An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World.


PANKAJ MISHRA was born in North India in 1969, and published a highly acclaimed book of fiction, The Romantics. His new book, An End to Suffering, is, however, a personal and historical exploration of Buddha and Buddhism. It is both odd and appropriate that an Indian should "discover" Buddhism. Buddha, like Mishra, lived in Northern India, but during the 6th Century, B.C. Today there are nearly no Buddhists in India, although the religion has been successfully transplanted to Tibet, China, Japan, Indochina, and Sri Lanka. The many new forms of Buddhism now practiced would probably be unrecognizable to the original Buddha. Just as Jesus would probably not recognize the many modern versions of Christianity.

An End to Suffering (the title contrasts with the Christian goal of an end to sin) is both Mishra's historical analysis of Buddha's place in the 6th Century B.C. world, and also a personal account of his contemporary experience of Buddhism. In 1992 Mishra moved to an isolated Himalayan village to read and reflect and eventually to travel in an effort to better understand Buddha's message. His scholarship paid off and he is able to accurately describe "the invention of Buddhism" by 19th and 20th century writers and archeologists, as well as the 6th century B.C. world of Northern India with its small kingdoms and a pantheon of Hindu gods. This was an era of a countercultural conflict with the overthrow of the Brahman priests and the emergence of radical thinkers. It was hard to be a Hindu, and as Nietzsche suggested, it was a time like 19th century Europe when it became hard to be a Christian. Indeed, Mishra draws upon his scholarly knowledge of European literature as well as the history of Indian thought, and he finds parallels to both in Buddha's time.

There are probably better explanations of Buddha's life (and legends) in other books (see Karen Armstrong's book on Buddha) but the author's knowledge and experience in India gives him a unique perspective on Buddha's enlightenment, his Four Noble Truths and his psychological view of the mind.

Even more perceptive are Mishra's comments on London and America, and the growing Buddhist movement in these countries. It is as though the foreigner could understand another country better than its own residents. Toward the end of Buddha's life, a series of bloody battles raged across Northern India - a situation which the author compares to the current Indian-Pakistani battle over Kashmir, and indeed the entire bloody 20th century.

How Buddha would have reacted to contemporary violence is, of course, unknown. The Buddha's view of the self, not as distinct and unchanging, but as part of a causal process in the world could help to diminish self-centered destructive emotions, such as hatred and anger. Buddhist philosophy had a great influence on Ghandi and the nonviolent resistance and the growing popularity of an "engaged Buddhism" in the West might even be a surprise to Buddha himself. As the author finishes the book after the Twin Towers attacks and amid escalating violence, the Buddha's moral and spiritual ideology no longer seem something out of the past but a necessary therapy for current times.