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Buddha (Lives)

By Karen Armstrong



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Buddhism is a faith that commands over 100 million followers throughout the world. Buddha stands with Christ, Confucius and Mohammed as someone who revolutionized the religious ideas of his time to advocate a new way of living. All that is known about Buddha comes from a collection of ancient writings that fuse history, biography and myth. Karen Armstrong distils from these the key events of Buddha's life: his birth as Siddhartha Gotama in the fifth century BC and his abandonment of his wife and son; his attainment of enlightenment under the Banyan tree (the moment he became a buddha, or enlightened one; his political influence; the divisions among his followers; and his serene death. Armstrong also introduces the key tenets of Buddhism: she explains the doctrine of anatta (no-soul) and the concepts of kamma (actions), samsara (keeping going), dhamma (a law or teaching that reflects the fundamental principles of existence) and the idealised state of nibbana (literally the 'cooling of the ego'). Since it promotes no personal god, Buddhism, writes Armstrong, 'is essentially a psychological faith'. In our own age of secular anxiety, she shows that it has profound lessons to teach about selflessness and the simple life. Karen Armstrong's short book is a magnificent introduction to the life and thought of this most influential of spiritual thinkers.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Books on Buddhism may overflow the shelves, but the life story of the Buddha himself has remained obscure despite over 2,500 years of influence on millions of people around the world. In an attempt to rectify this, and to make the Buddha and Buddhism accessible to Westerners, the beloved scholar and author of such sweeping religious studies as *A History of God* has written a readable, sophisticated, and somewhat unconventional biography of one of the most influential people of all time. Buddha himself fought against the cult of personality, and the Buddhist scriptures were faithful, giving few details of his life and personality. Karen Armstrong mines these early scriptures, as well as later biographies, then fleshes the story out with an explanation of the cultural landscape of the 6th century B.C., creating a deft blend of biography, history, philosophy, and mythology.

At the age of 29, Siddhartha Gautama walked away from the insulated pleasure palace that had been his home and joined a growing force of wandering monks searching for spiritual enlightenment during an age of upheaval. Armstrong traces Gautama's journey through yoga and asceticism and grounds it in the varied religious teachings of the time. In many parts of the world during this so-called axial age, new religions were developing as a response to growing urbanization and market forces. Yet each shared a common impulse--they placed faith increasingly on the individual who was to seek inner depth rather than magical control. Taoism and Confucianism, Hinduism, monotheism in the Middle East and Iran, and Greek rationalism were all emerging as Gautama made his determined way towards enlightenment under the bodhi tree and during the next 45 years that he spent teaching along the banks of the Ganges. Armstrong, in her intelligent and clarifying style, is quick to point out the Buddha's relevance to our own time of transition, struggle, and spiritual void in both his approach--which was based on skepticism and empiricism--and his teachings.

Despite the lack of typical historical documentation, Armstrong has written a rich and revealing description of both a unique time in history and an unusual man. *Buddha* is a terrific primer for those interested in the origins and fundamentals of Buddhism. --Lesley Reed

From Publishers Weekly

Armstrong's esteemed works, including such standards as *A History of God* and *The Battle for God*, have primarily focused on the monotheism of the Middle East. Now she turns farther eastward to craft this short biography for the Penguin Lives series. Armstrong carefully ties the Buddha's time to our own and champions his spiritual discoveries with an understated dignity that even the Buddha might bless. While exercising a scholar's restraint, she reveals a detectable compassion for Sidhatta Gotama, the radical who walked away from a pleasure palace because he refused to "remain locked in an undeveloped version" [of himself]. Armstrong overcame peculiar challenges to write about this historical figure who became "a type rather than an individual," as his personality and life particulars evaporated into the power of his selflessness. She turned this lack of details for a conventional biography to our advantage, opting to enhance Gotama's story with the broad canvas of his time and culture, thus making him accessibly human. This handsome and solid portrait is sure to become a classic; it is a refined and readable biography of a pivotal character in human history. It is likely true that when the 80-year-old Buddha died he had, as the sutra says, "gone beyond the power of words," but in this thoughtful and revealing study, Armstrong has come near to proving the scriptures wrong. (Feb.) Forecast: Despite the plethora of Buddhist books on the market, few recent Buddha biographies have been written for a general audience. Armstrong's superb reputation should help sales, and Viking plans a six-city author tour and national publicity.

From Library Journal

This sterling work by Armstrong (religion, Leo Baeck Coll.; A History of God; The Battle for God) is anything but standard fare. Armstrong combines the abilities of storyteller, historian, and interpreter of Buddhist thought to create a work that is both fascinating and informative. What makes this such a strong and engaging work is that she uses her discriminating insight as a historian while recognizing that "the people of North India were not interested in history in our sense: they were more concerned about the meaning of historical events." This insight is applied effectively throughout, as Armstrong considers the Buddhist teaching encapsulated in the major events of the Buddha's life. Her explications have great clarity and power, making this work essential reading for those looking for a brief introduction to the Buddha's life and Buddhist thought.DDavid Bourquin, California State Univ., San Bernardino

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Users Review

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