

## Searching for a better way

Pankaj Mishra's *An End to Suffering* is an investigation into Buddhism that intrigues Andrew Brown



**Andrew Brown**  
The Guardian, Saturday 6 November 2004

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

---

### **An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World**

by Pankaj Mishra

400pp, Picador, **£17.99**

In Conway's Game of Life, played on a computer screen, small patterns of cells propagate complicated shapes from simple rules. Patterns appear, then are destroyed; then the same pattern reappears in another place, where it is destroyed once more, and then rebuilt somewhere else. It is like watching a smoke ring blow away, then condense again from wisps of smoke in a different part of the room. Sometimes a blob of cells will expand into a perfect ring with a hollow centre, so that every cell that had been filled in becomes empty, and all the empty cells which had surrounded the original pattern are taken over. It is a good Buddhist game about the transience and illusory quality of life. The doughnut pattern is also an illustration of the history of some religions. The empires whose languages Christ spoke have vanished now entirely. The first heartlands of Christianity, in the Middle East, have been Muslim for more than a thousand years: by the time that happened, Christianity was firmly established in western Europe. Now it seems to be vanishing from here, with all its strength in Africa, the Far East and the Americas.

Buddhism, like Christianity, is a doughnut-shaped religion, one which has spread far beyond its original homelands, and, in the process, been almost obliterated where it arose. In the 1820s, the British, puzzling over abandoned Buddhist temples, believed that the Buddha had been an Egyptian deity, though some proposed that he was the Norse god Odin. The spot where he had attained enlightenment was marked by a Hindu temple, where the Buddha was just another god in the pantheon. Yet outside India, Buddhism flourished, and seems to be flourishing more and more.

Pankaj Mishra grew up in the heart of the doughnut, where Hinduism and Islam seemed to have eliminated even the traces of Buddhism in the places where the Buddha actually walked. As he travelled outside his family, and later outside his country, he found himself more attracted to the missing religion. He has written a big sloppy book, badly organised but full of very good bits. It moves uneasily between autobiography, history and a philosophical and ethical defence of Buddhism. It might have been better as a novel, though it would be hard to move the weight of well-organised historical exposition along any sort of plot line. The autobiographical sections, beautifully written and moving, describe lives on the margins, his own, his parents', and his friends'.

All of these Hindus are living in times of vast confusion, when the old, rural forms of life and religion have been overthrown, but the new, scientific world cannot deliver on its promises. Decency and striving are opposed to each other; yet the traditional life, where gentlemen had no need to strive, turns out to be based on hideous cruelty and exploitation. One university friend, an apparently heartless roué, who orders teenage prostitutes the way that British students might order takeaway pizza, turns out to have a sister who was burnt to death after her dowry disappointed her husband. There was nothing her own family could do. She had married rather above herself. Eventually, the brother joins the BJP, the Hindu nationalist party, in which he can lose his own misery by perpetuating the misery of others.

Here is the great millstone, of suffering and striving, from which the Buddha sought

escape; and as Mishra searches across the hot and squalid plains for traces of the Buddhist past, what he finds is a period very like our own. The Buddha himself becomes another discontented, potentially decadent aristocrat living in times of profound economic and political change. Empires arose in the Gangetic plain. The small oligarchic states from which the Buddha sprang were overthrown - one clan of his relatives were thrown into pits and trampled by elephants after their city was absorbed into a more modern political unit.

For Mishra, the Buddha is a figure eternally modern because he switches religious thought "from speculation to ethics". Instead of trying to explain the world away, he wants to change it. This sounds odd, since Buddhism is normally considered a quietist religion. If the world is an illusion, how can we change it? But in this apparent paradox lies the core of the Buddha's innovation and attractiveness. The world is an illusion in the sense that what we can understand is bounded by our consciousness, which is by definition inadequate and partial. To the extent that we mistake our consciousness for reality, we are falling victim to an illusion. At the same time the contents of our consciousness is real. It does change the world, and is changed by it. Normally this process is almost automatic. But if we consider the causes and consequences of our acts, we can deliberately filter from the stream of consciousness our hurtful and selfish urges. When we do this, we filter some evil from the world.

"It is choice or intention that I call Karma," said the Buddha, "the mental work - for, having chosen, a man acts by body, speech and mind." This is an extraordinarily pragmatic view of religion. Faith is understood not as a set of propositions about the world, whether these are philosophy or magical incantations. It is instead an answer to the question "How should I act?"

Does this count as a religion at all? Yes, because moral action always takes place in a community, and Buddhists naturally formed themselves into communities, and even into countries. Buddhists have fought wars; there is even the equivalent of Paisleyite Buddhism among the Tibetan exile community. But Buddhism has on the whole done less harm than any other world religion. At a moment when all the others seem to be conspiring to make the world a more terrible place, *An End to Suffering* makes an extremely attractive and thought-provoking case.