observes, "filmmakers do have a responsibility to think through the potential negative consequences of their films" because Jews are indelibly written into that history (2004, 28). Furthermore, the Christian understanding of Jesus is itself fraught, particularly in its attempt to balance his human and divine natures. The Jesus film often steps into this fray by making Christ either too superhuman or too human (Deacy 2001). For that reason, the Jesus film is doubly vulnerable to controversy, from the perspective of theological orthodoxy as well as historical accuracy. The protests over Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) for making the savior too recognizably mundane in his longings are a case in point. Gibson's own Christ, on the other hand, survives such an excess of physical brutality that he is rendered into an action superhero, compromising the theological view that it is Christ's very humanness that enabled the redemptive power of his suffering.

The sociopolitical and religious stakes in how one sees Christ, then, impose qualifications on Reverend Jump's enthusiasm for the motion picture, which he sanctions on the grounds that Jesus himself preached by means of exciting and accessible stories. He singles out Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan because it was taken "from contemporary experience. It was the sort of thing that might have happened any day and to any one in the audience" (2002, 217). But this very approachability also creates the justification for iconoclasm. As David Freedberg observes, the power of images to attract and hold the attention is a double-edged sword, for, "What if the lingering is occasioned by color, line, and pleasure in anatomy, and not by reflections of sacred history and dogma?" (1989, 187). The moving action that film provides only adds to this litany of aesthetic pleasures. In the course of Christian history, the mesmerizing powers of art have required interventions in order to "draw the mind away from the attractive sign to the meaningful signified . . . [to] prevent our dwelling on quality and form" (Freedberg 1989, 188).

The Buddha was also a historical figure, but his human existence is contrasted to—and subsumed under—the ever-present Dharma-body of his teachings, which appropriately includes the idea that all beings

are ultimately insubstantial, impermanent, and not to be clung to. As theorizing about the nature of the Buddha progressed, the Buddha was understood in terms of the ever-present dharmakāya, understood both as a transcendent realm such as the *dharmadhātu* (“dharma dimension,” “dharma sphere,” dharma element”) and as a personified being such as Vairocana, the Universal Buddha.⁹ The impulses that initially minimized the historical Buddha through aniconism eventually gave rise to the view that Śākyamuni is only one historical manifestation of the ever-present dharmakāya.¹⁰ Ironically, this provided a justification for reversing aniconism on the grounds that even images of the Buddha—as yet another historical manifestation—can also lead sentient beings to liberation. This logic is demonstrated in the well-known story of the first image of Śākyamuni and its implication that there is no functional difference between the image and the original person. This image was reputedly commissioned by King Udayana of Kauśāmbī when the Buddha was absent for three months preaching to his mother in the Trāyastriṃśa heaven (“heaven of the thirty-three”).¹¹ Stricken by the absence of the Buddha, the king had an artist transported to the heaven to create a likeness in sandalwood. Quite interestingly, it is said that when the Buddha returned to the palace, the sandalwood image rose and greeted the Buddha, who in turn responded to the image and said: “The work expected from you is to toil in diligence to convert the unbelieving and to lead in the way of religion the future ages” (Beal 1980, 255).¹²

This mythical tale encapsulates Buddhist historical practice, in which the longing to see the absent Buddha has led countless followers to recreate him in likenesses that are animated into “living images” that are thought to be equal in every way to the original Buddha. The Jowo Śākyamuni housed in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, which is often described as the most important image in Tibet, is another that was supposedly constructed during the Buddha’s lifetime. It was purportedly brought to Tibet by Wencheng Gongzhu (628–680) from the Chinese Tang court as a part of her dowry when she was wed to the first Tibetan emperor, Songtsen Gampo (d. 649). Its status as a living image means “devotees do not view him as simply a statue but rather as a manifestation of the Buddha himself” (Warner 2011, 3). The Śākyamuni image in Seiryōji temple in Kyoto is another statue that is invested with the same status. It is supposedly a copy of King Udayana’s sandalwood image that was brought from China to Japan by the monk Chōnen in the tenth century (Henderson and Hurvitz 1956).¹³ Both the Jowo and Seiryōji

Buddhas are venerated as “first Buddha images” that were carved from life while the Buddha lived, and we can see a concern with historical continuity here in that the veracity of the images is vouchsafed by the claim that they were modeled on the actual Buddha.

But this conceit seems undermined by the fact that the Seiryōji Buddha, for example, is acknowledged to be a *copy* of King Udayana’s sandalwood image, which means that it cannot be a “first Buddha image” that was modeled on the living Buddha. This apparent inconsistency actually holds the key to understanding how the power of Buddha images is rendered. A comparison to Buddhist relic worship provides helpful illumination. The centrality and power of relics in Buddhist ritual practice is tied to the fact that relics are either remains of the Buddha himself or were in direct physical contact with him, such as his begging bowl. Relics therefore make the absent Buddha present through the power of synecdoche and contact. Buddha images are also recognized as a kind of relic, but one that acts on a different kind of power:

Images . . . gain their authority by their capacity to re-present the Buddha visually. . . . Images, unlike relics, can be reproduced endlessly, and they are accepted as worthy of veneration because they embody basic iconographic conventions. Images are also, in many cases, ritually consecrated. . . . In general, however, the ease of reproducing images allows for their proliferation outside monastic control to an extent that distinguishes them from relics, which are usually confined within the ritually defined boundaries of monastic complexes. (Trainor 1997, 30–31)

The power of images arises from the fact that they are ritually consecrated in monastic ceremonies that bring them to life as living Buddhas (Bentor 1996; Swearer 2004). Some images such as the Jowo and Seiryōji Buddhas are given distinction by virtue of a lineage that is traced back to the historical Śākyamuni. This logic works for the Seiryōji Buddha because it is connected to Udayana’s sandalwood Buddha, which in turn is connected to the original Buddha. This idea of an unbroken physical lineage partakes in the logic of relics, which are also authenticated by chronicles of successive transmission from the Buddha down to the present day. But this proximity to the actual Buddha, which seems to guarantee the “likeness” of these images, has less to do with physical

similarity than with ritual efficacy. The consecrated images are “like” the Buddha in that their presence has the same potency in allowing devotees to generate merit.¹⁴ And unlike relics, each of which must be an actual physical remnant of the Buddha, images can proliferate to the point where the criterion of physical proximity becomes far less relevant. This trend is reinforced by developments in theories about Buddhahood that see the potential of multiple historical entities to function as manifestations of the dharmakāya.

We can see this development in Buddhist locations that adhere closely to Mahāyāna tradition. Yael Bentor’s study of Tibetan Buddhist ritual texts reveals that consecrated images and *stūpas* (Buddhist reliquary monuments) are “regarded as parallel to the emanation of a Buddha in the *samsāric* world” (1996, 5) because the act of consecration “establishes” (Sanskrit: *pratiṣṭhā*; Tibetan: *rab-gnas*) the dharmakāya in the physical object.¹⁵ In Mahāyāna theory, the Buddha’s form-body (*rūpakāya*) is only one of many “manifestations” or “emanations” (*nirmāṇakāyas*) that can appear in the world.¹⁶ This signals an important shift in the conception of Śākyamuni, who is demoted into merely one agent in a universe of entities that function for the sake of liberating sentient beings. In the Tibetan consecration texts:

[w]riters distinguish three types of emanation bodies. The supreme emanation bodies are the Buddhas; the born emanation bodies are various incarnations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas born in the world, such as the Dalai Lamas and other incarnate lamas; finally, the made emanation bodies are emanations made by artists and consecrated by lamas, such as *stūpas* and images, and even bridges. (Bentor 1996, 5–6)¹⁷

The nature of the dharmakāya that is established in these objects needs some parsing here. The Dharma-body may simply be the physical texts that preserve the Buddha’s words even though he himself is gone. In the Pāli *Nikāyas*, the dharmakāya simply means the teachings of the Buddha (Xing 2005, 22). But the Dharma-body came to be understood in a second sense as the qualities (*dharmas*) of the Buddha’s knowledge and enlightenment.¹⁸ This enlarges the idea of the Buddha into something more than a historical person or even a body of teachings, focusing instead on the Buddha’s knowledge (*adhigama*) as an abiding possibility that is ever-present in the world: “By implication, it is also a place where

the student or the worshipper can follow the Buddha's example and realize the Perfection of Wisdom for himself or herself" (Eckel 1992, 99). To say that the Dharma-body remains in the world, then, is to say that the virtuous qualities that the Buddha attained are an ever-present possibility for all beings. As a result, the importance of the historical Śākyamuni is diminished, as he is turned into one temporary manifestation of this larger principle of an abiding Buddhahood. The early tradition's aniconic sign—such as the footprint of the Buddha—emphasizes the Buddha's absence as a reminder that his "importance lies precisely and only in the *effects* he has upon those others to whom he appears to be present" (emphasis added; Griffiths 1994, 94). The point of seeing the Buddha is not so much to see *him* but rather to see what he sees.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the desire to see what the Buddha saw deemphasizes Śākyamuni Buddha by creating a bewildering proliferation of Buddhas. This trend actually begins in Theravāda texts, where Śākyamuni recounts a lineage of six previous Buddhas who lived parallel lives in prior cosmic ages.¹⁹ The Mahāsāṃghika, another early school, originated the idea of numerous Buddhas living in other worlds. Mahāyāna cosmology develops this idea to reveal countless simultaneously existing Buddhas and bodhisattvas in multiple world systems and Buddha-fields (*buddhakṣetra*), or Pure Lands. Working around the early teaching that only one Buddha can arise in a world system, the Mahāyāna emphasis on innumerable bodhisattvas who strive for complete liberation fueled the logic that there must be many Buddha lands for them to occupy (Xing 2005, 166).

The preeminence of bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna Buddhism may have created the need to provide realms for them to occupy, but the idea that the universe is teeming with Buddhas and bodhisattvas in every direction also exhibits a soteriological principle: if the eternal Dharma-body can manifest as one specific being in a particular time and place, then there is no limit to the number and forms it can take. According to the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* ("Ten Stages"), when beings reach the eighth stage of the bodhisattva path they are able to pervade "an unspeakable number of universes and undertake manifestations in the forms of the beings there according to their various inclinations, by means of knowledge of how to appear as a reflection" (Cleary 1993, 768).²⁰ In the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, which focuses on Avalokiteśvara, it is stated that this bodhisattva can manifest in the form of a Buddha if needed, but also as numerous other beings ranging from gods, kings, laymen and women,

boys and girls, and even demons. This ability to take on many forms in order to respond to the needs of different beings is elaborated by the fifth-century commentator Vasubandhu through substance metaphors for the dharmadhātu (“dharma element”) such as water or gold, which can take many forms while still remaining itself (Eckel 1992, 102–105).²¹

The Pāli texts describe another version of Buddha-proliferation with the idea of “mind-made bodies” produced by meditative concentration for the purpose of performing Buddha works. Just as a sword can be drawn from its scabbard, or a snake from its old skin, the monk “draws that body out of this body, having form, mind-made, complete with all its limbs and faculties” (D I.77). As a fruit of the homeless life—that is, the Buddhist path—this capacity to produce mind-made bodies is shared by Buddhas and bodhisattvas, who out of compassion for all beings produce many efficacious Buddha-bodies. The idea of mind-made bodies develops into an explicit theory of magically emanated bodies that appear in human or heavenly Buddha realms for the purpose of liberating all beings.²² In this manner, the Buddha “seems to be present to different living beings in different ways, to different extents” (Griffiths 1994, 109).

In sum, all Buddha-bodies are expedient illusions, or works of art. This idea also proposes that there is no need to privilege one form over another if they produce the same effects. This point is explicitly affirmed in the Mahāyāna text *On the Merit of Bathing the Buddha*. The sūtra begins with the Buddha at Rājagriha amid an immense assembly of monks and bodhisattvas. There the Pure Wisdom Bodhisattva wonders how it will be possible to see the Buddha once the latter has passed out of this world. The Buddha responds by offering substitutions for his own body. In the early tradition, the Buddha’s bone relics were placed in stūpas as a way of extending the physical presence of the Buddha (Strong 2007). In this text, the Buddha sanctions the use of a Dharma “relic” in the form of a four-line verse, replacing the physical Buddha with his teachings. Archeological evidence from India confirms that canonical texts eventually replaced physical relics in stūpas. The rise of Dharma “relics” and image worship eclipsed relic veneration in those parts of India under strong brahmanical influence, with its abhorrence of corpses as ritually polluting (Bronkhorst 2011a, 193–206). This led to the substitution of images and verses for bodily remains.²³ The rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism also promoted the worship of texts as a way of bypassing the stūpa cults under the control of more orthodox schools (Schopen 1975). This “cult of the book” actively substituted texts for the relics of the Buddha, on

the principle that the Buddha and the Dharma are equivalent.²⁴ *On the Merit of Bathing the Buddha* provides a spiritual rationale for the efficacy of relic, text, and image veneration alike:

If men, women, or the five groups of mendicants would build an image of the Buddha . . . it would be like doing homage by offering up a rare jewel. If in accordance with one's own strength and ability one can be truly sincere and respectful, it [the image or stūpa] would be *like my present body, equal without difference*. (Boucher 1995, 65; emphasis added)

The sūtra affirms that all three forms of Buddha homage can promote the ability to be truly sincere and respectful. Paying obeisance to a relic, text, or image is uniformly equivalent to worshipping the Buddha himself because they all enable Buddha qualities, such as attention, compassion, and insight. This eighth-century Chinese text, which is purportedly based on an Indian Sanskrit sūtra,²⁵ seems to reconcile what were once competing practices by emphasizing a unified soteriological aim—that is, the *experiences* enabled by ritual veneration, which is ultimately more important than the physical vehicles employed. In this act of reconciliation, the text reaffirms the original principle that seeing the Buddha is more a matter of the virtuous qualities attained, rather than the actual bodies seen.

The Necessity of Form

The other side of this picture, however, is that the history of Buddhism displays a need for concrete bodies that engage the senses and the imagination. The Buddhist tradition has availed itself of every means of seeing the Buddha—through stories, poetry, paintings, carvings, statuary, and dramas.²⁶ The necessity of concrete manifestations of Buddhahood, in contrast to philosophical abstractions such as nonduality, no-self (*anātman*), and emptiness, has been felt by monastics and laypeople alike. Rather than being a concession to human weakness, the use of forms agrees with the Buddhist view that sensory perception is prior to the conceptuality of words. This is particularly evident in the way the sense of sight is emphasized. The vision metaphors that characterize the Buddha's enlightenment as “seeing” and “insight” are not just poetic

images but also describe the content of the Buddha's wisdom as a "direct perception" (*pratyakṣa*) of reality. To see the Buddha, in other words, is not a matter of ideas and concepts but rather an actual *seeing* that is unencumbered by conceptual labels.

In the Buddhist phenomenology of the person articulated in the Pāli texts, sensory perceptions emerge from the body, and thoughts arise afterward as a form of distortion. Hence, "perception [is] primary in the sense that it reveals the world prior to the imposition of conceptual elaboration" (McMahan 2002, 48). The sensations (*saṃjñā*) that arise in the wake of contact between the body and external objects are observed to immediately trigger a naming process that imposes categories upon the world. This "cognitive process is based on not seeing things as they really are: and this misperception is what constitutes the ignorance which generates continued *saṃsāric* existence" (Hamilton 1999, 56). This phenomenon is later identified with the "proliferation" (*prapañca*) of concepts set into motion by the process of naming, and which needs to stop in order for liberation to take place. This results in Buddhism's enduring ambivalence toward words, doctrine, and scriptures even while it makes ample use of them. But in the end, the point is clear: "Words may be essential to convey certain types of meaning, but they are no substitute for direct perception. To see something is to know it more directly than to hear about it through words" (Eckel 1992, 149).

But a paradox arises here, in that the specificity and materiality of the Buddhas seen are supposed to help one in apprehending an ultimately formless and empty reality. The physicality of the Buddha disperses first into a set of teachings and finally to a purely mental state of understanding.²⁷ This understanding is described as nondual knowledge, which arises from the insight that the insubstantial nature of all things (their "empty" quality) means there is no fundamental difference between things. Thus, the Tibetan consecration texts, for example, acknowledge that the act of consecrating an image as a receptacle of the dharmakāya is only a conceit because the dharmakāya is "as vast as space" and therefore non-localizable in any single object. This also means that the quality of emptiness is already in the image/stūpa without ever having to be established there. This nondual knowledge undermines the necessity of any particular receptacle and discerns the Buddha-nature in all things. To really see the Buddha, then, means letting the Buddha go—at least as envisioned as a particular form.

But even the practice of “direct seeing” means that one must look at *something*. As Bentor observes, “It is not an easy matter to perceive the omnipresent nature of the [dharmakāya], nor to regard the entire universe as sacred. One prefers to confine the ultimate powers in certain identifiable places” (1996, 18). The difficulty of visualizing the nondual and the formless is not lost on those who construct sensory imaginings of the Buddha. Consider the following poem by the Chinese poet Qiu Wei (694–789):

On the precipitous peak, a bracken hut,
 A climb straight up of thirty *li*.
 I knock at the gate—no servant boy;
 I peak in the room—only a table and bench.
 If he’s not abroad in his covered cart,
 He must be fishing in the autumn waters.
 This way and that, we do not meet
 After all that effort, in vain I gaze, awed.
 The color of grass in the new rain,
 The sound of pines in an evening window.
 Arriving here at the summit of solitude,
 Perfect contentment washes over my heart.
 While there’s been no understanding of guest and host,
 There is something of the sense of limpid purity.
 When my desire abated, then did I descend the mountain,
 What need is there to see the master?²⁸

This poem rehearses the well-known poetic theme of looking for the Zen master and not finding him in. The popularity of this trope testifies to how much the Buddhist challenge to see an unseeable “emptiness” spurred on the aesthetic imagination. In this poem, the absence of the recluse is the main event and echoes the absence of Śākyamuni himself. The success of the poet’s encounter with this absence pivots on a series of substitutions that are both tacitly and explicitly invoked. The master sought out for instruction is himself a substitute for the historical Buddha, who in turn is merely an apparitional body of the formless dharmakāya. In the absence of the master, the speaker finds “perfect contentment” in the landscape, which now substitutes for the master. But lest this gets misunderstood, it is clearly the speaker’s “awe,”

“solitude,” and “sense of limpid purity” that embodies his attainment. What is crucial is the attentiveness of the poet in traversing the physical landscape rather than the environment, *per se*.

This meditative attention is normally understood as the primary *means* to enlightenment, but as the poem suggests, this practice is also the *substance* of enlightenment itself. The dualism of subject and object is dissolved because what the poet does is not separate from the stated goal of his activity: meditative attention is both the means and end. Furthermore, the poem’s focus on nature, as the broadest reiteration of the Buddha, signifies how readily we can find the means of liberation at our disposal. This tacit exhortation to let go of particular forms and utilize what is immediately at hand neutralizes dualistic distinctions between “religious” and “nonreligious” objects. To see the Buddha everywhere is a strategy for “seeing” the formless in all forms. The process of seeing the Buddha is also the process that allows one to see *like* the Buddha by exerting an attentive gaze that goes beyond conventional labels and comes alive to the nature of things—to the point of seeing a universe of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the ordinary and even the abject. This principle is a tremendous boon to aesthetic practice.

Visions of the Buddha

The medium of film—particularly its visual and temporal nature—stands out for how it can attend to the sensory and phenomenal world. Film can direct our gaze and form connections between things, which is a way of telling a story, and it can also lead us to look at objects and events that contribute nothing to the development of plot and that even undermine the intelligibility of the narrative. The films examined in this book do both, but they are ordered from the first kind to the second in order to replicate how Buddhist traditions have patterned levels of Buddhist insight. The first film, Kim Kiduk’s *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* (2004), is the most overtly Buddhist in content and the film weaves its episodes together according to the narrative logic of the doctrine of karma, which can be summarized as a postulated connection between actions and consequences. According to the East Asian and Tibetan Buddhist schemas of doctrinal classification, karma doctrine and its focus on reward and punishment is a preliminary teaching that is ultimately superseded by the realization of emptiness and Buddha-nature.

For that reason, the final chapter examines the films of the American director Terrence Malick, particularly *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The Tree of Life* (2011), and *To the Wonder* (2013), which lack any mention of Buddhism. I construct this progression of works that increasingly erase references to the Buddha and to Buddhism to make the point that film itself can stand in for the Buddha and the kind of seeing he is understood to have attained.

My analysis of Malick's cinema appears to participate in what might be called "Buddhist film criticism," in which contemporary Western films such as *Groundhog Day* (1993), *American Beauty* (1999), and *Donnie Darko* (2001) are analyzed through the lenses of Buddhist teachings and values.²⁹ John Whalen-Bridge refers to such films as "draftees" that have become Buddhist by virtue of being discussed in Buddhist terms (2014, 46), and he suggests part of the reason for this phenomenon (particularly in the context of the Buddhist Film Festival) is to appeal to mainstream Western audiences. Hollywood feature films avoid the potential turn-off of films that are too devotional or hagiographical, such as Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997)—a biopic about the current Dalai Lama's early life—and provide an accessible way of introducing Buddhist teachings. My choice of Malick is a departure from this general feature of the "draftee" Buddhist film because Malick's cinema is hardly accessible or representative of Hollywood filmmaking. Watching a Malick film can require a fair amount of effort for the average viewer and it frustrates the usual filmic norms of narrative sensibility. I choose these films as examples of the highest and most difficult form of Buddhist vision precisely because they defy thematic handling and put the emphasis on how the viewer experiences the sensory filmic event itself.

Through the five chapters of film analysis in this book, I construct three progressive ways of seeing the Buddha loosely based on an artistic precedent from the ancient Buddhist world—the temple known as Borobudur on the island of Java in Indonesia. Constructed during the late eighth and early ninth centuries, this stone temple is a rising structure that peaks with a central stūpa. The bottom levels consist of four nested galleries that progressively ascend toward the center. These square-shaped galleries are relatively enclosed spaces formed by high walls on the sides that face the center, on the one hand, and by balustrades on the sides that look out and away from the temple, on the other. All four galleries feature highly elaborate relief carvings that are viewed by circumambulating each level before moving up to the next gallery level.



FIGURE 1.4. Borobudur Temple, ninth century. Central Java, Indonesia.

After the fourth gallery, the pilgrim emerges onto three nested and circular open-air terraces. There are no view-obstructing walls here but an open space that offers panoramic vistas of the countryside. In addition, a total of seventy-two small stūpas sit atop the three terraces, each with a sitting Buddha that can be seen through the latticed openings of the stūpa covers. At the very top of the temple sits the main stūpa, made of solid and visually impenetrable stone.

A notable feature of Borobudur is the way the depictions on the relief carvings closely follow Buddhist scriptures, particularly the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, a Mahāyāna text that became part of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* in Buddhahadra's Chinese translation of 420 CE. But as Julie Gifford points out in her study of the monument, it is a mistake to simply “read” Borobudur as a visual illustration of Buddhist texts. This discounts how Borobudur is meant to be experienced: “The visual program of Borobudur as a whole was not designed precisely to be ‘viewed,’ but rather to be contemplated in the context of ritual, devotional, and possibly meditative practice” (Gifford 2011, 4). Taken in as a whole, the “visual program” of Borobudur stages a progression of visions of the Buddha from the particular to the ultimate. The experience of Borobudur moves the pilgrim from discrete narratives about the Buddha to a final wisdom in which the Buddha, as represented by the central stūpa, is completely