



Buddhism

Malcolm David Eckel

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Buddhism has captivated many millions of people around the world, its vitality and adaptability enabling it to transform the civilizations of India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan, and also become a lively component in the cultures of Europe, Australia, and the Americas. But have you ever wondered how a religion that doesn't even have a god could have accomplished this?

Now you have the opportunity to have your questions answered, as this series of 24 lectures by an award-winning teacher traces the history, principles, and evolution of a theology that is both familiar and foreign.

You'll learn the astonishing story of Siddhartha Gautama - who was to become the Buddha, or "enlightened one" - the Indian prince who abandoned wife, son, and a privileged life to seek the meaning of life and death, and whose "awakening" and subsequent teachings have since impacted the world as few others have.

And you'll learn what happened after his death, as his followers began to share his teachings about the "Four Noble Truths" and the "Path" to Enlightenment. You'll see how Buddhist beliefs underwent significant and even radical change, with different varieties of Buddhism having to take shape as those beliefs spread across India, Central Asia, China, Japan, and virtually every corner of the Western world, such as becoming more respectful of one's duties to family and ancestors in China or becoming reconciled with local deities in Japan.

Buddhism Details

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Amirography says

I would say that this course has been a pleasure. For two reasons. 1. The author kept the content varied and fun. 2. Buddhism is already rather interesting.

I'm not sure what Buddhism is. Is it a school of philosophy? Is it a religion? Is it a set of cultural traditions? I'm not sure. It is fluid like no religion or school of thought. Also it has been used as a religion, but it mostly have been a set of experienced knowledges, without any emphasis on the result. I love that about it.

Structure: 4/5

Flow: 3/5

Style: 3/5

Content: 4/5

Walter says

An excellent overview of the history of Buddhism, from its beginnings in India (with a thorough grounding in earlier Indian religious thought) through its development in other parts of Asia. Pays particular attention to how Buddhism grew and changed in Tibet and Japan (countries whose traditions have had the biggest presence in the U.S.), as well as China and to a lesser extent, Southeast Asia. More than just a history, the lectures include insights into many core concepts of Buddhism, including no-self, emptiness, and competing ideas about enlightenment.

Gary Beauregard Bottomley says

This Great Course Lecture series covers the religion by considering the historical context of the faith. (I'm not even sure if "faith" is the correct word to use in this context since as a whole Buddhist don't seem to believe in pretending to know things they don't know). I'm not sure if there is a source for what I want regarding learning about the tenets of Buddhism. As the lecturer said one of the early beliefs for Buddhism is all things are impermanent and that includes Buddhism itself. Well, I'll still be on the look out for a book on the subject to read in order to understand a little bit more about Buddhism.

Nathan Albright says

Part One:

As someone who has listened to a wide variety of faith-based Great Courses so far [1], one aspect that I have noticed is a consistent difficulty is the way that many instructors assume that the people listening to these courses are those who are members of or sympathizers with the religious traditions involved. While this may be true of many people who take such course, it is generally not the case for me because there are as far as I know no sympathetic mentions of, much less explorations of, my own faith tradition in this collection of audiobooks. This book in particular suffers from assuming the listener is familiar with or interested with

Buddhism because it does not give a portrayal that is sympathetic to Buddhism at all for someone who comes to it from a biblical worldview. Enough is discussed in enough detail that someone who does have a biblical worldview is going to be even more unsympathetic of Buddhism than they would before, and admittedly I did not come to this course particularly sympathetic to the Buddhist worldview, especially given the way that Buddhist meditation is a common element of treatments that are encouraged for PTSD and related issues.

After introducing what Buddhism is in the first lecture, the professor of this course spends a considerable amount of time discussing the context of India at the time of the Buddha and the importance of the reprehensible doctrine of reincarnation within Indian religion and the defective cosmology of an infinite past with an infinite amount of lives for souls wandering in the misery of death and rebirth. After this the author gives an overly credulous discussion of the story of the Buddha, not only his life, but also some truly ridiculous stories about supposed previous lives. After this there are discussions of the passing and temporary nature of life and the supposed absence of anything permanent like identity, the immensely long and difficult path to Nirvana, an ideal of nothingness and annihilation, as well as discussions of the Buddhist monastic community and their idolatrous art and architecture. It is at this part that the course gets even stranger than it was--and it was already pretty disturbingly strange--in talking about the main schisms of Buddhism with Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Mahayana Buddhism and the truly bizarre ideal of the bodhisattva. The next lecture discusses various imaginary celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas that are invoked in ways that seem to be a horrible parody of Roman Catholic sainthood. The lectures close with a view of emptiness that appear to contradict what the original Buddha himself said, demonstrative of the wide diversity of contradictory belief systems within Buddhism.

As the professor expresses it, Buddhism differs from biblical religion in a lot of fundamental ways for faiths which are often viewed as being close. For one, the doctrine of karmic debt is a horrifying way of blaming the victim/survivor of life's tragedies for some supposed debt from past lives that have to be repaid through present or future suffering. The lack of a permanent identity contrasts negatively with the biblical truth of people being created in the image and likeness of God with the opportunity to enjoy eternal life, as permanent an identity as one could have. At its best, the supposed wisdom of the professor and the worldview he is promoting here merely approaches the cynical and despairing paradoxes of Solomon in Ecclesiastes in thinking that under the sun all is vanity and futility, which is the same sort of view that Buddhism possesses, with the additional handicap that it does not view of a life above the sun but rather views things only from under the sun, in a world that is supposed to be without beginning and without end, nothing but turtles all the way down. That such a pathetic and ridiculous worldview could command the assent of hundreds of millions of people only demonstrates the depths of superstition and idolatry and folly that humanity can fall into.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

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Part Two:

I must admit that going into this particular course I did not know a lot about the specific subject matter of the aspects of Buddhism that the professor was teaching, although it turned out that I knew more than I had expected, whether that was about the author's fondness for Tibet [1] or the importance of Buddhism to Japanese culture, or even the role of Buddhism in spreading the occult to the United States, something the instructor seems strangely proud of. One of the upsides of listening to or reading something where the person presenting the material thinks that they are writing to an insider audience of fellow believers or sympathizers is that they are more honest and more outspoken than they would be if they felt that people were being critical or negative. In this case the instructor's honesty and enthusiasm demonstrates his fondness for syncretism and his love of fake deep religious thinking and his general interest in the influence of Buddhism on contemporary world culture, without thinking whether that is a good thing or not. Most of the people listening to these lectures, I would think, would at least be likely to agree with him.

The contents of this particular series of 12 lectures in six hours of presentation are varied. The professor spends a lecture each on Buddhist philosophy and tantra in particular, which he tends to soft-pedal the sexual nature of and focus on the way that it gives power through experience. After that the professor discusses the theory and practice of the mandala and the way that it appears in ideas like that of the various chakras. Three lectures follow on different aspects of Buddhism in Tibet: the first efforts at conversion during the short-lived Tibetan Empire, the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and the Dalai Lama. Two more lectures follow on the origins and classical period of Chinese Buddhism with its blend with Taoism and Confucianism. After this comes three lectures of Japanese Buddhism, with the origins of its blend with native Shinto religion, a discussion of Honen, Shinran, and Nichiren Buddhism, and a separate lecture on the familiar Zen Buddhism, before the instructor ends with an intriguing and odd look at Buddhism in America. Whatever can be said about the instructor's view of the protean nature of Buddhism and its tendency to change even as it seeks to change the cultures it is in, the instructor at least appears pretty honest even if not completely so.

One area where I have some significant disagreement with the instructor is the nature of the appeal of Buddhism. The author tends to think that the view that everyone suffers and that Buddhism offers some kind of illusory escape from suffering is the main reason for Buddhism's appeal in all of its many and varied forms. In my mind, though, there are a few things that make Buddhism appealing. For one, Buddhist philosophers have always grafted Buddhism onto local traditions and sought to blend certain elements of Buddhism with what was already present in the host society. For another, Buddhism appears to be most interested, at least in its Western incarnations, with trying to appeal to people who want to avoid taking responsibility for the state of their life. Buddhist beliefs in endless reincarnation offer a chance for people to try to blame the suffering of their lives on some kind of karmic debt that they have to pay off, or alternatively for them to justify how well off they are relative to the rest of the world by appealing to the more noble state of their own souls relative to that of others who are less well off. This seems to me a rather artful but shabby dodge of the real nature of things.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

[2] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2014...>

Aryeh Levine says

I enjoyed this dive into the history, religion, and philosophy of Buddhism. Dr. Eckel keeps it somewhat light, which is appreciated, as the main theme of the religion seems to be that the world is on fire. This is not a practical guide in any way- you will not learn how to meditate or get any closer to Buddhahood by the end of the lecture, but you will know a whole lot more about Buddhism in all its incarnations by the time you finished. Dr. Eckel is definitely deeply knowledgable and passionate about Buddhism and kept the subject matter fresh throughout the series, but I got the sense that he is much more excited about, say, touching the shoes of the 5th incarnation of the Dalai Lama than getting an actual experience of not having a self. Nevertheless, if you like me and came to this lecture as a meditator seeking to understand more about the religious, political, cultural and historical context of Buddhism, this is a good place to start.

Teo 2050 says

[Eckel MD (2001) (12:30) Buddhism

01. What is Buddhism?
02. India at the Time of the Buddha
03. The Doctrine of Reincarnation
04. The Story of the Buddha
05. All Is Suffering
06. The Path to Nirvana
07. The Buddhist Monastic Community
08. Buddhist Art and Architecture
09. Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia
10. Mahayana Buddhism and the Bodhisattva Ideal
11. Celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
12. Emptiness
13. Buddhist Philosophy
14. Buddhist Tantra
15. The Theory and Practice

Paul says

I had a very different idea about Buddhism before this. It opened my eyes to the variety of Buddhism all around the world. It also eliminated some more fantastic notions about the religion I had had. In the end, I was a little disappointed because the religion eventually evolved in directions I disliked. Image worshiping, superstition and all those things that make up so many other religions abound in many of those different flavors of Buddhism. It was an educational course for me.

Kathy Nealen says

Perhaps it is the nature of Buddhism, but it seemed like the lecturer was talking around Buddhism more than talking about Buddhism. I guess there is a limit to what one can say about emptiness and No Self. I think he should have added a bonus lecture that was completely blank.

Jan Anne says

Best Great Courses I've done yet. Passionate teacher and a fascinating religion, culture & history

Timothy says

This course was thorough in presentation of the history, but there were times that I felt the author leaned too heavily on the historical growth of Buddhism to different cultures and forms than in the explication of Buddhist theory. Which is fine, but I wanted more theory.

That may very well be a function of the lack of specificity in Buddhism itself, and not a weakness in the presentation. In fact, the author on several occasions mentioned that it is notoriously hard to determine what Buddhism "is" or "believes," etc.

That said, I don't remember nearly a single of the many names of various influential Buddhist monks that the author took pains to mention and catalog in the history; the ideas are much more important, at least to me.

Andrew says

I've had lots of education about world religions, and tons regarding Buddhism. Finally, with this series, I found a point where I could connect at a personal level. I'm in a state of gratitude for this one.

Morgan Blackledge says

It's ok.

~_(?)_/~

Jon Stout says

More lectures I listen to while I'm driving: This series was twenty-four lectures and very thorough and engaging, covering the spread of Buddhism from India into Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. I was impressed by the influence of Buddhism, growing out of Hinduism and interacting with Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism. No corner of Asia is untouched, unless it be some corner of Siberia.

In the detailed descriptions of Buddhist schools, I was interested to note a dozen or more parallels to the history of western philosophy. For example, one school asserted no positions, but adopted the method of assuming opponents' positions and showing the absurdities which resulted. This approach parallels Socrates' style, and the logical method of *reductio ad absurdum*. The many parallels were fascinating and led me to believe that some movements of thought are perennial and transcend individual cultures.

Tina Panik says

Excellent in scope and narration, this course will enlighten both new and old practitioners alike.

Joe says

This audiobook of Buddhism was a very enlightening listen, 24 lessons 2 lessons per cd on 12 cds. The author kept the lessons very interesting and relevant. I really learned a lot about Buddhism and the differences and similarities from other religions. I can easily give this 4/5 stars
