



Wendy J. N. Lee, Director, *Pad Yatra: A Green Odyssey*

72 Minutes. Color. Los Angeles: Good Docs, 2013. \$129.00 (Non-Institutional); \$229.00 (Institutional). <http://www.padyatrafilm.com/>.

IT HAS BEEN almost half a century now since Leslie WHITE Jr. (1967) infamously stated that certain indigenous cultures were more ecologically friendly than others. One of the religious cultures he indicated was Buddhism, but HUBER (1997) demonstrated thirty years later that Tibetan Buddhism, at least, was a latecomer to ecological consciousness, since it was really a Western-backed push that elevated Tibetan Buddhists to the level of environmental warriors. Be that as it may, some Tibetan Buddhists, with the aid of their wealthy western backers, continue the ecological crusade today.

Among organizations advocating ecological awareness is the group named Eco Pad Yatra for Peace. *Pad* means “foot” in the Sanskrit-derived vernaculars of north India and *yātrā* refers to “journey,” with the implication of a “spiritual journey.” It is thus often translated as “pilgrimage” in common discourse. This blending of the sacred and profane, of touristic backpacking and pilgrimage, is supposed to lead one on a spiritual journey from self to selflessness, as their website (<http://www.padyatra.org>) suggests.

As I sit writing this review, His Holiness the twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa (aka Jigme Pema Wangchen), head of the Drukpa lineage, one of the independent *gsar ma* (new) schools of Vajrayana Buddhism, has just departed with his “spiritual family,” the “kung fu fighting nuns,” for a seventh journey through the Himalayas

to collect garbage and teach locals about the positive benefits of being eco-friendly. For only the price of an airline ticket and a non-refundable registration fee of over \$1,000 (Drukpa Publications Pvt. Ltd. 2014) you, too, could have gone.

The film under review documents an earlier Pad Yatra, utilizing the indigenous photographic talents of Ngawang Sodpa and the throaty voice of former Hollywood A-list actress Daryl Hannah, who entices by daring us to “take a step.” The film begins with reports of a sudden cloudburst that devastated a portion of Ladakh in 2010. Deforestation was blamed for the extensive damage, so the Gyalwang Drukpa decided to found Live to Love International, a not-for-profit organization that raises ecological awareness through universal brotherhood and love. He is shown peddling the idea at the United Nations, then being interviewed on American radio, sounding like a New Age guru.

The action then shifts to the journey itself. It is partly experienced by the viewer through the cheery Carrie Lee, a Pad Yatra volunteer who normally works at a high-profile law firm in Los Angeles. At first, she did not know the difference between a mountain and a molehill, so she hired one of the best physical trainers in LA to whip her into shape for the monumental trek, her first and possibly last. Lee appears periodically throughout the film to make personal comments about the trials and tribulations of life on the road in the highest mountains of the world. The party of monks, nuns, and Westerners (virtually no Indians or Nepalis are visible in the film until Bollywood star Aamir Khan makes a guest appearance toward the conclusion) is shown getting ready for the trip. Their materials consist of a combination of locally made goods and state-of-the-art tents, boots, ski poles, and other paraphernalia purchased from mountaineering suppliers such as REI. They set out happily and are shown expressing compassion for all sentient beings, as, for example, when they stop on a path to blow the bugs gently off of the trail in order to avoid trampling them underfoot. But as the party moves forward, up and down seemingly endless switchback trails, the fun hike begins to become tediously difficult. It is now no longer leisure but work.

The rigorous schedule set by the “kung fu nuns,” as the Westerners call them, begins daily with a whistle at the crack of dawn to get people out of their cozy down sleeping bags and to the mess tent. The second whistle sounds the taking down of the tents and the beginning of the day’s journey. Along the way, they are shown selflessly healing humans and animals (Gyalwang Drukpa even saves a snake at one point!) alike, while being entertained by happy natives with dances each night in the villages they visit.

The village visits have the dual function of rejuvenation and opportunity to teach the locals about environmental issues. The rigorous schedule eventually leads to the formation of a “turtle club” for the slow pokes who cannot keep up with the rest. Carrie Lee, our excited but somewhat naïve Los Angelina, realizes that she is one of the slow ones despite all of her expensive personal training. In the end, she is no match for the locals who can do in sandals and robes what she cannot with hiking boots and jeans.

The party finally arrives at Hemis *dgon pa* in Ladakh. Hemis is a major monastery of the Drukpa Order in Ladakh that is surrounded in mystery and legend,

a place some people claim was even visited by Jesus Christ during his so-called “missing years.” Here they rejuvenate, recoup, and sort and pack the eight-hundred pounds of plastic retrieved from the mountains. Later parts of the journey encounter snowy weather, landslides, and floods, during which a horse is rescued from a raging river. The party finally arrives at their destination, and the narrator then asks us how we can quantify the success of the journey. We thus get catapulted into a “green day” celebration in Ladakh where nine thousand are in attendance, including the likes of Aamir Khan, the movie star turned philanthropist and social activist. The *Guinness World Records* is there to record the event for history, for over fifty thousand trees were planted in less than thirty minutes.

While the film paints a romantic and, at times, sensationalistic picture of the event with lots of smiling locals and so on, it is also full of remarkable cinematography. The mountain shots are sometimes awesome and at other times even sublime. One cannot help thinking that it might be a good idea to invest in such an enterprise. Indeed, that is part of why the film was made. It is partly a work of art and partly an advertisement for the Gyalwang Drukpa’s charitable work, for which he has received numerous awards from the Indian government and other organizations with international bases. At times, I felt moved by the journey, but I also felt like I was being pitched by an able salesperson. Tibetan Buddhism is, after all, a *cause célèbre*, with great support from people such as Richard Gere and others. However, Tibetophilia took a hiatus after 9/11 when the Dalai Lama wrote a letter urging George W. Bush to practice compassion for the perpetrators of the surprise attack. Now, the Tibetan freedom cause titled Rangzen (*rang btsan*) is once again receiving attention due to the immolations of frustrated Tibetans who feel they have no other choice than to take their own lives passively in a dramatic show of anti-colonial defiance. This film certainly contributes to the Rangzen cause by portraying Tibetans in exile as good, hardworking, and honest folk. The viewer can judge for himself or herself to what degree my review rings true.

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Frank J. Korom
Boston University