

Book Review – Buddhism, A Concise Introduction

Judging from the Amazon reviews and the comments on the back cover, *Buddhism, A Concise Introduction* by Huston Smith and Philip Novak, is an important introduction to the topic. What I encountered instead was a book that began as a hagiography of the Buddha and ended with a syncretistic mishmash of Christianity and Buddhism described as Pure Land Buddhism. The patriarch of the book is Huston Smith, a scion of Methodist missionaries who was born in pre-war China, practiced Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, and made the study of religions his life work, with PhD credentials and teaching assignments at Harvard, MIT and UC Berkeley. The junior partner in this endeavor is Philip Novak, a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Dominican University in San Rafael, California. Both men are eminently qualified to write a book like *Buddhism, A Concise Introduction*. They are intellectually gifted, well educated, and fluid in prose, but they write as star-struck rock fans or adoring lovers. This would be fine in a devotional text for true believers, but is inappropriate for a basic introduction to the general public.

Smith and Novak's first two chapters purport to be biography but teach only the most complementary and reverential version of the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. The details were finally codified about 500 years after his death, and there are multiple conflicting versions. Even his birth and death dates are in dispute. But this book hides all of these difficulties; what readers get is a seamless narrative of wonderfulness. H.W. Schumann's *The Historical Buddha* is a far better biography.

The authors' six characteristics of religion - authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, grace, and mystery – provoke thought, although their conclusion, that these characteristics suggest that the root of religion lies in the human makeup, is a non-sequitur.¹ After describing religion, Smith and Novak implausibly argue that the Buddha preached a religion without any of these. The Buddha opposed the authority of the Brahmins and told his disciples to seek their own enlightenment, but simultaneously considered himself the authority over his Order. He opposed much existing Hindu ritual, but instituted rules and rituals of his own. The Buddha discouraged speculation that he considered unnecessary, but the core of his system was speculative – there is no objective evidence for reincarnation, and even his first Noble Truth, that life is suffering, is speculative. The Buddha jettisoned many Hindu traditions but replaced them with Buddhist ones. The self-proclaimed mission of the Buddha, delaying Nirvana and remaining in the world of suffering so he could lead others to enlightenment, is an example of grace. Finally, his insistence that man lives in a world of illusion (maya) and must make himself free from it, speaks of mystery. The acolytes Smith and Novak claim that Buddhism is empirical, scientific, pragmatic, therapeutic, psychological, egalitarian, and individualistic.² It is, but no more so than other faiths.

The four Noble Truths are 1) life is suffering, 2) the cause of suffering is craving (desire), 3) suffering will vanish once craving goes away, and 4) the way to eliminate craving is to follow the Eightfold Path:

1. Right Views – understanding the world appropriately
2. Right Intent – desiring to be enlightened
3. Right Speech – speaking truthfully and charitably
4. Right Conduct – living well, especially with good intentions
5. Right Livelihood – avoiding occupations that deal in blood (arms maker, soldier, hunter, butcher, fisherman), liquor (bartender), poison, or sex (prostitute, pimp, trafficker)
6. Right Effort – exerting yourself towards virtue
7. Right Mindfulness – exercising control over your mental state
8. Right Concentration – learning to concentrate your mind and body on your task

Underlying all of these is Right Association, because it is impossible to do all of these things without the support of others. The Eightfold Path includes some good rules to live by, but these concepts are not unique to Buddhism.

¹ Huston Smith, Philip Novak, *Buddhism, A Concise Introduction*, Harper Collins, 2003, 22.

² Huston Smith, Philip Novak, *Buddhism, A Concise Introduction*, Harper Collins, 2003, 29-30.

The chapter on the Great Divide between the traditional Theravada school and the progressive Mahayana school was interesting, as were the subsequent chapters on the Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan traditions of Buddhism. All three have a goodly number of adherents in the modern world, and the Tibetan Dalai Lama is a world figure worth knowing something about. Smith and Novak note that Buddhism largely died out in India, but speak little of the reasons for it. The monastic nature of Buddhism and social factors played a role, but so did the swords and arrows of Islam, which trampled northern India in the 11th century.

Part 2 of *Buddhism, A Concise Introduction* describes how Buddhism came to Europe; largely related to trade, missionary work, and colonialism. Buddhism came to America through the Chinese railroad migrants, Japanese workers in Hawaii, various influential writers, and the Theosophical Society. Part 2 also describes the New Buddhism in America, describing it as

1. Meditation centered
2. Lay phenomenon
3. Equal between men and women
4. Cross pollinating between the schools
5. Socially and politically engaged

Zen is the largest Buddhist presence in the US, but Tibetan Buddhism is growing. The Vipassana movement is also prominent, and the authors seem quite satisfied with this turn of events. Finally, the authors cover Pure Land Buddhism, which they imply is too much like Christianity to attract much attention.

In summary, *Buddhism, A Concise Introduction* is well written and interesting. Its authors are genuine experts in the field. Too bad that their eyes are so blinded by the glory of the Buddha that they can't see their own chauvinism. This book has great potential, but would be far better if it were more balanced.

Questions

1. How would you bring better balance to this book, admitting the struggles of the Buddha and Buddhism rather than painting a near perfect picture?
2. Would a summary of modern Buddhism in Asia have been useful, rather than focusing only on the West?
3. How can Christians use the concepts of Pure Land Buddhism to reach Buddhists for Christ?