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## Philosopher King

By ADAM GOODHEART

### AN END TO SUFFERING

The Buddha in the World.

By Pankaj Mishra.

422 pp. Farrar, Straus &amp; Giroux. \$25.

ONE night during the time I was reading this book, I had the odd experience of bumping unexpectedly into its author. At the lower Manhattan holiday party of a stylish magazine, I was briefly introduced to an owlish fellow with a Brahminical beard who smiled at me amid the din of a crowded sake bar. You occasionally hear of writers, especially when their books are of long incubation, coming to resemble their subjects, and my fleeting glimpse of Pankaj Mishra seems to offer uncanny proof of the phenomenon. For here, surely, was the young Siddhartha Gautama himself: a scholar-sophisticate, a personality both cosmopolitan and ascetic, at large and at home in the world.

Such, at least, is the portrait Mishra draws of the sixth-century B.C. Indian princeling who would become known in his own lifetime as the Buddha, the enlightened one. Born in a small city on the dusty plain at the foot of the Himalayas, he came of age at a historical moment when city states and villages ruled by tribal elders were giving way to centralized kingdoms and empires, a transformation that brought with it chaotic social and cultural upheaval. Individual lives were suddenly subject to the whims of distant rulers; merchants, soldiers and itinerant preachers were all on the move. War and famine swept human truths, along with human lives, before them.

The time was ripe, then, for a visionary who could explain -- and perhaps even cure -- some of the pain, frustration and sorrow he saw around him. By the time the Buddha died, at about the age of 80, he had preached to thousands, walked many miles across northern India, counseled kings and founded a civilization that would eclipse the great empires of his day, stretching eventually from Tibet to California.

Mishra himself was born in 1969 to a displaced and dispossessed Hindu Brahmin family that had left its village near India's Nepalese border and migrated to the city. He grew up, he says, amid a society not unlike the one the Buddha had addressed two and a half millenniums earlier: one beset with dislocation and upheaval, where "each person still had to bear in solitude the knowledge that the old props of caste and community were gone and that the awareness of being an individual brought both freedom and pain."

In 1992, fresh out of the university in Delhi, Mishra moved to a small Himalayan village to continue his education, to read and write and travel among the mountain towns and old colonial outposts. It was then that he began to research and write the book on Buddhism that he has only now completed. (In the interim, he published two other works, a novel and a travelogue.)

"An End to Suffering" is part biography, part history, part travel book, part philosophic treatise. But perhaps it could best be described as a work of intellectual autobiography. I say "intellectual" rather than spiritual, let alone religious. Mishra is not a Buddhist -- he "couldn't sit still" long enough to meditate successfully -- and his story is not a narrative of conversion or a road map to inner peace, at least not in the expected sense. It is, rather, the tale of his attempts to delve into the legacy of one of the world's greatest philosophers.

The Buddha, as Mishra describes him, was not a prophet -- not a religious figure but a secular one. Indeed, "he had placed no value on prayer or belief in a deity; he had not spoken of creation, original sin or the last judgment." He likewise ignored the question of why sin and evil exist in the world, which has obsessed nearly every major religion. The Buddha's concern was purely practical: to relieve suffering, both material and existential. His precepts weren't couched as revelations from on high, delivered with the crash of thunder; instead they came as small quotidian insights: "I well remember how once, when I was sitting in the shade of a jambu tree on a path between the fields. . . ."

He was, in many senses, a modern man, maybe even the first modern man, because he put into words the anomie and angst that are the daily companions of billions of modern lives. (Perhaps it's appropriate that northern India, which was the birthplace of some of the world's first cities, should also have been a birthplace of individual identity.) Yet the Buddha also recognized that the only real peace could come from within. Despite the flickering, flamelike nature of the self, he found, at the center of its inconstant, all-consuming dance, something steady and true.

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