SPRI*NG, SUMMER, FALL, WINTER . . . SPRING*

(2023 – released in the United States, 2024)

Written and Directed by Kim Ki-duk.

*Spring* has been noted particularly for its lyrical cinematography. The film is set in a Buddhist temple, floating in a remote lake in the mountains. But it is also noteworthy because it is an important addition to the relatively small number of mainstream films that have a focus on Buddhism, including *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Caravan*, *The Little Buddha*, and *The Cup*. Finally, while most films dealing with Buddhism focus on Tibetan Buddhism, *Spring* introduces the viewer to Korean Buddhism, itself chiefly influenced by Chinese “chan” traditions that became Zen Buddhism in Japan.

*Spring* is no easy glimpse into Buddhist principles, nor is it a costume-drama retelling of the foundational story of Buddhism, like *Asoka*, an Indian film that tells how Buddhism was initially taken up by Ashoka, emperor of the Maurya Empire.  *Spring* is a film that prompts viewers to find out more about both the director and Buddhist principles. What the film can do most usefully is to help us contemplate two differences between the religions of East and West: firstly, the cyclical vs. the linear (teleological) notion of time, and secondly, the difference in emphasis on compassion in Buddhism vs. love in Christianity.

The story of *Spring* starts with a monk and child on their secluded floating temple. The child has a cruel streak which finds expression in the tying of stones to a fish, a frog, and a snake. The monk watches and then ties a heavy stone to the child in the night, to teach him the Buddhist lesson of karma: all actions have consequences for the perpetrator. The monk tells the child that if any of the animals has died, then he will carry that stone in his heart for the rest of his life. Much of the resulting drama hinges on the moral development of the child as he becomes a teenager, seduces a visiting young woman, leaves the temple for the ‘world’ (where he sinks to crime and murder), returns and repents, and grows old. Finally, a new cycle begins when another child is brought to the temple and is left in his care.

Ki-duk Kim tells this story through the stunning landscape of the mountain lake and its changes in season, appearing himself as the returning penitent monk, braving snow and ice in a thin shirt to perfect his martial art and carry the heavy boulder up the mountain.Kim is trained in the martial arts, but he is a Christian rather than a Buddhist. This fact gives a clue to the film: it may be best understood as a journey of understanding for Kim himself, as he grapples with the ancient religion of his country, a religion not his own.1

Buddhism, as presented by Kim, appears in its severe aspect as saying that punishment is harsh for human weakness, and the ‘world’ is full of temptations that lead one astray. The Buddha’s original emphasis on release from suffering and the value of spiritual community (sangha) is not dwelt upon much in this film: rather, we see a particular aspect of Buddhist compassion that creates an instructive contrast to the active love of the Christian tradition. The positive aspect of compassion in Buddhism involves the moral care for others, just as the positive aspect of love does in Christianity. When Christian love runs cold it becomes control. When Buddhist compassion runs cold it becomes indifference. This means that we must always be alert to the possibility of our love or compassion becoming something we do not want it to become.

As a work of art, *Spring* shares a contemplative style with *Babette’s Feast* and *The Way*. There are no car chases, shoot outs, or even love interests. A slow pace and a connection to the beautiful give viewers time to think about the meaning of the film and the meaning of their own lives.

1Is it possible that film making is itself a journey, similar to the journeys

that are the stories of so many movies?

This review is adapted from the article, “*Bom yeoreum gaeul gyeoul* *geurego, bom* (*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . Spring*),” by Mike King,

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