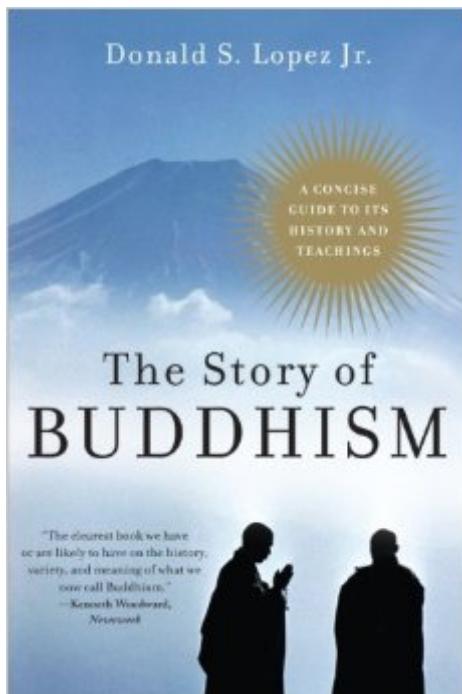


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The Story Of Buddhism: A Concise Guide To Its History & Teachings



Synopsis

How and when did the many schools of Buddhism emerge? How does the historical figure of Siddartha Guatama relate to the many teachings that are presented in his name? Did Buddhism modify the cultures to which it was introduced, or did they modify Buddhism? Leading Buddhist scholar Donald S. Lopez Jr. explores the origins of this 2,500-year-old religion and traces its major developments up to the present, focusing not only on the essential elements common to all schools of Buddhism but also revealing the differences among the major traditions. Beginning with the creation and structure of the Buddhist universe, Lopez explores the life of the Buddha, the core Buddhist tenets, and the development of the monastic life and lay practices. Combining brilliant scholarship with fascinating stories -- contemporary and historical, sometimes miraculous, sometimes humorous -- this rich and absorbing volume presents a fresh and expert history of Buddhism and Buddhist life.

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Customer Reviews

Donald Lopez, a professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at the University of Michigan, is one of the best scholars who attempt to present a balanced, accurate picture of Buddhism as it has been practiced over the generations. His book "The Story of Buddhism" considers the actual practice of Buddhism, in all its diverse forms, in Asia, superstitions, magic, idiosyncracies, and all. In this way, it differs from most books that present Buddhism to Americans. These books typically focus on meditation, on the liberating, non-theistic character of the Buddha's teaching, and of Buddhism as a guide to life in the difficulties of secular 20th and 21st century America. Such works are valuable

and important, but they fail to give the reader a historical sense of Buddhism. Lopez's book opens with a short treatment of Buddhist cosmology, including its picture of the universe, the earth, and the heavens and hells. There is an all-to-brief discussion of the key Buddhist teaching of Dependent Origination. The chapter on cosmology is followed by a discussion of the life of the Buddha, taken from a wide variety of textual sources, of the Dharma, Monasticism, Lay Life, and Enlightenment. The focus of the book is on the various schools of Mahayana Buddhism and on the Buddhism of Tibet. I found surprisingly little discussion of Theravada Buddhism, (practiced historically in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand) which is likely the earliest version of Buddhism we have today. Lopez describes well how various Mahayana thinkers broke away from earlier teachings but doesn't tell us much about these early teachings themselves. There is a great deal of emphasis in the book on how the Buddha's teaching was applied and modified over the years. Most of lay practice, Lopez informs us, was devoted to the accumulation of merit by the practice of good deeds. A regular meditation practice, much less textual study of the Sutras, was simply unavailable to most people who have over the generations called themselves Buddhists, either laity or monastic. Lopez describes well the ritualistic practices of any number of Buddhist schools, emphasizing matters such as relic worship, ancestor worship, fortune-telling and horoscopes, miracle cures, magic, mandalas, and what the modern reader is likely to view as superstition. He briefly describes for the reader a number of Buddhist schools and practices, including Tantric Buddhism, the Pure Land School, and Zen, and their different paths to enlightenment. There is a wonderfully detailed picture of a ritual involving the Heart Sutra, repeated many times, with the use of icons and statues. This book is a welcome, clear-minded corrective to those who approach Buddhism ahistorically. But there is, indeed, more to the story than this, as Professor Lopez realizes. For all his objectivity, I think Lopez has some grasp of the power of the Buddha's message which has led many to it, including modern Americans, over the millenia. This is most clearly indicated in the final paragraph of Professor Lopez's book. He writes (p. 256)" But there is also another challenge, the challenge provided by the dharma, which makes the remarkable claim that it is possible to live a life untainted by what are called the eight worldly concerns: gain and loss, fame and disgrace, praise and blame, happiness and sorrow." This is a worthwhile critical introduction to an endlessly fascinating teaching.

Lopez is the most objective scholar writing accessible books on Buddhism. This particular book is an even-handed overview of Buddhist history, beliefs and practices. If you only are interested in the "adapted for modern Western audiences" version of Buddhism that is found in most books, then you might not be interested in this. But, if you are interested in an historical view that attempts to date,

for example, when and where and by whom various sutras were written, when (and to some extent why) the mahayana school developed, and in general how Buddhism developed and has been taught and practiced in various places, then this book is for you. I also recommend Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-La* (if you want a more inside, critical understanding of Tibetan Buddhism).

Donald Lopez is one of our best scholars of Buddhism, and I wouldn't begin to presume to question his factual grasp of the the history of the dharma or the life and teachings of the Buddha. What's more, he brings to bear a healthy secular perspective on Buddhist studies which goes missing in many of his colleague's efforts. It has been all too easy for many of us, looking through New Age eyes for something to replace our recently lost inherited faiths, to fall mindlessly in love with the spiritual dispensations of the local Zen master or Tibetan Lama. Alas, few if any of us begin to understand the great cultural distances separating us from the foundational meanings and philosophical presuppositions of Zen or Vajrayana or Theravadan meditation and thought. Mr. Lopez's book is a good way to begin to understand the everyday practices of the dharma in its native lands - ritual, myth, unbridled superstition, etc.. This isn't American Buddhism (beat or square) in Greenwich Village or Zen archery in the northern Vermont hills. Unfortunately, it's not the whole picture or the real story of Buddhsim, either. For one thing, I wonder if His Holiness the Dalai Lama would recognize his understanding of the Dharma here; or if MahaGhosananda, the great peacemaker of Cambodia, would find anything approaching his understanding of loving-kindness in these pages. I think not. And this is the great failing of Mr. Lopez's otherwise good book: it is not a good reading of the compassionate spirit and transcendent wisdom of the Dharma, and, therefore, not a book I would recommend to persons looking for a way to begin to understand the Buddha's teachings. Too many central teachings receive too little attention (interdependent causation, for example), and the gentleness and probing insight of living Buddhist exemplars seems all but lost on Mr. Lopez (who knows them all). I was looking for more and I came away disappointed. Still, I learned a lot. For when Mr. Lopez is good, he is very, very good.

Most bookstore books on Buddhism seem to be of the inspirational -- "how to make your personal problems better through Buddhism" -- sort. I've been looking for a Religious Studies type book on Buddhism. I've read a couple D.T. Suzuki books like that on Zen Buddhism, but THE STORY OF BUDDHISM here is the first single critical/historical text I've found on the subject of The Whole Buddhist Thing.I agree with the earlier review titled "Not The Best Introduction" that the text glosses over a lot of issues that could really benefit from more explanation. The author blazes through the 5

Aggregates of Attachment and the 4 Noble Truths in about as many pages. Zen gets a whole 7 pages. There's actually more stuff in my encyclopedia on Nagarjuna, the Void school, and the Yogacara school than I could find here. I suppose that's what happens when you try to compress such a vast subject into a 250 page discussion. For me, the book was a memory-refresher on the few subjects I already knew something about, but not a good explanation of unfamiliar material. There's a helpful glossary at the end of the book, however.

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