

# **THE PATH OF BUDDHISM**

**by George D. Chryssides**

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is difficult to know where to begin when introducing any religion. If Christians were asked to present Christianity (in its entirety) to total strangers, should they describe Syrian Orthodoxy or the Salvation Army? Should they mention Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, whom most Christians have never read at first hand? Or would it be better to comment on the average member in the pew who attends a Women's Guild or Fellowship Meeting? Perhaps it would be preferable to give the story of the Old and New Testaments: this might seem a promising approach, but, even so, how many Christians have read the Bible from cover to cover?

To describe Buddhism presents the same problems magnified to an infinitely greater degree. There are many more brands of Buddhism than of Christianity, but if we described these, we would not be giving a picture of 'what every Buddhist knows', since many Buddhists are only familiar with their own variety. We could study some of the scholars, yet many Buddhists have never heard of Nagarjuna or Tsongkhapa, great though these men were. We could try examining the scriptures, but different Buddhists use different religious writings, and the total amount of scripture is so vast that no scholar, either eastern or western, has read it all. If we pay too much attention to the monk, we neglect what it is like to be a Buddhist layperson. If we focus too narrowly on the folk practices and pageantry of the various festivals, we might be left with the impression that Buddhism is an unreflecting faith, practised by fairly simple folk.

In the end, any writer must compromise. I have chosen to present a cross-section of Buddhism, looking at its origins and development, its beliefs and practices, and then the various traditions that exist. I have tried to view it from the vantage-point of the monk, the layperson, the scholar, the person who is born in a Buddhist country, the westerner who comes into contact with Buddhist people or ideas. To attempt all this may be over-ambitious, and I am aware that where I have stopped to comment on the ideas of some of Buddhism's great thinkers, there is the risk of losing the attention of readers who prefer more of a travelogue to the more abstract ideas of philosophers. However, to ignore the latter could easily perpetuate the myth that we in the west have a monopoly of solid reflection on religious matters. On the few occasions when the going is slightly tougher, I have alerted those readers who may be less at home with abstractions, and who can skip through these more intellectual forests to the next clearing.

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