

The Zen Essence in Only Yesterday by Studio Ghibli

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Only Yesterday is one of the most meditative films made by Studio Ghibli. Unlike many animated stories which tend to focus on dramatic conflict, sensationalism, and action, Only Yesterday relies on introspection, internal conflict, and contemplation to reveal its story. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the film using the perspective of Zen Buddhism. In particular, the paper focuses on how Only Yesterday's themes and motifs are compatible with major tenets of Zen Buddhism. This paper will consider how mindfulness of ordinary life moments is expressed in the film; how the theme of impermanence is explored through memory and the transition between different times in one's life; and how non-attachment to one's identity is depicted. In addition, the paper will examine how silence, pauses, and emptiness function in the film as expressions associated with *ma*, which is an important element in Zen aesthetics. Finally, it will explore the film's portrayal of the protagonist as someone who accepts her current circumstances and is aware of herself as part of the world around her, as opposed to someone trying to change the circumstances to better suit her needs.

Keywords: Zen Essence, Studio Ghibli, Isao Takahata, Taeko, animated movies.

Introduction

The animated movies made by Studio Ghibli are extraordinarily beautiful. They exude an essence that is essentially Zen in nature. The representation of the natural world is so intricately done that the one who is watching these films or is delving into the world of Studio Ghibli realises sooner than later that this beauty of nature can be found around us and must be relished as much as possible. Living in the mundane world, dealing with mediocrity every day, makes one immune to the beauty that can be found in the smallest of things around us. This is what Studio Ghibli makes you realise, and that is also the purpose of art. Studio Ghibli also has the journey of self-discovery in many of its films.

Only Yesterday, directed by Isao Takahata is one such film, with which one can connect at multiple levels because it bridges the gap between the urban and rural and at the same time, it also delves into the innocent

world of childhood. Zen philosophy believes that humans are not separate from nature and there is a deep interconnectedness between humans and nature. Humans must not dominate nature, but they must exist in harmony with it by realising the mutual interdependence of all things.

Zen and Only Yesterday

Only Yesterday is a film where Taeko, the central character wants to take a journey into the countryside by taking leave for few days from her office in Tokyo, she longs for the country life but is unable to get out of the rat race of Tokyo in order to immerse herself in the rural. Finally, she takes a decision to do so and this journey into the countryside would become a journey of complete transformation for her.

In the beginning of the movie, as Taeko takes the holiday, her boss is baffled that she is visiting the countryside, whereas he was expecting her to be visiting some exotic foreign country. This urge to immerse herself

in the pastoral is in itself a very Zen trait. It is more of a withdrawal from the material world and relishing in the simple. The journey into the countryside also becomes a journey into the Self as Taeko not only realises what she actually wants out of life, but she also embraces the new life and it is a huge decision because she has to completely give up her old self and the old life to accept the new self and the new life. It is a great transition and transformation, not an easy one to come to terms with; thus, the journey to the countryside becomes a journey of self-discovery for Taeko, another essential aspect of Zen Buddhism and spirituality, where transience and change and acceptance of this change is the core concept of Zen teaching.

The journey that Taeko takes to the countryside is also a journey into her childhood. She is often transported to her childhood as she traverses the countryside. Coming to the countryside by taking time out from her busy schedule to think and contemplate, Taeko becomes mindful, a lot of memories that can be associated with childhood trauma, surface. She is seen to be tormented as she reaches puberty by the stigma that menstruation brings in the lives of girls. She is not good in mathematics, and that was another reason for her low self-esteem in childhood. Another extremely traumatic experience that she had with her father was when he slapped her just once and it was a very bitter experience for her. The father was seen to be generally very patient and considerate, though she is quite plainly a stubborn child but one fine day he loses his calm on her unruly behaviour and unnecessary stubbornness. In

the countryside she comes to terms with her childhood trauma. She eventually says to Toshio that when she returns again, she shall not carry the baggage and burden of her childhood with her. This idea of letting go of the past is extremely essential to the idea propagated by Zen. The journey into the countryside, heals her of the trauma.

When Taeko and Toshio are returning from their trip the mountains they stop at a point, which overlooks the scenery of the cultivated land beneath, and which has amalgamated with the forest and river around, they have an interesting conversation where Toshio clears the understanding that Taeko has of the countryside. Their conversation is as follows:

Taeko: Now, this is countryside, the real countryside.

Toshio: not really ...it's interesting. You say that, city people see forest and woods and streams and they're happy because they think what they're seeing is nature apart from back deep in the mountains, almost everything you see here is the work of a farmer. Everything has been touched by man, our ancestors cleared this and cultivated that, encouraged mushrooms, berries, wild garlic...the scenery has come about by lucky accident as people have struggled with nature to get what they needed to survive.

Taeko: So without people, this scenery wouldn't have been here.

Toshio: No, it wouldn't have. To get what they need from nature farmers have to do a lot of different things to make sure that nature will continue to provide forever. It's sort of a joint

venture between the people and the Earth, that's how the countryside works.

After this conversation Taeko comes to realise that though she has always lived in the city, she has been able to form such a strong bond with nature and the countryside because she realises that though she has physically never lived here, her ancestors would certainly have had a close intimacy with the countryside and man's interdependence on nature is the thing that draws her to this place. It is in her genetic makeup, irrespective of whether she ever lived in the countryside or not. This dialogue also illustrates the Buddhist teaching of interdependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) which conveys the idea that nothing exists in isolation but that everything is part of a web of relationships. The Zen idea that freedom is to be found in nature rather than looking for freedom from nature is also the underlying philosophy of the movie.

The engagement of Taeko in the daily chores of the pastoral life are in tune with *samu*, the zen practice of mindful work that helps in maintaining the running of the monastery. Taeko could have very well stayed at their hosts' place without working and just spending her holidays in leisure, but she wanted to get involved rather thoroughly in the daily routine of her hosts. She wishes to have an immersive experience of the countryside. She wakes up early and says the sunrise prayer with her hosts and eventually starts harvesting the safflowers and for her, as is for the audience, the intricacy of the complete process of the harvesting of the safflowers and their processing into the end products to be used as

rouge is not only eye opening but also extremely intriguing.

The way the scenes of farming and the people's engagement are represented in the film are slow and focused. It is not only the immersion of Taeko in the countryside that is being represented in the movie but the audience must engage with these scenes of the countryside with complete mindfulness as they form a great portion of the screen time and the movie is slow paced. The zen work practice is also represented in the attention that is given to the details illustrating the sensory experience of the fields, the feel of the soil, the movements of hands among others, this reflects the discipline and peace of *samu*. The film is of this world and the supernatural, fantastical and the larger than life characters and situations are lacking, which is often the signature style of Studio Ghibli films. The film lacks melodrama and is a celebration of all that is simple in life which the rural setting emphasises. The Zen ideal of non-duality is also illustrated in Taeko's involvement with farming and gratitude for everything that is provided by nature, as it shows that man and nature are not two different entities.

Another aspect of the monastic life is living in a community and to serve the community, that is also being fulfilled by Taeko as for her the vacation in the countryside was not just a holiday but an active participation in the daily intensive activities of her hosts' life where they are physically working in the fields to not only earn their living quite literally but also producing the food that they will consume. Monasteries are generally located in remote pastoral settings

where the monks actively participate in the cultivation and production of food and food products. Eventually, as she chooses to spend the rest of her life with the family of Toshio by marrying him, she is also embracing the family and the community as a social setup, it is similar to the monks participating in collective community works and collective meditation practices.

Though Taeko does not go to the countryside with the intention and purpose of healing her childhood trauma, but in close intimacy with the quietude of the pastoral, it becomes a transformative journey for her that makes her come to terms with the childhood trauma. It is not a simple journey, the traumatic memories from her childhood keep on surfacing one by one and through a close observation of those memories, she is able to study them meditatively and come out of the trauma associated with them. It is similar to the practice of Zazen. Though Zazen is mostly sitting meditation but it is all about observing one's thoughts and letting go of them such that you become detached from their influence in your life and thus are not embroiled in the emotional conflict associated with the mind.

Zen practices are not very flamboyant and ritualistic, they are simple and propagate simplicity and minimalism, similar is the case with Taeko as her journey is not about a grand transformation but about coming to terms and accepting her self even though the memories about her childhood self are at times disturbing and conflicting. Through mindfulness she is able to dissolve the toxicity that some of her disturbing childhood memories present. The glamour, flamboyance and materialism of

Tokyo doesn't appeal to Taeko but the contrasting rawness and simplicity of the rural appeals to her.

Taeko appreciated the positive outlook that Toshio has towards life. There are a lot of overlapping interests in their perspective of life or similar experiences of the past like their relationships with their respective fathers and the shows they happened to have watched as children. The only difference is that Taeko grew up in Tokyo and Toshio in the countryside. Both of them are able to share a lot of things with each other about their past life and their perspectives on different things. Their being together is representative of companionship, they are able to communicate with each other in a very wholesome way. Their conversation and appreciation of each others make their companionship ideal and the relationship's culmination into a marriage is anticipated by the audience. More than love the idea of companionship is seen in their relationship, but with companionship comes love and caring. Marriage is a life changing decision and for someone who is used to living alone in an urban setup, it becomes an even more challenging decision to make, so when the grandmother of Toshio, rather directly, puts forward the proposal of Toshio and Taeko's marriage to her, Taeko naturally becomes agitated and shocked and requires some time to think about it. When she goes into the solitude to contemplate her feelings and reaction to the proposal of the grandmother, she again transports back to her childhood. Through the movie it is seen that's Taeko actually struggled a lot even a child to make contact with people and though she lived in a

house full of people, her sisters, granny and parents, she still felt isolated. Similar was the case with her in her school, where she felt even more isolated, though among so many children.

Taeko, who is also a sensitive, self reflective person is a bit disappointed in herself as her self-reflection bares the many faces of herself as she becomes introspective in the solitude of the countryside. She sees that she puts on a veneer of liking people but in her heart she might not like them. She relates an incidence to Toshio, of her schooldays with a boy named Abe, with whom she pretended to be friends and showed him compassion but in reality she hated him. She says that even now she has not been able to forego her habit of false pretence. She hides her real feelings and wears a masked face. It is a kind of a confession to Toshio which again shows that she can confide in him though they haven't known each other for very long, they have been able to build up a mutual trust for each other over a short period of time.

This conversation between Taeko and Toshio also brings in the understanding from a gendered perspective of how the opposite sexes can often miscommunicate with each other especially if one of them has a soft corner for the other. Toshio relates his own experience, how as a child he had a soft corner for a girl and around her he behaved strangely, often teasing her. Similar would have been the case with Abe, the boy who behaved strangely around the kid Taeko. Both Taeko and Toshio are perceptive and sensitive and have evolved to a level where they can co-exist with a better understanding of life with each other.

The incident with Abe and her feelings in relation to the marriage proposal with Toshio by his grandmother shows Taeko's struggle with acceptance of her self and sense of belonging. She becomes conflicted about the projection of her self in the outer world in relation to the understanding of her internal self, this leads to her becoming agitated. She feels she has double standards and feels guilty about her hypocrisy. This is essentially important, also in relation to the self-introspection practices of Zen Buddhism, where one becomes aware of the flawed nature of one's individual self. This results in an internal conflict of the mind and this has further to be seen meditatively such that one evolves out of one's individuality and gets a better understanding of the Self. This would only happen if one has an acceptance of the self from a distanced viewpoint without the identification with one's ego.

Before the grandmother suggested to Taeko the possible union of Taeko with Toshio in marriage, she was completely immersed and lost in her past, in the childhood, it was through her interaction with Toshio and the setting of the countryside that she was becoming aware of the present. But the grandmother's brisk intrusion of this thought made Taeko think of her present and her future. This wakes her from the lulled sleep of the past and the nostalgia as well as the trauma of her childhood. She must take an action and should think in terms of accepting herself in relation to the immediate present which is also representative of the coming future, and her decision would give a direction and shape to this future. It is a jolt that shakes her up from her reverie of living in

denial of the present; she must accept herself as she is and should also accept the countryside as her place of belonging, as she has come to realise that her place of belonging is away from the city and her heart belongs to the countryside.

Towards the end of the story when she returns back to the countryside in Yamagata and that is the very same day by abandoning her journey to Tokyo halfway through and taking the return train, she is seen to be surrounded by her childhood self and several of her classmates and friends from childhood, these are representative of the ghosts from childhood that come to haunt her. She eventually reaches back and meets Toshio, who comes to receive her on her call.

As she drives away with Toshio, these children follow only up to a distance, and then they cannot keep up with the pace of their car, this can be taken as symbolic of her final abandonment of the trauma associated with childhood, and finally moving on as she embraces her new life with Toshio in the countryside. It is a new beginning for her, where she not only leaves behind the city, but also the childhood memories that came to haunt her and would not let her be at peace with herself. The countryside and Toshio become for her, the new life, where she is going to find solace and peace. It is like the abandonment of the world and the materialism associated with it by the monks when they enter the monastery and embrace new life. Also, it is the embracing of the present and letting go of the past.

On the drive back to his home with Toshio, after she meets him in the rain and has a conversation with him, she comes to realise

that though he might be slightly younger than her, he has great maturity and understands life better. She thinks, he seems to be older to her and also that how did she let him come so close to her. This shows that though she is someone, who is not open to let other people into her life, yet there was something in Toshio that made Taeko let loose of her reservedness and the shield she had created around her. She enjoys his company and wishes to be friends with him. She wants to shake hands with him, the idea of this act is in itself representative of the comfort that has developed in their friendship, the idea here is very clear, she wishes to be Taeko's friend and companion, it is an ideal situation for developing a lifelong relationship which is not based on just physical attraction of each other but is much more binding where companionship is desired.

As she thinks further and measures things from the point of view of the future, she becomes increasingly convinced that she must seize the opportunity that is being offered to her of embracing the country life and also to think about the life of a possible future with Toshio. The final conviction makes her abandon the train journey to Tokyo and return to the countryside, to live and work beside Toshio, for the rest of her life. Thus, the journey to the countryside not only becomes a journey to explore the simple and the minimal but also a journey of self-discovery, not very unlike the Zen quest of self-discovery.

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