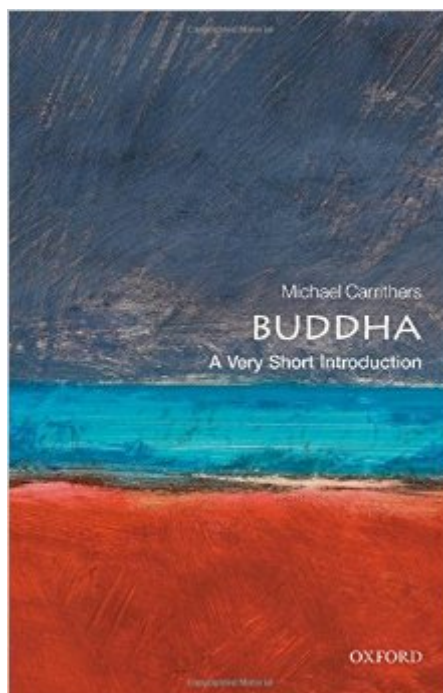


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The Buddha: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



Synopsis

In this valuable introduction, Michael Carrithers guides us through the complex and sometimes conflicting information that Buddhist texts give us about the life and teaching of the Buddha. He discusses the social and political background of India in the Buddha's time and traces the development of his thought. He also assesses the rapid and widespread assimilation of Buddhism and its contemporary relevance. Well-paced and informative, this introduction will enlighten not only those who study Buddhism and comparative religion but anyone intrigued by the remarkable philosophy of one of the greatest religious thinkers. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

This book, perhaps better than any other I've read, brings to light the unique philosophical position of the Buddha. Carrithers clearly explains how the Buddha stood out from the intellectual background of his time and helps one understand how and why the Buddha arrived at his views. A brilliant account of the Buddha's life and teachings not only for its scholarship but also for its refreshing lucidity.

This is a recycled version of the same book by the same publisher in the Past Masters series. It is a pity there have been no changes if any made to the original work done in 1983 as a few things have changed in Buddhist studies since then. At least the pictures are better and the book looks shorter than the original transmission. A sharp, highly critical approach with the most important elements highlighted. A coherent essay of depth and rigour. A joy to read and appreciate. This is the 2nd book on Buddhism in the A Very Short Introduction series (VSI) by OUP. The book "Buddhism a VSI" by D. Keown is also excellent. In fact most of the books on the VSI series seem to be brilliant. To be recommended to anyone, cheap to buy, cheaper to read and the taste is very expensive.

I like Carrithers's account of the Buddha because of his sensitivity to many sociological, political, and economic issues that ought at least to be considered in discussions of the Buddha's life. In 5 chapters -- divided into early life, the search for enlightenment, the enlightenment itself, and teaching -- Carrithers provides interesting descriptions of the cultural context of the development of the Buddhist doctrines. This approach offers novel explanations for the adaptability of Buddhist teachings across the continents. Although Carrithers relies solely upon the Pali Text Society editions of the Theravada canon (p. viii), it is clear that he is not dependent upon them. Instead, Carrithers is skeptical that even the earliest texts, being significantly removed from the Buddha's lifetime, can be the sole source of authority upon which scholars should rely. Carrithers, therefore, introduces atypical, but important, discussions of the political scene. He challenges the common notion that Siddhartha's father was a king. At the time and place of his birth, says Carrithers, that part of the Gangetic civilization was probably ruled by "oligarchies or councils of elders" and so "they did not have kings in the strict sense" (p. 13). Similarly, Carrithers challenges common assumptions concerning the caste system, the centralization of political authority along the lines of the Greek polis, and the climate of social and intellectual change during the Buddha's lifetime. It is possible through these considerations to interpret Siddhartha's Socratic questioning of authority -- the Brahmin caste, for example -- as an act consistent with overall social change. When reading Carrithers I often have the impression that he sees Siddhartha as a self-questioning Socrates that must be understood in the context of great economic, political, and social change.

There is a whole series of the Past Masters books but this is the first one I have read (The Buddha: Past Masters by Michael Carrithers) in this series. I have been interested in the many Asian philosophies for most of my life and I have read numerous books on the topic over the years. This 102 page hardcover volume focuses on the life and intellectual development of the Buddha. It

explains the differences and similarities of various competing philosophies being promoted at the time. This book is organized into five sections. The introduction provides insight into some of the myths surrounding this historical figure. The second section covers in detail the early life and renunciation. The third and fourth section deals with the awakening. The final chapter explains the mission and the death of Buddha. There is also a section on further readings about the Buddha. Though this book did a great job of explaining the thought process and life of this great philosopher I was a little disappointed that there were so few quotes from the Buddha in this volume. Nevertheless, I think anyone interested in the life of the Buddha will find this a good introduction to the topic. Rating: 4 Stars. Joseph J. Truncale (Author: Zen Poetry Moments: Haiku and Senryu for special occasions).

Michael Carrithers does a good job of contextualizing a somewhat secularized version of the Sakyamuni Buddha's biography as per the Pali Suttas, although he does give some serious credence to the Chinese and Sanskrit canons. It is brief, and some basic, biography of the relationship between the historical Buddha's ideas and his biography. It, however, skims much, including things that are more uncomfortable for modern readers, and Carrithers's also occasionally secularizes things in way scholars like John S. Strong advise against. The particularly strong parts where Carrithers knowledge of the Sakyas and Kalamans of the gangic plains and the relationship the oligarchical Republican structures could have had on Buddhism, and he also touches on both the Sremana (although he does not use that term) and yoga traditions would were obviously part of the Buddha's milieu. All that said, even with these serious and somewhat unexpected insights, it means a fairly shallow treatment of the material because of the length and focus of the introduction.

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