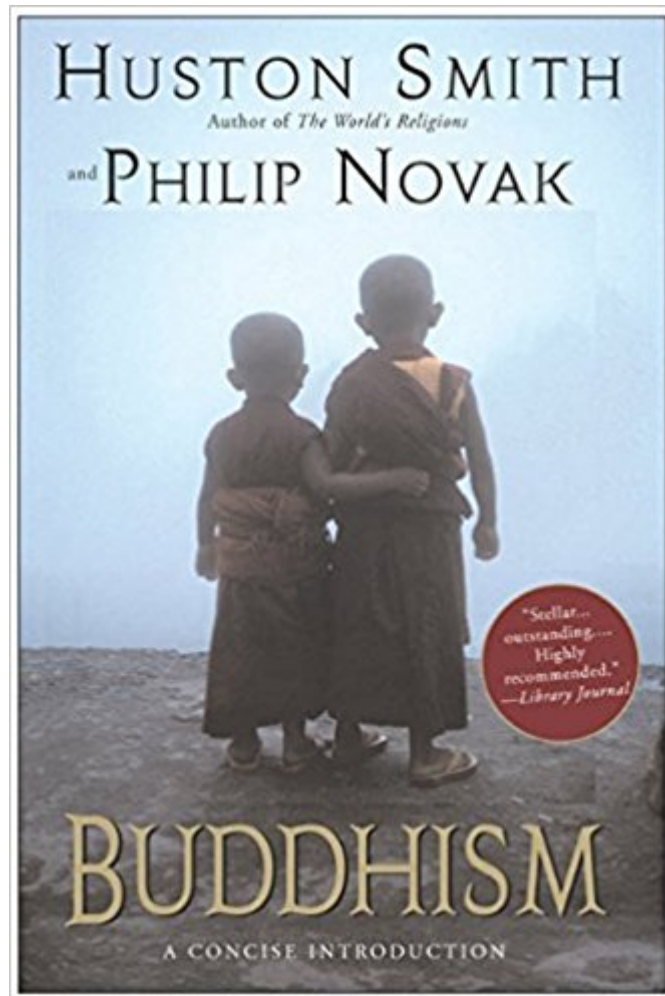




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Buddhism: A Concise Introduction



Synopsis

A concise and up-to-date guide to the history, teachings, and practice of Buddhism by two luminaries in the field of world religions.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: HarperOne (December 14, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0060730676

ISBN-13: 978-0060730673

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (36 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #145,681 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #33 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern > Buddhism > History](#) #36 in [Books > History > World > Religious > Buddhism](#) #367 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Comparative Religion](#)

Customer Reviews

I have read a number of books about Buddhism, and this is the best of its kind. However, to avoid disappointment, it is very important to understand what its "kind" is! This is NOT -- as the subtitle and the cover art could misleadingly suggest -- a user-friendly introduction to Buddhist practice. It is not a hand-holding tour of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold way, with beginning training in meditation. If you buy it expecting such things, you may well write another negative review. The authors are academics specializing in the history of religion (see Smith's other books, which are widely respected), and they are both Buddhist practitioners. In this book they combine these traits to write a deep, sympathetic account of Buddhism as a religion: what its main tenets are -- how it is practiced -- how it fractured historically into different strands. They write analytically and comparatively, but they also write with understanding and sympathy. They treat Buddhism as a living religion to be practiced by modern people - not as an anthropological artifact, the way some non-Buddhist authors do. Smith and Novak are particularly good at describing, sympathetically and in depth, the philosophical roots of the different practices in each strand. The chapters that compare the differing values of the Mahayana and Theravada strains, and then show their fundamental unity, is worth the book's price. They also tease out the key differences between the four types of Tibetan

Buddhism, and explain the sources and values of other schools as different as Goenka and Pure Land.

This is the second book I have read on Buddhism, the other being "The Three Pillars of Zen". As I am fairly ignorant of Buddhism and am fully a Westerner, I will not comment on the accuracy of the text, only on the writing itself. The book starts off strong with a vivid portrait of Siddhartha Guatama and a discussion of the various sects of Buddhism, particularly Theravada and Mahayana. The Four Noble Truths as well as the Noble Eightfold Path are explained, along with various subsets of lists that have been organized over the years. The second half of the book mainly discusses the journey of Buddhism to America, with a very brief section on the journey of Buddhism to Europe.

Unfortunately, I found that the prose became significantly less engaging from this point on, which is likely due to the change in primary authorship. While the first half is quite lucid and fascinating, the second half reads more like a list of "who's who" in American Buddhism along with endless lists of names of the various people that have contributed to this or that area. While this information is important, it does not make for good prose reading; an annotated bibliography or listing of names would be far more useful, as there is no way for a reader to remember more than a small fraction of the names listed in any case. This reader would have preferred more space devoted to the general phenomena involved in the western movement of Buddhism. It would have also been nice for there to be some appendices, with the various lists, people, sects, etc. presented in chart form. The index works well enough, but this would have been a great addition. I would also like to say one thing to readers who dismiss this book as "shallow" or "watered down".

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