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Book Reviews

Buddhism in 5 Minutes, edited by Elizabeth J Harris. Equinox, 2021. 406pp. Hb. £70. ISBN-13: 9781800500891; Pb. £24.95. ISBN-13: 9781800500914; eBook. £24.95. ISBN-13: 9781800500914.

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The Buddhist tradition is multi-faceted, with a wealth of scripture, art, historiography, and debate—an abundance of knowledge that is difficult for even the most seasoned academic to grasp. *Buddhism in Five Minutes* attempts to alleviate this, providing an in-depth discussion of seventy-five different subjects across eleven themes, written by specialists in each area. This book is largely in an accessible register for beginners new to the tradition, but with enough depth and detail that, after 7 years of formal education centering Buddhism, I have learned many new things from reading it. As a former Buddhist Studies student who is now engaging with Buddhism within religious education in England, I consider this book a formidable resource.

Buddhism in Five Minutes is part of the "Religion in Five Minutes" series, produced by Equinox Publishing, that aims to create short and accessible books and currently has 14 issues published or forthcoming, discussing, amongst others, paganism, Mormonism, Buddhism, and Indigenous Religious traditions. All of the issues follow the same format: short chapters written by specialists and academics which can be read in or around five minutes, so that readers of all backgrounds can engage with the traditions in an academically rigorous way. The thematic chapter groups cover eleven topics, and total 75 short essays on topics such as Buddhism and race, Western Buddhism, Buddhism and pacifism, holy texts, non-self, and mindfulness. From an educational point of view, this book discusses a number of questions often asked by students and those which often appear in GCSE and A-Level exam specifications, such as Buddhist responses to science, what it means to become enlightened or awakened, and, "who is the fat Buddha figure?". In this way, the book manages to cover a mix of doctrinal topics alongside less expected ones—such as the "fat Buddha"—which reconciles with Harris' suggested reading approach, to begin with a chapter that you find most interesting and move on from there (1).

All 75 chapters cover topics that would be useful to teachers and pupils, whether studying for GCSEs, A-Levels, or university courses, who want to gain a well-rounded understanding of some of the many elements of the Buddhist tradition.

Keywords: Buddhism, education, ethics, key teachings

The structure of the text allows for detailed explanation of all the key doctrinal facets of Buddhism, as well as anthropological questions, ethical questions, and topical issues such as "How do Buddhists view artificial intelligence?". From my teaching experience, three chapters stand out as particularly useful for the teaching of Buddhism in schools: "Is Buddhism atheistic, non-theistic, or theistic?", "What is Nirvana?", and "To what extent does Buddhism 'deny the Self'? The non-self teaching." These chapters cover notoriously tricky aspects of the tradition that are frequently questioned by teachers and students alike.

The first of these chapters concerns a common misconception about Buddhism—that there are no gods. Although Buddhism is not concerned with a creator God, there are mortal gods, or devas, who are subject to the same cycle of rebirth as humans. Peter Harvey's first chapter, of 9 in the volume, explains the role and lives of gods, existing across twenty-six different heavens in Buddhist cosmology. He explains the Buddha's criticisms of theistic views, namely citing the existence of suffering in the world, before discussing the interactions the Buddha had with lower devas, and noting that shrines to some of these gods are often seen in Buddhist temples—something which often shocks students. Finally, Harvey discusses the role of heavenly—but not Godly in the Abrahamic sense—Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Simply and succinctly addressing the question of whether or not Buddhism has a creator God, Harvey explains a few of the ways in which the Gods interact with Buddhism, to alleviate any confusion as to how there can be gods that aren't God.

"What is Nirvana?" by Arjuna C. B. Ranatunga tackles a difficult and confusing topic with clarity in just four pages. Ranatunga begins with a brief explanation of nirvana: it is the "good goal" of Buddhism, which provides meaning for many Buddhists: it is the extinction of craving; and it is beyond description (112). The use of scripture in this chapter is particularly adept. Buddhist scripture is difficult to parse without context and prior experience and Ranatunga has chosen, edited, and commentated on excerpts in such a way that they become far more understandable and accessible to even the newest of novices.

Finally, the teaching of non-self can prove particularly difficult for students, which is often met with a plethora of useful but convoluted metaphors to help explain the teaching. Christopher V. Jones's chapter cuts through much of the complexity, offering a clear and concise explanation of the term "non-self" and the ideas behind it, alongside a comparison to contemporary Indian religious traditions. Jones's explanation, that there is nothing within a human which should be "mistaken for an enduring, essential kernel of our identity [or thought of as] intrinsically valuable," expertly explains the teaching in understandable terms (100). The chapter as a whole expounds the teaching in such a way that a complete beginner would feel confident to explain it.

Furthermore, one of Denise Cush's chapters, "Should Buddhism be taught in schools?" touches on my own area of research and eloquently summarises some of the many issues that have faced those who teach and have taught tertiary-level Buddhism in England, from its beginning in the 1960s to today. Cush highlights criticisms that the topic is too difficult, too challenging for teachers, and Buddhist

pupils do not find their own beliefs reconcile with what they are being taught. Scholarship surrounding Buddhism within English education is treated deftly and explained well, giving the reader a sense of the extent of the teaching landscape and the struggles that go along with it.

The main strength of this book, and the series in general, is that it has allowed for teachers, students, or anyone interested in Buddhism to immediately be able to access understandable scholarship from the best Buddhist Studies academics in the world. It is a great asset for anyone interested in the tradition, and an example of how cutting-edge scholarship can be made accessible for all. However, part of this strength reveals a weakness of the volume, in that scholars who have spent years within the academy, often when aiming to write accessibly, still at times manage to write at a register that is potentially too difficult for many readers. These sections of a higher register do not occur within *Buddhism for five minutes* continually, but they are frequent enough that it may dissuade some readers. This can be attributed to the fact that the book's audience—the novice—is a definitionally fuzzy category which is not as small as it may first appear. Is the novice someone with higher education but no formal Buddhist education? A GCSE or A-Level student? Or simply someone with interest in Buddhism? Arguably, these three categories would require different nuance in approach, and the overarching goal of "writing for a novice" may have caused some of the difficulties with register. Despite this, on the whole the volume remains a largely accessible work—notably in contrast with the traditional academic register.

My primary criticism of the book is acknowledged in its own introduction, in which Harris writes that had they had space they would have liked to include a chapter on Buddhism and disability or Buddhism and conversion. Although the scope of any text rarely allows for all of the information that the author[s] would like to include, it seems a shame to omit a chapter as important as Buddhism and disability, especially when some of the 14 chapters in the "What the Buddha taught" sections could arguably have been synthesised into fewer chapters covering a similar level of material. Although the length and scope of the text may have been a publishing decision and not related to the authors, to highlight a useful and interesting topic without then being able to engage with it further felt like an admission of oversight.

Despite a few small criticisms, this book remains an enriching resource for teachers, students, and anyone with an interest in the Buddhist tradition. The ease with which this world-class scholarship can be accessed is not often seen, and I am sure this text will serve as a much-loved and well-utilised resource for many years to come.