

Preview Notes: Buddhism Goes To The Movies. Dr Robert Miller.

In the book *Philosophy Goes To The Movies*, philosopher Christopher Falzon explored philosophical issues by illustrating them with themes from popular movies. We'll do something similar, focussing on Buddhist issues. Movies will include, eg, Samsara, Run Lola Run, Total Recall, American Beauty, Adaptation, etc. Issues we'll explore will include, eg, no-self, interconnectedness, non-dualism, beauty, meditation, love – all from a Buddhist viewpoint.

You may find it entertaining as well as educational to watch the DVDs at home before or in connection with the course, but this is by no means essential. I will use the movies to illustrate a particular philosophical theme, but I'll really be focussing much more on the philosophical theme than on the movie. One can easily understand the theme without having seen the movie.

For example, here are some points we can consider in Talk 1...

Talk 1. Who Am I? – Total Recall And Riddles Of The Self.

What is *real* about *personal identity* in time?

Most folk see themselves as a mind, a self, perhaps a soul, *inhabiting* a material body as if a vehicle – the *pilot in the ship* or *ghost in the machine* theory. Self or soul might even be thought of as something *separable* from the body (eg, at death).

This is standard Dualist ontology: material body plus immaterial mind or soul. Crops up a lot in popular culture. Eg, in comedy film, *All Of Me* (1984, Carl Reiner), starring Steve Martin and Lili Tomlin, mind or soul or self of heiress Edwina Cutwater is mysteriously *transferred* into the body of a man, lawyer Roger Cobb. Comic potential lies in a woman being in a man's body, now a vehicle for *two* selves antagonistic to one another.

However, Dualist ontology is actually quite strange. Here are some questions...

Where exactly is your *non-physical* mind *positioned* in your body's *physical* space?

It's problematic, because if mind is not composed of anything physical at all, such as atoms and electrons, it would have no mass, weight, solidity, or physical force, also then no size, spatial dimensions, movements, or positioning.

If mind occupies no physical space how can it be *in* physical space? But if your mind is not located in space then how can it be located *inside* your *body's* space – *anywhere*? Or *transfer* into another physical body space?

Perhaps movie, *Being John Malkovich* (1999, Spike Jonze) can be read as a kind of *spoof* of the idea of 'mind transfer' movies, as it plays fast-and-loose with it, taking it to the point of the comic and absurd...

In general, screenwriters can't seem to make up their minds about minds...

If *disembodied* – as supposedly in the case of a *ghost* – do minds or souls occupy a particular *place* in space? If non-spatial, having no size, they would not occupy a space. But if they can't *be in* or occupy a place in space, they also can't *change* their place – that is, they can't *really* be *in motion* in and though space.

After all, a ghost *really* flying around makes little sense if non-physical, for then the gravitational balancing act involved in flying would be redundant.

Also various problems arise when we try to think of souls or ghosts as real things interacting with matter. For instance, people wonder: If you weigh a person's body just before it dies, then weigh it just after, would it *weigh less* if the soul has left the body? If it is *immaterial*, then it surely can't *weigh* anything, because weight is a material property. So the urban myth of the soul weighing 21 *grams* (as in the movie, *21 Grams*, 2003, dir: Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu) seems to make as little sense as saying soul has a size. It is dismissed by science as a joke.

A more serious problem is: if mind or soul has no physical properties, including *physical force* – traction, pull, pressure, etc, forces required to move a physical mass of some weight – how can *the ghost in your machine* possibly *move* it, ie, get your body to act and do things, such as get up off a chair and walk about?

How come your ghostly self or soul does not flit straight through your body, as ghosts *appear* to flit through walls because non-solid, non-physical?

And why it is that ghosts in movies, stories and visions appear in *armour*, or fully *clothed*. Are we to suppose that there are immaterial ghostly versions of clothes – eg, shoes and socks? (As in Harry Potter movies, etc.)

Further puzzles are generated by the idea of *personal identity through time*.

Eg – suppose one develops Alzheimer’s Disease. This is explored in the movie, *Iris* (2001, Richard Eyre) based on the life of Iris Murdoch. She was a philosopher. But she developed Alzheimer’s, and then she thought and acted in very different ways than in her youth. Her self had changed a lot. It was not *the same*. Yet, people tend to say she is the *same* self, and has the same *personal identity* through time and change. But why do we call our self the *same* self when the *later* self is not at all the *same* as the *earlier* self? Here one is both *the same* and *different* – a paradox.

Particular puzzles of *personal* identity deepen if we consider some odd situations that arise, often illustrated in popular movies.

For example, consider *amnesia*. In movie, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996, Renny Harlin) main character (Geena Davis) is really a trained professional assassin called Charlie. However, early on she doesn’t realise this, as she’s had a head injury that caused amnesia. Consequently, she is now living her life as a housewife called Samantha Caine. Every so often Samantha gets a vague sense that she has abilities that don’t fit with her way of life and has occasional flash-backs: memories she can’t explain or account for. So who then is she?

Suppose she never recovers her memories and past life: she’d live out her life as Samantha Caine. She would *ascribe* her *identity* to *that* personality, *identify* with it, call it her true self, etc.

In the movie, she does rediscover her past and her abilities. Now, is she Samantha or is she Charlie? They have *different* personalities. So if one *ascribes identity* to self by memory and personality then we’d say she was *one self* at one time and *different self* later on. If, in the end, she becomes a synthesis of the two, would we say this third self is her true personal identity? Or was she really the *same self* throughout all these changes, even when she had amnesia?

How to *ascribe* personal identity in such cases becomes *debatable*, because relative to different purposes and points of view. So how can *self-identity in time* be real?

In the movie, *Total Recall* (1990, Paul Verhoeven) Arnold Schwarzenegger plays construction worker Douglas Quaid who discovers his memory of the past derives from a memory chip implanted in his brain. He gradually finds out that he is really a secret agent called Hauser who deliberately implanted the chip in his own brain and re-programmed himself so that he would, in effect, become Quaid.

To cut to the near the end: Quaid has by now discovered he is really Hauser, but when an opportunity arises to remove the chip and become Hauser, he fights this. For at this point he *identifies himself* with Quaid. If Quaid allowed the chip to be removed, that would mean the death of him. Quaid fights for his survival.

Quaid *ascribes* his self-identity to his current self-awareness together with its set of memories and personality. Change *these* and there's a new and different *self*.

Consider another Schwarzanegger movie: *The 6th Day* (2000, Roger Spottiswoode). Here his character, Adam Gibson, is cloned. Also, the clone is implanted with Adam Gibson's memories and personality. If so, then which of the two is the real Adam Gibson? If we ascribe this identity to *the current memories and personality*, they both are.

Presumably, in principle, one could manufacture ten thousands Adam Gibson clones each one the same in body and mind at the moment of manufacture. Then we'd have to say they are all the same self.

Some folk object. They ask: *What about his self, his soul?*

And they might raise a question. Suppose that before Adam Gibson was cloned in the thousands, he committed a heinous crime: *Should we punish all the manufactured Adam Gibson clones for a crime committed before they even existed?* If they don't have the *same self as soul*, we might want to say no.

Similar puzzles arise in cases of amnesia. Suppose professional assassin Charlie murdered in the past, and a private investigator traces the crime to the house of Samantha Caine. But suppose Samantha has amnesia and does not remember her life as Charlie. Should Samantha be held accountable for Charlie's crimes if she can't remember them and exhibits a different personality and sense of personal identity?

Believers in Dualist 'soul theory' will probably say she *should* be punished because her self *as soul* is *the same*. Similarly, they may say a frail old man of eighty should be held accountable and punished for crimes *he can't even remember* that he committed as a Nazi when he was twenty.

Some take this further and say: this is so regardless of what *body* the soul is in. People who believe in reincarnation or transmigration often say it is *just* that a soul in its *next incarnation* be held accountable and punishable (via karma) for deeds done in a previous lifetime – *even if one cannot remember the previous lifetime*.

However, presumably these folk will also say that the Adam Gibson clones should *not* be held accountable, as they don't have his soul – *even if they do remember the heinous crime of the past and revel in it!* This seems strange.

Further puzzles arise if we consider *multiple personality disorder*. In films such as *The Three Faces Of Eve* (1957, Nunnally Johnston), *Sybil* (1976, Daniel Petrie), and *Fight Club* (1999, David Fincher) we are presented with characters having two or more personalities and corresponding memories. The first two movies were based on real life cases: Eve had three distinct personalities and Sybil had sixteen. So what will we ascribe *personal identity* to here?

If self is 'current personality with its memories' we seem driven to say either that their *several selves* go in and out of existence, or that there were three or more selves occupying the same body, with some selves sleeping or lying dormant (as it were) while another self is activated.

What if one of the *selves* becomes dominant in the end: Shall we say the other selves have died? Or what about this: Suppose a therapist helps Eve or Sybil get rid of the other selves so that only one survives: Are we to say they have *killed off* the others and the therapist *an accessory to murder*? (This kind of *killing-off* process is dramatically depicted in the movie, *Identity*, 2003, dir., James Mangold).

Believers in personal selves and souls say there is only *one* inhabiting the body and it would persist as *the same* throughout multiple personality changes or amnesia. However, we never do *perceive* such an unchanging self or soul identity in time.

Philosopher, David Hume, put it this way: "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed at any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist." (*Treatise On Human Nature*, pg 300)

Hume argued that the personal self in time is nothing but the bundle of perceptions and memories. The self is not a single, separate, and continuous identity in time, but rather a multiple and discontinuous flux of impermanent perceptions, sensations, and memories causally interconnected with the whole environment. Ascribing some *lasting separate identity* to it is merely a culturally variable convention of our language.

This is very like the Buddhist teaching of *anatta* (Pali, or *anatman*, Sanskrit). This refers to the non-existence of a separate personal self in time. Its opposite is *atta* or *atman*, belief in a soul or lasting self that persists through changes in time and transmigration (reincarnation, rebirth). What is normally thought of as ‘the personal self’ is merely a bundle of constantly changing constituents (called *skandhas*).

Another understanding (as taught by Buddha in the Mahayana *Tathagatagarbha* scriptures) says that the *skandhas* are not the true Self, as they do change and vary from one moment to the next, but that the non-temporal Buddha-nature deep within us, or the Buddha Self, is the one true Self.

Who then are you?

Who *is* the observer, the source of awareness, if separate personal identity in time is merely a variable conventional illusion?

Many Buddhists and Transcendental Idealists have said: the Transpersonal Self. For *this* Self doesn’t claim to be a separate personal identity in time, supposedly existing throughout all change and difference, but rather a timeless Self that’s always *present* as Observer precisely because it is not *in* space, time, or change.

Maybe that would help explain why it is that we all have such a profound sense that “*I am*” – the I, always *the same* and *present* despite changeable and discontinuous *appearances* of the *personal self* or *persona* to consciousness in time?

Your person/persona is doomed to change, forget or recover memories, grow old, maybe get Alzheimer’s, maybe go gaga, and then die. But is that your real self or an optical illusion of the self?

So here’s a thought for the day:

If one’s true self is the Transpersonal Self, one’s true Self is in the Eternal Now.

Some Movies:

All Of Me (1984, dir: Carl Reiner)

Freaky Friday (2003, dir: Mark S. Waters)

Being John Malkovich (1999, dir: Spike Jonze)

Caspar (1995, dir: Brad Silberling)
Ghost (1990, dir: Jerry Zucker)
Iris (2001, dir: Richard Eyre)
The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996, dir: Renny Harlin)
The Bourne Identity, 2002, dir: Doug Liman)
Total Recall (1990, dir: Paul Verhoeven)
The 6th Day (2000, dir: Roger Spottiswoode).
The Three Faces Of Eve (1957, dir: Nunnally Johnston)
Sybil (1976, dir: Daniel Petrie)
Fight Club (1999, dir: David Fincher)
Identity (2003, dir: James Mangold)
21 Grams (2003, dir: Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu)

Some Texts:

Falzon, Christopher, *Philosophy Goes To The Movies*, Routledge, London, 2002, pp 49-74.
Mark Rowlands, *The Philosopher At The End Of The Universe*, Ebury Press, London, 2003, pp 87-120
Descartes, Rene, *The Philosophical Writings Of Descartes*, Volume II, Cambridge Uni. Press, 1984. See *Meditation 6*.
David Hume, *A Treatise Of Human Nature*, Penguin Classics, 1969 pp 299-311
Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, Little, Brown & Co, Boston, 1991
Adam Morton, *Philosophy In Practice: An Introduction To The Main Questions*, Blackwell, 1996. Part 3 Reality; 12, Materialism And Dualism.

Talk 2. Am I Free? – Sliding Doors And Destiny.

Some issues:

The movie *Run Lola Run* (1998, Tom Tykwer) explores the *causal interconnectedness* of people, decisions, actions, and events: *how it all runs together*. Whatever Lola does has an effect, and the effects ripple out to influence others and their futures.

In the movie, *Sliding Doors* (1998, Peter Howitt) we are shown two possible futures for Helen (Gwyneth Paltrow) depending on whether she catches a train in time in the London underground or the sliding doors shut just before she gets on. If she catches the train, there is a particular train of events, and if she doesn't it leads to a different train of events.

The movies use metaphors: the *running together* of causes and effects, and the *train of events*, time running along a track. Both illustrate how events are *interconnected* so that if one small change is made, even just a few seconds delay in arriving for a train, this can have *escalating* effects that changes everyone's lives far into the future.

This theme ties in with our previous theme: how can there be a separate self when everything is so interconnected?

This also raises the question: if everything is non-separate and interconnected how there be a separate so-called freewill? Can we prove freewill? If not, how can we prove real individual guilt? If we cannot prove real guilt, how can we justify retributive punishment?

What then are the implications for individual praise and blame, separate reward and punishment, etc?

Moreover, from a Buddhist point a view, if a person acts badly because he or she is not enlightened, hence is ignorant, should we not say that the person 'acted in ignorance' – hence did not really know what they were doing? So we should act toward the person with understanding and compassion rather than with hostility, revenge, and punishment?

Some Movies:

Run Lola Run (1998, dir: Tom Tykwer)

Sliding Doors (1998, dir: Peter Howitt)

Minority Report (2002, dir: Steven Spielberg)

The Butterfly Effect (2004, dir: Eric Bress)

Some Texts:

Mark Rowlands, *The Philosopher At The End Of The Universe*, Ebury Press, London, 2003, see Chapter 5: *Minority Report*, pp 121-154.

Paul Edwards and Arthur Pap, *A Modern Introduction To Philosophy*, 3rd Edition, Free Press, N.Y., 3rd Edition, 1973. Section 1 contains many good articles arguing both for and against Determinism.

Stuart Sim (ed.), *The Icon Critical Dictionary Of Postmodern Thought*, Icon Books, London, 1998, pg 212 for entry on Chaos Theory.

Talk 3. Do I exist separate from things? – Samsara And Schrödinger's Cat.

Samsara is a Sanskrit word (originally derived from 'to flow together' to pass through states, to wander) that generally refers to the phenomenal world of every day appearances where we believe ourselves to be *separate* personal selves at the mercy of *powers other than ourselves* – eg, other people, material things, material determinism, or perhaps even a *separate* God.

This sense of *separate otherness* typically generates *deep existential anxiety, angst*. After all, 'the other' in general has a will of its own we can't control. We are aware things could go *against us* at any minute.

No wonder we are so insecure! It would be crazy *not* to be *insecure* in this situation, since it *is* insecure. Hence existentialists say: *We are born to live in angst and insecurity, alienated from and subject to the other.*

But are we ontologically separate in the first place?

The movie, *Samsara* (dir., Nan Palin, 2002) begins with Tashi (Shawn Ku), sitting in a cave in solitary meditation, no doubt attempting to cure the angst. Covered in long hair and beard, he is roused from his trance and brought back to the monastery by fellow monks. Living among people again he regains strength and an awakening of his sex drive. He encounters peasant girl Pema (Christy Chung) and falls in love.

Arguing with his abbot that to properly *renounce* the world he should *experience* it first, he journeys to the village and marries Pema.

He overcomes his sense of existential separation by sexual union with Pema and absorbing himself in communal village life. But years pass and he grows restless. He gets involved in a feud in the village, and with a local profiteer. He has sex with another woman and this leaves him feeling estranged from Pema.

He finds himself yearning to have his old spiritual life back. Again he separates, leaving the village to go back to his old monastery.

On the way back he finds a stone on which has been carved a riddle: "*How do you stop a drop of water from going dry?*"

He'd come across the question earlier when he was a monk and was unable to answer it. After all his experiences in the world, he is still unable to answer it. But he turns the stone over and on the reverse is carved the answer...

However, I won't tell you what it is yet...!

Some Movies:

Samsara (2002, dir: Pan Nalin)

Insignificance (1985, dir: Nicolas Roeg)

Some Texts:

John Gribbin, *Schrödinger's Kittens: the search for reality*, Orion Books, London, 1996, esp. pp 1-30.

John Gribbin, *In Search Of Schrödinger's Cat*, Corgi, London, 1985.

Fritjof Capra, *The Tao Of Physics: an exploration of the parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism*, 3rd Edition, Flamingo, London, 1992.

Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: an overview of the new physics*, Flamingo, London, 1984.

Paul C.W. Davies, *The Big Questions*, Penguin, 1996.

Paul C.W. Davies, *The Ghost In The Atom: a discussion of the mysteries of Quantum Physics*, Cambridge Uni. Press, 1993.

Paul C.W. Davies, *The Matter Myth: beyond chaos and complexity*, Penguin, 1992.

Paul C.W. Davies, *The Mind Of God: science and the search for ultimate meaning*, Penguin, 1992.

Amit Goswami, *The Self-Aware Universe: how consciousness creates the material world*, Tarcher/Putnam, N.Y., 1995.

John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory: a very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

David Lindley, *Where Does The Weirdness Go?* Basic Books, 1996.

Walter Stace, *Stars, Atoms, And Sensations*, in Paul Edwards and Arthur Pap, *A Modern Introduction To Philosophy*, 3rd Edition, Free Press, 1973

Talk 4. American Beauty And Aesthetic Bounty.

In this talk we will consider what Kant called the disinterested aesthetic contemplation of free beauty – a kind of beauty that can be experienced potentially in every-

thing if we are meditatively open and receptive enough. We'll be illustrating this topic with reference to themes in the movie *American Beauty*.

Some Movies:

American Beauty (dir: Sam Mendes, 1999)

Some Texts:

Immanuel Kant, *The Critique Of Judgement*, James Creed Meredith, Oxford University Press, 1978

Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics And The Philosophy Of Art Criticism*, Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1960: *The Aesthetic Attitude*. Also in John Hospers (ed.), *Introductory Readings In Aesthetics*, Collier-Macmillan. 1969, and in Caroline Korsmeyer, *Aesthetics: the big questions*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998

Paul Guyer, *Kant And The Claims Of Taste*, 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press, 1997

M. Conrad Hyers, *Zen And The Comic Spirit*, Rider & Co, London,

John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element In Heidegger's Thought*, Ohio University Press, 1977.

Eckhart Tolle, *The Power Of Now: a guide to spiritual enlightenment*, Hodder, 2001

Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings Of The Mystics*, Mentor Books, 1960.

Robert Miller, *Zen And The Media*, in *Tirra Lirra*, Vol 6, Nos. 2 & 3, Summer/Autumn, Melbourne, 1996

Talk 5. Adaptation and Affluent Affection.

In movies *Adaptation* (2002. dir., Spike Jonze) and *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallstrom, 2000) the theme is develop that the highest and best kind of love would be one that is all-inclusive and based on a realisation of our oneness and interconnectedness (non-separation).

For example, in the movie *Adaptation* the character called Donald Kaufman wrote a screenplay called *The Three*, and after the credits to *Adaptation* have rolled an excerpt described as being from *The Three* appears on screen. It runs: "We're all one thing, Lieutenant. That's what I've come to realise. Like cells in a body, except we can't see the body. The way fish can't see the ocean. And so we envy each other. Hate each other. How silly is that? – A heart cell hating a lung cell."

Toward the end of the movie *Chocolat* the young priest delivers a sermon in which he says that goodness and love are not to be measured by “*what we deny ourselves*” and “*whom we exclude*”, but are to be measured by “*what we embrace, what we create, and whom we include.*” – thus adapting them into one’s whole sphere of affection.

So in this final talk we will explore this theme of holistic love.

Movies:

Adaptation (dir., Spike Jonze, 2002)

Chocolat (dir., Lasse Hallstrom, 2000)

Kama Sutra: A Tale Of Love (India 1996, dir., Mira Nair)

Texts:

Some love references:

Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Freedom From The Known*, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1969, esp. chapter 10 on Love.

Osho, *Love, Freedom, And Aloneness: the koan of relationships*, St Martin’s Griffin, N.Y., 2003.

Eckhart Tolle, *The Power Of Now*, Hodder, 2001, esp. chapter one.

Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks*, New World Library, 2003

Charlotte Joko Beck, *Everyday Zen: love and work*, Harper & Row, 1989.

Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Be As You Are: the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, edited by David Godman, Penguin Arkana, 1985

Anthony de Mello, *Awareness*, Doubleday Books, 1990

Eric Fromm, *The Art Of Loving*, Perennial, 1989.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford Uni. Press, 1993, pp 95-109

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On The Frailty Of Human Bonds*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003.

M.Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled: a new psychology of love*, Arrow Books, 1990.

Haridas Chaudhuri, *The Philosophy Of Love*, Routledge, N.Y., 1987.

Ulrich Beck, *The Normal Chaos Of Love*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995.

Helen E. Fisher, *Why We Love: the nature and chemistry of romantic love*, Henry Holt Co., N.Y., 2004.

D.L.Norton & M.F.Kille (ed), *Philosophies Of Love*, Littelfield, 1971.

R.C.Solomon & K.M.Higgins (ed), *The Philosophy Of (Erotic) Love*, Uni Kansas Press, 1991.

John Armstrong, *Conditions Of Love: the philosophy of intimacy*, Norton, N.Y., 2003.
