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## The Bitter Buddha

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# The Bitter Buddha

**Abstract**

This is a film review of *The Bitter Buddha* (2013) directed by Steven Feinartz.

**Keywords**

Buddhism, Comedy

**Author Notes**

William Blizek is the founding editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* (2009).

*The Bitter Buddha*

*The Bitter Buddha* is the story of comedian Eddie Pepitone.

Audiences love Eddie. More importantly, comedians think of Eddie as a comedian's comedian.



But, Eddie is bitter and his comedy is filled with anger. That anger is not directed at the audience, however, so the audience is always able to enjoy the show. Much of the anger comes from Eddie's insecurity and the fact that he cannot seem to do anything right in the eyes of his father. That insecurity has prevented Eddie from promoting himself in a way that would make him much more famous than he is, so his career has been limited by his own behavior. His career is a running theme in his comedy. This is the bitter side of Eddie Pepitone.

The Buddha side comes from his efforts to meditate; exercise; eat well, and give up the drinking and smoking. Eddie is always in a constant battle with himself—he has the scars to prove it. Of course, none of these things actually work. He tells friends that he has become a vegan, but they point out that he had two hamburgers just a couple of hours ago. Oddly enough, the continued effort to improve his life gives Eddie a kind of stability that helps him continue with his career. So, the Buddha side of Eddie is actually successful, even if Eddie is

always failing at the Buddha side. The most important element in Eddie's life that helps him to deal with his pain and disappointment is his comedy. But the Buddha side effort gives Eddie enough stability so that he can continue the comedy that is his tool for dealing with the big, bad, threatening world out there.

The irony here is that his efforts to find enlightenment, redemption, forgiveness, and so on, all of which fail, help him find his salvation in the comedy he loves. In a hilarious, but very poignant moment toward the end of the movie, Eddie goes out into the audience and heckles himself. No one else has been heckling him, so he even has to do the heckling of himself, himself. We are our own worst enemies. This means that we have to reach outside of ourselves for the help we need to win the fight with ourselves. Religion might be described as that which is outside of ourselves that helps us win the fight with ourselves; if this defines religion, then comedy also could be religion—at least for Eddie Pepitone, and perhaps for all of us.

— William Blizek