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BOOKS OF THE TIMES; In an Age of Strife, What Would Buddha Do?

By WILLIAM GRIMES

'An End to Suffering'

'The Buddha in the World'

By Pankaj Mishra

Illustrated. 422 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$25.

The Indian novelist and journalist Pankaj Mishra had two ideas when he came up with the subtitle "The Buddha in the World." Always, in his rambling meditations on the history and meaning of Buddhism, he struggles to place the Buddha in historical context. He evokes the physical settings, socioeconomic changes and political tensions of Northern India six centuries before Jesus, the world in which Siddhartha Gautama first spread his radical message.

At the same time, his own spiritual quest pulls the story into the present, as he sorts out his conflicted feelings about Buddhism and its relevance to the world of terrorist bombings, multinational corporations and seething third-world discontent.

Mr. Mishra, the author of a highly praised novel, "The Romantics," has written an odd, uneasy book. It began life as a projected historical novel about the Buddha. Mr. Mishra, who grew up in northern India, traveled from one Buddhist site to another, reading widely and deeply along the way, then returned to Mashobra, a village in the Himalayas, where he sorted out his thoughts and reflected. These journeys, and the fruits of Mr. Mishra's study, have been stored and reworked into a highly personal history, not too remote in spirit from works like "The Education of Henry Adams."

It's easy to see why Mr. Mishra was attracted to Buddhism. Nietzsche, analyzing Buddhism's appeal to its early audience, spoke of "races grown kindly, gentle, overintellectual who feel pain too easily." The description fits Mr. Mishra, and his own self-description rounds out the portrait. Part of a Hindu family clinging tenuously to the middle class, he grew up in an India obsessed with emulating the West and transforming itself into a modern society.

Like so many others, his father abandoned his native his village for the city. But by the late 1970's and 80's, Mr. Mishra writes, "these aspirations had lost some of their force." The British administrative system, in Indian hands, had deteriorated, and Mr. Mishra's university in Allahabad, once known as the Oxford of the east, was now a sorry sight: "It had become a battlefield for rival caste groups, a setting for the primordial struggles for food and shelter, of violence and terror."

Mr. Mishra intended to study commerce, if only to avoid medicine and engineering, the standard avenues to success for Indians of his class. But he was besotted with Nietzsche and the French existentialists. He worshiped the great European novelists like Flaubert, Tolstoy and Proust, writers who dramatized, as he saw it, "the fate of the individual in society." (It's telling that he found his way to "Questions of King Menander," an early Buddhist text, through a short story by Borges.) Diffidently, he declared himself a writer, although he had no idea what, exactly, he would write about. Like one of the "superfluous men" in the novels of Turgenev, another of his models, he had been equipped with a sensitive nature and a passion for social justice, but modern India offered him no place. Looking around him, he saw misery, poverty, failed social institutions and a rising tides of political violence. In short, like the Buddha, he looked out on the world and saw suffering.

Mr. Mishra offers a highly attractive introduction to the basic thinking behind Buddhism. He stresses what he sees as its practicality and workability. The Buddha identified a problem, the restless, ego-driven striving that inevitably leads to frustration and unhappiness. He then developed a set of introspective techniques designed to make the suffering individual more self-aware, and through this self-awareness to move systematically beyond the self and its vain strivings toward a state he called nirvana.

Mr. Mishra's Buddha is a practical philosopher, engaged in the here and now. "It was the Buddha's achievement," he writes, "as it was that of Socrates, to detach wisdom from its basis in fixed and often esoteric forms of knowledge and opinion and offer it as a moral and spiritual project for individuals."