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## **Pankaj Mishra's *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the Contemporary World***

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### **Abstract**

The Buddhism, one of the most ancient religions of the world, began in India around 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and has found itself blossoming even in the contemporary world. The Buddha, which means 'the enlightened one' was not God, or, His Emissary on earth, but the individual who had managed to liberate himself from ordinary human suffering, and then, out of compassion, had shared his insights with others. He had placed no value on prayer or belief in a deity; he had not spoken of creation, original sin or the last judgment. He had spoken instead of a suffering that was man-made and thus eradicable. He had confined himself to human beings, living everyday lives with desire, attachment, pride, jealousy, and hatred. Pankaj Mishra's novel *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* (2004) is in the best traditions of the Buddhism. It is both dispassionate and deeply engaged, complicated and simple, erudite and profoundly humane. Is the Buddha still relevant today and

if so, in what ways? Mishra tries to answer this question as he travels through South Asia to Europe and America. His main emphasis is to discover how Buddhist thought has flowered even in the heyday of materialistic world. To Mishra, in the contemporary world which is a vast panorama of futility, anarchy, terror, and horror, it is the Buddha who has come to represent enlightenment. It is the Buddha who seems calm and clear-sighted, having thrown away all the usual baggage: theology, god, soul, sweet expectation or numbing dread or the idea of eternity.

### **Keywords**

The Buddha; Suffering; Modern World; Pankaj Mishra; *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*.

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The Buddhism, one of the most ancient religions of the world, began in India around 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., and has found itself blossoming even in the contemporary world. One must wonder what the Buddhism has to offer to educated and technologically informed world. What is here in the Buddhism that traditional religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity cannot offer? The Buddha, which means ‘the enlightened one’ was not God, or, His Emissary on earth, but the individual who had managed to liberate himself from ordinary human suffering, and then, out of compassion, had shared his insights with others. He had placed no value on prayer or belief in a deity; he had not spoken of creation, original sin or the last judgment. He had spoken instead of a suffering that was manmade and thus eradicable. He had confined himself to human beings living everyday lives with desire, attachment, pride, jealousy, and hatred. The present paper is divided into two parts: part one succinctly introduces seminal teachings of the Buddha; and part two aims to discuss the novel *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* written by noted writer Pankaj Mishra where he heavily dwells on the Buddha and his relevance and

significance in the contemporary world which is a vast panorama of futility, anarchy, terror, and horror.

## I

According to the Buddhist tradition, Shakyamuni (a name meaning “Sage of the Shakya Clan”) is the founder of the Buddhism. Shakyamuni was born around 490 B.C.E. to a royal family who lived in a palace in the foothills of the Himalayas. In his youth, Shakyamuni’s father provides him with everything he wants and encourages him to excel in his studies. However, he would not permit Shakyamuni to leave the palace grounds. Shakyamuni grows up with many luxuries and married a beautiful princess, but he still is not happy. He longs to see what was beyond the palace gates, thinking that a clue to his search for the meaning of life lay beyond the safety and luxury of the palace.

At the age of 29, Shakyamuni makes four visits to a park outside the city of Kapilavastu and encounters successively, an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic, a *sramana*. He is deeply affected and disturbed by these sights; they tell him of the decay, suffering, and the death that come in everyone’s life. He decides to renounce the palace, his wife Yashodhara, his newborn son Rahul and goes forth into the world to understand more about life, why human beings suffer, and how one can help relieve suffering in the world. Thus, he begins his journey as a seeker of wisdom.

Shakyamuni begins his search for enlightenment. According to the Buddhist belief, enlightenment is the experience of true reality, an “awakening” through which one could comprehend the true nature of things. Initially he practices asceticism, a lifestyle of severe discipline to attain enlightenment. After six years of enduring many hardships strictly abstaining from eating and drinking, Shakyamuni realizes that he has not come to a deeper understanding of life. He realizes that neither luxury nor starvation would lead to enlightenment and instead decides to follow a moderate path or the *Middle Way*.

There are these two extremes, monks, which one who has left the world should not pursue. Which two? (On the one hand giving oneself up to indulgence in sensual pleasure; this is base, common, vulgar, unholy, unprofitable. (On the other hand) giving oneself up to self-torment; this painful, unholy (and also) unprofitable. (*Samyutta Nikaya* 1843)

He goes to a place Bodh Gaya where he becomes awakened to a true understanding of life. The moment of his enlightenment takes place in meditation under a tree. In his enlightenment, he gains the power to see his former lives, the power to see death and rebirth of all types, and finally the realization that he has eliminated all desires and ignorance within himself. He has analysed that desires and ignorance arise from a craving for and an attachment to a self that has no true existence. He has developed analytic and contemplative techniques which prove that neither the self nor the phenomenal world is solid, stable, and discrete. All of them are in a flux. In this way he becomes the Buddha, a title meaning “awakened one.”

The Buddha explains the following four noble truths:

1. *Dukkha*, life is suffering
2. *Samudaya*, the origin or arising of *dukkha*, craving
3. *Nirodha*
4. *Marga*, the way leading for the cessation of *dukkha*

The fourth noble truth lays down the eightfold path, which describes a journey from high moral behaviour to meditation to wisdom, and culminates in the cessation of suffering. They are:

1. Right View ( Action, speech and thought should flow out of an awareness of things as they are, impermanent and unsatisfactory)
2. Right Intention (Freeing oneself from selfishness and sensual pleasure, and acting with compassion and benevolence)
3. Right Speech (A rigorous distance from false, hurtful and idle character)

4. Right Action (No violence, stealing or sexual misconduct)
5. Right Livelihood (Without violating the rights of others)
6. Right Effort (A constant vigilance against unwholesome mental states like anger, greed and malice)
7. Right Mindfulness (Perpetual awareness of the body feelings and thoughts)
8. Right Concentration (Focusing the mind on a single object)

The Four Noble Truths form the basis of the Buddhist thought. It is believed that suffering, in part, is due to the impermanence of life. Even if one is happy at a given time, this happiness is not permanent. Since it is believed that life is suffering, the Buddhists also believe that human beings have the potential to become free from suffering by practicing meditation and cultivating a lifestyle prescribed by the Buddha. The ultimate goal in the Buddhism is to end the cycle of suffering, the cycle of repeated death and rebirth. The achievement of this goal is called *nirvana*.

## II

Pankaj Mishra, as a writer, came into limelight with the publication of a highly acclaimed book of fiction, *The Romantics*. His most acclaimed writing so far is *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. This is part biography, part history, part travel book, and part philosophic treatise. But above all it could best be described as a work of intellectual autobiography as opposed to spiritual one because Mishra is not a Buddhist- he “couldn’t sit still” long enough to meditate successfully- and his story is not a narrative of conversion or a road map to inner peace, at least not in the expected sense (*An End to Suffering: Philosopher King*). *An End to Suffering* (the title contrasts with the Christian goal of an end to sin) is both Mishra's historical analysis of Buddha's place in the 6th Century B.C. E. world, and not only a personal account of his contemporary experience of Buddhism but also of great intellectuals, thinkers,

and philosophers of modern day world. In 1992 Mishra moved to an isolated Himalayan village to read and reflect and eventually to travel in an effort to better understand Buddha's message. His scholarship paid off and he is able to accurately describe "the invention of Buddhism" by 19th and 20th century writers and archaeologists, as well as the 6th century B.C. world of Northern India with its small kingdoms and a pantheon of Hindu gods. This was an era of a countercultural conflict with the overthrow of the Brahman priests and the emergence of radical thinkers. It was hard to be a Hindu, and as Nietzsche suggested, it was a time like 19th century Europe when it became hard to be a Christian. Indeed, Mishra draws upon his scholarly knowledge of European literature as well as the history of Indian thought, and he finds parallels to both in Buddha's time.

The Buddha seems to have inspired something of a cult in nineteenth and early twentieth century's artists and intellectuals of Europe and America in significant ways. Schopenhauer often spoke admiringly of the Buddha and towards the end of his life even claimed that he and his followers were the first European Buddhists. The German writer Hermann Hesse wrote *Siddhartha* (1922) a novel about the renunciation of young Buddha, which was embraced by 1960s young Europeans and Americans who were disenchanted with the aggressive and all enveloping nature of materialism in their times. Henry David Thoreau, in America, translated a French version of the Buddhist text, the *Lotus Sutra*, into English. Nietzsche renewed his attacks on Christianity by comparing it to Buddhism, which he thought was a subtle product of a old and exhausted civilizations. In this connection we cannot ignore the impact of the Buddhism not only on philosophers and intellectuals but also on scientists and ethnologists. Albert Einstein had called the Buddhism as the religion of the future since it was compatible with modern science. The French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss had ended his memoir, *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), with extraordinary praise of the Buddha:

What else, indeed, have I learned from the masters who taught me, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have visited and even from the science which is the pride of the West, apart from a few scraps of wisdom which, when laid end to end, coincide with the meditation of the Sage at the foot of the tree? (503)

During Buddha's time, there was plenty of suffering – the suffering of people uprooted from their native habitats and forced into cities. There was the suffering of loneliness caused by the breakdown of the old social order. There was also the suffering caused by wars of conquest: the large new armies of the big kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha overrunning the smaller republics. The Buddha's own clan, the Shakyas, were slaughtered in one such war a few years before his death. Organized greed, war and genocide were the part and parcel of the Buddha's times. In this connection Mishra Observes:

They seem to have led him to his suspicion of the amoral individualism which was rapidly emerging in the India of his time, and which was reflected in the politics and the philosophical speculation of his peers. Their presence partly explains the obsessive way in which he tried to undermine the idea that there was anything like an autonomous or stable individual self. (330)

This situation can well be compared to the current Indian- Pakistani battle over Kashmir, and indeed the entire bloody 20th century and first two decades of 21<sup>st</sup> century. India and Pakistan have been involved in two wars over Kashmir. Pakistan which came into existence as a separate homeland for Indian Muslims during the partition of India in 1947, have always claimed the Muslim majority Valley of Kashmir. The young generation of Muslims, better educated and much articulated, have begun to chafe at the lack of democracy and economic development in the valley. The Indian government so far has not done the full justice. It is more interested in joining Kashmir valley in so called

mainstream culture than to acknowledge and give importance to the distinct culture of Valley. Mishra broods:

As in Algeria, Iran and Egypt anxiety about modernization, about cultural influences from elsewhere and rampant unemployment turned, in Kashmir, into an anxiety about religion: the notion that not only Muslims but Islam itself was in danger. (313)

As a result, by the year 2000, due to Pakistan supported anti-India insurgency, more than thirty thousand people – militants, soldiers and civilians – had died. Explosion of bombs, poking out of machine guns, turning of hotels and boulevards into bunkers by army men, transformation of Srinagar into debris of dilapidated houses and springing up of new graveyards, converted Kashmir the paradise into a sullen and tensed haven. And top of it this dire scenario prompted Bill Clinton, the then President of U.S.A., to term Kashmir as the ‘most dangerous place in the world’.

In the same corollary we can talk about the violence which erupted after the fall of twin tower on 9/11, in the cyclical manner, the problem of Israel and Palestine over Gaza which results in the death of innocents and emergence of multitudes of refugees almost every year. Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the way they sabotaged the tall statues of the Buddha in the Bamiyan valley, renaming the name of museum of Kabul. In the streets of Peshawar Afghan refugee selling drugs and guns and mosque preachers rallied against virtuous infidels. And most recently killings of children in an army school in Pakistan. They seem to obliterate the memories of Asanga and Vasubandhu, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist philosophers. Back in India the massacre of Hindu nationalists of over two thousand Muslims in Gujarat has proved that the Hindus are growing more fundamental and militant.

Amidst this vast panorama of futility, anarchy, terror and horror we have many instances of modern Buddhas. Over more than four decades of exile, Dalai Lama continued his insistence on non-violence to solve the problem of



Tibet, the victim of Chinese brutality. He threatened to resign his leadership of the Tibetan community in exile if Tibetans ever resorted to the violent insurrection against the Chinese. In the same fashion, the Buddhist democrat Aung San Suu Kyi refuses to lead an armed struggle against the military rulers of Myanmar who kept her under house arrest for more than a decade.

What is the validity of the Buddha in these troubled times? What the Buddha has to offer, who lived in simpler time, to the people fighting for political oppression, social and economic injustice, and environmental destruction? Undoubtedly he hadn't conceived of the radical, large scale social engineering that almost all modern ideologies right or left – socialism, free market, democracy, radical Islam, Hindu nationalism, and liberal imperialism. But it must be taken into account that his indifference to political affairs was part of his mission whereby he laid more emphasis on individually achieved enterprises rather than collectively organized redemption or salvation. In this regard Pankaj ruminates:

To live in the present, with a high degree of self awareness and compassion manifested even in the smallest acts and thoughts – this sounds like private remedy for private distress. But the deepening and ethicizing of everyday life was part of the Buddha's bold and original response to the intellectual and spiritual crisis of his time – the crisis created by the break-up of smaller societies and the loss of older moralities. In much of what he had said and done he had addressed the suffering of human beings deprived of old consolations of faith and community and adrift in a very large world full of strange temptations and dangers. (403)

Certainly Buddhism may help us see that striving for political and social change could not be separated from a striving of inner transformation. There is little point in trying to restructure societies if individual minds are still cluttered with greed, anger and delusion.

Individual's sufferings are due to over engagement with greed, hatred and delusion. But at the same time it is equally true that they are also the source of life its pleasures too, however temporary, and that to vanquish them would be a kind of living in nothingness that is more terrifying than liberating. Nevertheless, the effort to control them seems a task more worth making. If we want to save this world it would be mandatory for us to take this task as a vocation, as a kind of ethical life in a world triggered by the motives of greed, hatred, and delusion. This emerges as a powerful reason to make the Buddha contemporary. In a society where violence and confusion are the part and parcel of our daily affair, the teachings of the Buddha hold out the possibility of knowledge as well as redemption- an awareness which is certainly liberating.

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