

Understanding Buddhism
Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought,
Nancy Wilson Ross; Vintage Random House, 1981;208 pp.

It is estimated that between one third and one-fifth of the people of the world follow some aspects of Buddhism, and that this number is steadily growing, not only in Asian countries like India, but also in modern Europe. In the USA, various forms of Buddhism have attracted a following. In Hawaii, America's newest state, Buddhism is the major religion. Many modern Westerners practice Zen; others have become enchanted by the Tibetan form of Buddhism through the Influence of exiled Tibetans, or they have taken instruction in Theravada Buddhism with teachers from Sri Lanka or Thailand.

Buddhism has nothing in common with Christianity. It is a man-centered religion; man is the instrument of his own destiny. Buddha himself has made this plain. He once said that "By one's self evil is done, by one's self one is purified. The pure and the impure stand and fall by themselves. No one can purify another." And unlike Christianity, it has no concept of a personal divinity. The author says: "It cannot be too often emphasized that Buddhism recognizes no sacred and revealed scripture and no divine personality existing outside and beyond man and his world. In Buddhism there is no personalized single great being whose final word is set forth in specific, sacred, never-to-be questioned writings, as in the Judeo-Christian Bible."

Nancy Wilson Ross gives special attention to the Theravanda tradition associated with Southeastern Asia and to the Tantrayana associated with Tibet and Zen, linked to Japan. She is a convert to Buddhism with a Christian-western background. This heritage becomes evident in her optimistic-philosophical description of Buddhism. She neglects to give an adequate treatment of folk-Buddhism though she admits that Buddhism abounds in contradictions and paradoxes. The proliferation of Buddhist deities, which is an integral part of Buddhism and art in certain cultures, illustrate the point.

Ross' discussion of Tibetan Buddhism doesn't take into consideration the awful results of the inherent feudal system of thought and practice. For centuries, the country has been in primitive darkness, gripped by fear and demonism. Han Suyin, in her book *Lhasa, The Open City*, counters the view that Tibet is a paradise lost.

Asiaweek (Nov. 13, 1981) reported that "There Is no question that Chinese rule has brought an unprecedented degree of economic security and social welfare to the average Tibetan. Only three decades ago, a tiny percentage of the population owned 95% of Tibet's arable land, and serfdom and slavery were everyday facts of life for a considerable number of Tibetans. The rate of infant mortality was among the world's highest, and illiteracy was widespread. Today, the signs of progress are everywhere, from new roads and schools to healthcare facilities, and extensive land reform has undeniably created a more equal distribution of assets." And it comments on its religion that "Although Tibetan religion is largely based on Mahayana Buddhism, it has also strong elements of demonolatry, a heritage of the ancient, animistic Bon creed native to

the region. Tantrism, a mixture of Shiva-worship and black magic, has also had considerable impact."

Despite my criticism, I hope that Nancy Wilson Ross' book will receive wide circulation. She has given a clear, refreshing and fascinating introduction to one of the world's major religions. Mission committees may want to purchase this book to aid them in their outreach to refugees from Southeast Asia.

Johan D. Tangelder
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