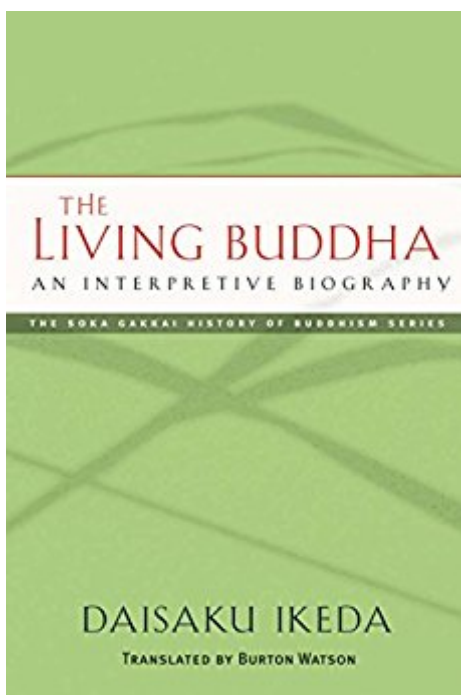


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The Living Buddha: An Interpretive Biography



Synopsis

Unlike most other major religions, Buddhism depends on neither divine revelation nor an incarnation of God for its authenticity. Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, was a man who through his own efforts attained enlightenment as to the essential nature of life. For this reason, his life story is meaningful to us today. As a biography of Shakyamuni, "The Living Buddha" is a vivid historical narrative based on what is known or can reasonably be surmised concerning his life and times. It is also an inspiring account of a heroic life dedicated to helping all people free themselves from suffering. Ikeda's image of Shakyamuni grows out of his own living experience as a Buddhist and as a man of action. Accordingly, the author views Shakyamuni not as a mystic, semi-legendary figure half hidden in the mists of a distant age in an exotic land, but as a warm and vital human being who was very much a product of his own time, who transcended circumstance to preach a message of universal validity.

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Customer Reviews

Daisaku Ikeda, a renowned and respected religious leader, poet, author and president of Soka Gakkai International, a global Buddhist order, gives us a very easy to understand and insightful look into

one of the most important religious figures in history. This puts into plain English, the story of a man, who renounces the luxurious comforts of his royal heritage and sets out to seek the answers to the questions, "Why do some people live in great comfort and wealth, while others suffer from poverty, illness and other afflictions in their lives?" and "What can be done to help people escape this suffering?" This book portrays a man with a highly intuitive understanding of life and great compassion for the suffering of his fellow human being, while at the same time giving an outline of the history of religious evolution of ancient India. As a devout practitioner of Nichiren Buddhism and an active member of Soka Gakkai, I found this book to be an essential reading and one of the most well thought and honest interpretations of the founding and early development of Buddhism. I also have the two other books in this series, and am currently reading the second one, "Buddhism, the First Millennium"

The best book ever written about the life of Siddhartha Gautama. Clear, insightful, well written. Anyone interested in Buddhism should read this book.

Good overview of the history of Buddhism. 3 books in the series.

Outstanding biography of Shakyamuni by Ikeda. Inspiring to read - have it already on Kindle but wanted a paperback copy.

In Japanese, the title's "My View of Shakyamuni." Ikeda, leader of the lay organization Soka Gakkai that stresses outreach, emphasizes how flexible Buddhism can be for our age. He cites Karl Jaspers on how in its origins, it emerged during what scholars call the Axial Age, when Socrates, Confucius, and later Jesus preached. Like them, the Buddha's messages weren't written down until later; like them, his teachings emerged from the "middle of the world" to spread to millions. (See Karen Armstrong's "Buddha" biography in the Penguin Lives series for more social and cross-cultural context.) Sharing the dharma teaching's foremost; the intellectual understanding, Ikeda tells us, cannot replace action. He places the little factually that we know about the historical Shakyamuni, the sage of the Shakyas, within the legends and suppositions that, as with Socrates and Jesus, grew up around the teacher after his death. One key difference: the Eastern conception of emancipation comes not from an oppressive political system so much as a deceptive personal structure. (See Pankraj Mishra's "An End to Suffering" for more on this comparison and contrast within Western & Hindu intellectual history and philosophy.) Ikeda admits he searches the scanty

information we can verify, while allowing the myths also to enter his study, for from both we, as with Jesus and Socrates, have built our perceptions of such men, far more imaginatively and powerfully than a few facts recited could sway so many millions in centuries since. This narrative takes time to look at those who as "voice hearers" (shravaka) listened to the teachings and found enlightenment. Here, a comparison with Stephen Batchelor's agnostic "Buddhism Without Beliefs" may be helpful. Batchelor wonders why in the original time of the Buddha's talks, many listeners earned enlightenment by hearing them, whereas now, many eons may be necessary for practitioners to find release. Ikeda appears to at first downplay "voice hearers" as a lower level within the Hindu "arhat" stages of enlightenment; while later he puts this stage at a somewhat higher stage (four out of ten?) for some of the first Buddhists. This issue remained somewhat confusing, although looking up information on Soka Gakkai in Donald Mitchell's excellent "Buddhism: An Introduction" from Oxford UP, the importance of ten stages for SG is emphasized as a key precept that may account for Ikeda's subtle downplaying of hearing teachings rather than making them actively part of one's life. Ikeda, similarly, favors promoting a simpler "Law of Life" as a core dharma rather than a 12-linked chain of causation to elucidate the difficult doctrine of "dependent origination" that underlies karma and rebirth, issues that gain minor attention here compared to a more socially directed, accessible, and practical Buddhism that allows the strengths of all involved in the world's pursuits to gain from it, not only monks. He shows why monks were sent out to spread the dharma not in groups or pairs, but alone. Why? Ikeda muses that this example demands individual initiative, and a creative, positive, and flexible application of Buddhism to one's own experience in the world. This direction unsurprisingly finds Ikeda reminding readers that Buddhism expects personal responsibility, not blind devotion to leaders, fanatical asceticism, or misdirected yoga marathons or Zen meditation that become ends in themselves for egotistical comfort rather than means to enlightenment. The dying Buddha reminded listeners to take charge of their improvement. The guide, unlike other "religions" (this term is used throughout Burton Watson's fluid translation despite possible confusion for Westerners; I am not sure what the Japanese equivalent term may have been), remains not focused on some external "absolute," but within the self, where one finds the way to conquer the ego and transcend the same self's delusions. Transformation by active habit, rather than information by passive reception, sums up the heart of dharma. Ikeda throughout reminds us that the few facts of the Buddha that are in this short text expanded, with nods to scholarship and dissenting perspectives and historical situations, do not tell us much in themselves. The data may be scanty, but the insights prove profound. The "dignity of the individual and one's subjective nature" occupy central stage for the dharma as Ikeda interprets it. From within

ourselves, we draw out the Law of Life. Practice makes us responsible, he finds, for our own liberation. He ends this primer: "In other words, one transforms the present changeable self into the self as it should be, the self that is in perfect harmony with the Law"-- the essence of Buddhism's in this "human revolution" inherent within each of us. (133) The book's glossary and index cross-reference and translate terms concisely for newcomers to the Sanskrit vocabulary and Indian places; this along with Karen Armstrong's work may prove ideal for beginners curious about Siddhartha Gautama. While it moves more into those who followed the Buddha and less on doctrine. (P.S. I've reviewed Armstrong, Batchelor, Mitchell, and Mishra's books on . Also see my review of Ikeda's follow-up, "Buddhism: The First Millennium," to be reprinted in the SG History of Buddhism series that this volume starts.)

Spiritual leader Daisaku Ikeda, president of the Buddhist lay organization Soka Gakkai, presents two volumes of "The Soka Gakkai History of Buddhism" series, offering a carefully researched presentation of what history and testimony have to tell us of the origins and contributions of the Buddhist faith. "The Living Buddha: An Interpretive Biography" is both a straightforward chronicle of the Buddha's life, and also an inspirational testimony meant to aid the reader in freeing oneself from suffering. "The Living Buddha" does not treat the Buddha as a distant legend, but rather as a living, breathing person who rose above the harsh difficulties of his day and age to deliver a universally crucial message, that remains immediately and directly relevant thousands of years later.

"Buddhism: The First Millennium" chronicles the rise of a religion that had its origins in an era when few were inclined to keep detailed historical records. It wasn't until the First Council, long after the death of the Buddha, that any major effort to create the Buddhist cannon took place. "Buddhism: The First Millennium" chronicles Buddhism's spread to Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, as well as the key individuals who helped to spread its message, including the Indian king Ashoka, the Greek philosopher-king Menander, and monks and lay believers such as Vimalakirti, Nagarjuna, and Vasubandhu. Both volumes are thoroughly accessible to reader of all backgrounds, invaluable contributions to Buddhist Studies shelves, and highly recommended.

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