



I am not a Buddhist

Charity Seraphina Fields

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Albert Einstein supposedly once said that Buddhism has all the markings of a cosmic religion. This engaging little book paints Buddhism as the way of the world to come but yet explains patiently why it is all right to fail at trying to become a Buddhist.

With lucid style and characteristic wit, Ms Fields deftly interweaves the past, the present and the future, science and spirituality, the East and the West, earth and space, and prose and poetry to produce a rich tapestry studded not only with gems of stupefying similes and mesmerising metaphors, but also drenched with the distilled wisdom of the ages infused with original inspirational insight.

Buddhism is a religion for wealthy intellectuals, according to Fields. But read this beautifully crafted book to find out just who might be one.

(This print edition is also available as an ebook on Google Play and Lulu, republished with the authors permission under the title "Battle Against Infinity")

I am not a Buddhist Details

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From Reader Review I am not a Buddhist for online ebook

Ishiro Suzuki says

Well worth your time to read it (if you're interested in Philosophy, esp. Eastern)

What sets this book apart from the hundreds of other books on Buddhism is its main thesis, which is a novel departure from what most of us think of when it comes to Buddhism. According to Charity Fields, Buddhism is **useless** for tackling today's great problems (and neither is any other religion to be accurate in my paraphrasing). Buddhism, however, is proposed to be a solution to problems of a future advanced civilization. The following lines from Chapter one of the book summarizes its main message: "Buddhism is not the answer to the question: Why am I suffering without all those things I want? Buddhism is the answer to the question: Why am I still suffering even though I have everything I want?"

According to Fields, Buddhism is concerned with a higher kind of suffering which is usually masked by the abundance of everyday suffering. The terminology used to distinguish the two are "profound" suffering for the hidden existential angst and "mundane" suffering for the everyday type. The book proposes that our life is characterized by mundane plight because of which most of us (except wealthy intellectuals) can't see the existence of profound suffering. But despite this, Buddhism's main target is "profound suffering" because it can't do anything about the mundane stuff.

In actual fact, the author claims, nothing but modern Science can do anything about mundane suffering. This stance is another novel departure from the positions of many other books, even of writers like Joseph Campbell (or of Jay Gould in his final years). Many writers have assigned Science and Spirituality to two separate non-intersecting domains answering to different kinds of needs with fundamentally different modes of operation. But for Fields Science is more than highly relevant to the spiritual life. It is actually essential. For her, the truly spiritual experience cannot happen for the population at large unless our civilization is lifted to a high enough level which is possible only through advancements in Science and Technology.

As for the poetry intermingled with the prose or the writing style of Ms. Fields, I'll leave it to somebody else to judge. I'm not an expert appraiser of literature. I found her writing to be very accessible and engaging, however, and I didn't lose anything in my first reading when I plain skipped all the poems in the book.

Four stars for the stimulating content and originality. BTW, the name of the book is misleading. It is a book about Buddhism, and to name the book "I am not a Buddhist" seems to invite those whose who are looking for arguments against the religion, rather than those who are favorably inclined, which is the target audience. Cosmic Buddhism would have been a better title.

Vickie says

Interesting but not the best Buddhist book I have read. Some of the concepts were thought provoking. Thanks to Goodreads for receiving the book and the opportunity to read it.

Michelle says

It is a rare thing for me to say that I learned or took nothing from a book. Indeed, that was the case here. This book was so over-written and self-indulgent. I could actually feel how highly the author thought of herself.

Vas says

This is an excellent book. I enjoyed it more for its poetry and form rather than the actual content. But I'm not going to review it here. I discovered that the e-book edition of this book is available under a different title (Battle against infinity - <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15...>) on Google Play and on iTunes for \$0.99 on iTunes, which seems to be the one more people are reading. So I'll reserve my review for later under that title.

Jen says

This book was really amazing. The writing is bold and fresh. The author has a way of letting her perspective come out in a telling and natural way that left me captivated and wanting more. I recommended this book to some of my friends who would be interested. I am sure they will enjoy it just as much.

Debrah A says

Nice book, I enjoyed it (read the eBook and the print version alternately).

I promise to write a longer review later this month.

Brian Burns says

As coincidence would have it, I found this book in the New Books shelf at my local library (the North Central branch) on the same day I landed on its Kirkus review page linked through from a review of Batchelor's book. I picked it up and read it in two days. The Kirkus reviewer has it right - Fields isn't at all concerned with explaining Buddhism to us. She is mainly interested in why the Buddha preached what he did, and the circumstances in his life that led him to think the way he did. Here is a quick run-down of the book and its significant chapters (in my assessment).

What's it like to have everything you want? This is a question that I myself have obsessed over since my fortunate strokes of luck during the silicon valley dot-com boom. The reason I liked this book is because it largely echoes my own thoughts on the matter. Charity Fields dares to ask "Suppose you have everything you want - what next?"

In Ch.1, Way of the west, - Fields argues that the Buddha's personal life, which was one of royal luxury, is most similar to the lives of people in opulent societies (read "Western civilization" here). According to her,

Buddhism is better suited to highly civilized societies where people have their basic needs fulfilled. In the Preface (which follows Ch.1??), Fields argues that belief is not an on-off switch and we can't simply will ourselves to believe in God or rebirth if we are not naturally inclined. She also says she's unfortunately one of those who can't believe. In Ch.3, Sieve for suffering, she introduces the idea of two kinds of suffering: profound and crass, and describes a mental experiment by which we can separate out and identify the profound kind. According to Fields, it is this kind of suffering that will remain when Science has solved all of humanity's problems.

Ch.5, Bad Boss, draws an analogy of the human body to an office, and depicts desire as a bad boss. Two kinds of approaches to deal with a bad boss are described. The first is a slavish servitude to his needs and the other is a defiant denial. Fields concludes that neither works because desire is a cold and calculating boss who will work you to death no matter how much you give in to him or resist him. Ch.8, Buddha's I, is an account of the Buddha's own position on metaphysical issues. This was one of my favorite chapters. It says pretty much the same thing as Batchelor says, that the concept of God is simply irrelevant to the Buddha, and so he doesn't waste his breath arguing one way or another on that topic. Ch.9, My Many Masters, explores the identity of the person behind our desires. Fields claims that we are impelled to think and act by countless chemical configurations caused by our genetic makeup. In this sense we are simply robots, and our consciousness is an emergent phenomenon (referring back to her discussion of epiphenomenalism in Ch.8). Ch. 10 and 11 deal with the issue of extreme physical suffering, our feelings of helplessness in face of it, and how no religion is able to do anything about it despite their unsuccessful attempts (theories of Karma, Heaven, Hell, etc.). Ch. 12 and 13 are really major diversions (and I can totally see what the Kirkus reviewer means here). In Ch.12. Fields contends that since no religion is able to do anything about crass suffering, Science is our only hope. She goes on to propose scientific solutions in a not-too-distant humanity to address the issues of pain and inequity. I have no idea how Ch.13 even relates to the rest of the book - it proposes that heaven and hell may be vivid near death experiences. Maybe her intention is to reconcile somewhat with dogmatic theists, saying that she grants their notions aren't all that preposterous? No idea. Ch.14 concludes by discussing the experiential nature of enlightenment, talks about the inability of anyone no matter how gifted, to communicate its nature to another, and outlines a few simple exercises to help us get on the path to realizing it ourselves.

In summary, this is a great book filled with many original ideas and proposals. It promises to present a fresh perspective on Buddhism and has a fair bit of force in its claim that Buddhism is highly relevant to wealthy intellectuals. Fields' literary style is flowery and pretty, and though it feels overdone at times, is nevertheless engaging on the whole. The little poems that pepper the book (some quoted, some translated, some original) are definitely its highlights. Although I'm not an expert when it comes to poetry, I suspect the allegory describing Arthur's battle at Camlann at the start of the book is a winner. But the other long poem (Baker's song) in Ch.6, not so much. In summary, this is a short and sweet book, certainly a keeper. It can grace your bookshelf right alongside Batchelor's if you're so inclined.
