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An End to Suffering by Pankaj Mishra

By Justin Wintle

Karma flattens dogma on the road to nirvana

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Indian intellectuals have never been shy to offer a discourse on the whole of human thought and history; it comes with the territory, of belonging to a very ancient culture that takes ideas seriously. As a student, I remember being mesmerised by *The Fly and the Fly-Bottle*, Ved Mehta's wide-ranging exploration of Western philosophy. In *An End to Suffering*, Pankaj Mishra is, if anything, even more ambitious.

This is a curious, disjunctive, awkward book on "the Buddha in the world". Like Mehta, the author undertakes a quest for truth, but along the way throws in passages of mildly self-congratulatory autobiography that, while finely written, fail to connect with his principal theme: a rediscovery of Buddhism. The autodidact, subsisting near Simla in the Himalayan foothills, presents himself first as a superior drop-out, then as a journalist made, or making, good.

Rediscovering Buddhism in India is not quite as bizarre as it sounds. Two and a half millennia ago, the Buddha lived and preached in northern India, and primary Buddhist scriptures have come down to us in Sanskrit and Pali. By around 1300BC, the faith (if we must call it that) was all but expunged in the Subcontinent thanks to jealous Hindus and zealous Muslims. Indeed, it was not until amateur British archaeologists attached to the East India Company began investigating Buddhist remains in the late 18th century that the Buddha's provenance was definitively secured.

Mishra adds to this rehabilitation by giving it a faintly chauvinist spin. That the Buddha was an Indian means much to him, and leads him to such thoughts as "The Chinese eagerness to distribute Buddhist texts was what gave birth to both paper and printing" - not true, as China had been experimenting with paper-like materials long before the first Buddhist set foot in the Middle Kingdom. We can hardly know for sure that the oldest surviving printed document (an eighth-century Buddhist prayer) was the first. For Mishra, as for some others, all good things ultimately derive from the Indian motherland: a sort of post-colonial neo-colonialism.

He is at his best reconstituting the spiritual and intellectual milieu in which the Buddha asserted himself. Then as now, India was awash with holy men who covered almost every conceivable angle along the religious spectrum - except monotheism. He is also good at extrapolating the complexity of the Buddha's thought, drawing on the paradox that Buddhist doctrine depended on replacing Vedic gods and goddesses with a reconstructed Self characterised by supreme Selflessness.

A key ingredient of Buddhism is an understanding of the "self" as something insubstantial, inchoate and indeterminate - as though all mankind suffered from Alzheimer's. This licenses Mishra to speed-read through Western philosophy in search of corroborative enlightenment, from Heraclitus and Plato to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud. Too much of his gallant overview is second-hand: Nietzsche's over-touted contribution to German fascism is unchallenged, while poor old Rousseau is again lamely credited with giving European totalitarianism a helping start. None of this will wash: it smacks too much of an antiquated Home University Library.


More profitably, in his bid to maximise the Buddha's context, Mishra dwells on India's remoter history. The great

emperor Ashoka was not quite the Buddhist usually projected, and Alexander the Great, who reached the Indus valley, is seen from the other side, as a warmonger. In between, the author describes his journeyings to India, London and California where, finally, he joins a New Age meditation class. Yet, at the experiential level, the Buddha somehow eludes him. About actual meditation Mishra has nothing to say, and we're left with something less than *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Justin Wintle wrote the 'Rough Guide History of Islam'

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