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Religion

An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality
William Stoddart
World Wisdom
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In *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality*, scholar William Stoddart provides a comprehensive and succinct summary of the diverse expressions of Buddhist teachings and culture across history. In just 160 pages, his concise account covers tremendous breadth and is brought to life with eighty full-color illustrations of Buddhist art and architecture, along with many maps and charts.

This overview will be helpful to the novice, explaining many terms essential to Buddhist thought. In the first chapters, Stoddart recounts the life of the Buddha and other early figures and defines the basic teachings and nature of Buddhism. In the second half of the book, he explores the many variations on this foundation, with chapters on the unique cultural developments in numerous countries where Buddhism took hold. These sections include summaries of Zen Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, and Shintoism, along with insights into common Western misconceptions about reincarnation and pantheism in Eastern thought.

On reincarnation, for instance, Stoddart notes that in the West, "the notion of 'reincarnation' has been adopted by many cultists who … profess to believe in it literally, envisaging a series of human rebirths in this world." According to Stoddart, the Buddhist conception of "transmigration" instead is far more subtle and refers to the "posthumous journeying of the unsanctified soul through an indefinite series of 'peripheral' or 'central' (but, quite emphatically, non-terrestrial) states." This general description begs for further explanation, which Stoddart attempts to provide by equating the Buddhist concept of transmigration with the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, though he asserts that a soul in purgatory is assured of paradise, whereas the "fate of a soul in transmigration may still be hell."

Similar attempts to compare Buddhist doctrines with Christian, Islamic, and other religions are threaded throughout the book and are consistent with Stoddart's grounding in perennial philosophy, a perspective that assumes certain universal principles underlie all

religious beliefs. Some readers will find these assertions enlightening, while others will likely be maddened by them. Implying that heaven is the equivalent of nirvana or that one can be rescued from one's karma in the "saving efficacy of the revealed means of grace (which are activated by faith and practice)" may be helpful parallels to a reader with a distinctly Christian or specifically Catholic perspective, but will seem forced to readers attuned to the nuances unique to Buddhist thought.

Rather than approaching Buddhism on its own terms, this perennial philosopher frequently defines it using Western terminology and religious references, explaining Buddhist thought while citing sources as wide-ranging as Plato, Moliere, St. Catherine, and Frithjof Schuan and quoting the Western Bible nearly as often as he quotes Buddhist scriptures. Perhaps the argument can be made that Christianity and Buddhism essentially share the same world view and provide similar paths to salvation, but in his concise format, Stoddart's confident assumptions are not fully explained or supported.

The book is well produced, and the many color illustrations are attractive and engaging. The slim volume has a curiously timeless design, with glossy cream-colored pages and fonts that could have been pulled from an aging book on a library shelf.

If one is comfortable with the distinctly Western orientation of the book's terminology and narrative, Stoddart's illustrated outline provides an accessible, often compelling, and encompassing introduction to the study of Buddhism.

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