

Buddhism, by Donald W. Mitchell

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

Newcomers to the Buddhist tradition are often bewildered by the sheer variety of often contradictory perspectives and approaches. From early in its history, Buddhism has been creative and flexible in adapting to the cultures it encountered across Asia and, in more recent times, Europe and America. Many Buddhist traditions, from Sri Lanka to Korea, from Tibet to Japan, now can be encountered in urban and rural monastic settings across the U.S. This mix of cultures and forms of Buddhist practice can be both enticing and baffling.

Donald Mitchell of Purdue University has been at the center of Buddhist-Christian dialogue for many years and has a firsthand familiarity with Buddhist leaders and the traditions they represent. He was a founding member of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and for many years edited the society's news bulletins on Buddhist-Christian dialogues around the world. As an adviser to the Board of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, he played a major role in organizing the Gethsemane Encounter of 1996 and Gethsemane Encounter II in April 2002. His earlier work, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (1991), is a thoughtful engagement with and response to the Kyoto School of Japanese Buddhist philosophers, who studied Western philosophy and theology and reinterpreted their own Buddhist heritage in light of the East-West dialogue.

In this helpful introduction Mitchell leads the reader through a wide array of Buddhist schools with a clear sense of the ongoing rhythms of the Buddhist tradition. The narrative proceeds historically, beginning with the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha, tracing the early Buddhist debates, following the growth of Buddhism across Asia, and concluding with contemporary Buddhism both in Asia and in the West. Punctuating the discussion are personal narratives from leading Buddhist figures explaining various facets of Buddhist life and practice. The Dalai Lama describes the routine of a typical day in his life; Thai Buddhist leader Sulak Sivaraksa explains the importance of Socially Engaged Buddhism for the poor in Thailand.

While the sheer number of names and schools may be daunting to the newcomer, this is an excellent and reliable guide to the Buddhist tradition.