



Damien Keown. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1996, xiii + 141 pages, ISBN: 0-1928-5386-4, US \$8.95.

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If you're looking for a beginner's book that presents Buddhism in a nutshell, Damien Keown's *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*, part of Oxford University Press's *Short Introductions Series* and due to be re-released this month, is definitely one to consider. Concise and well-written, *A Very Short Introduction* contains just the right amount of material on doctrine, cosmology, history, culture, and practice to satisfy basic curiosity and stimulate interest in learning more.

The book is divided into nine short chapters, and its very readable prose is supplemented at regular intervals with maps, diagrams, charts, black-and-white photographs, and tables appropriate to the discussion at hand. There is also a brief pronunciation guide, index, and a list of suggested readings for further exploration of the topics taken up.

Keown makes constructive use of Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion (the practical, experiential, narrative, doctrinal, and so on) to give an overview and orientation to Buddhism in chapter one. The remaining chapters, titled "The Buddha," "Karma and Rebirth," "The Four Noble Truths," "The Mahāyāna," "Buddhism in Asia," "Meditation," "Ethics," and "Buddhism in the West" cover just enough ground in each of these areas for a reader to gain a comprehensive insight into Buddhism without getting lost in a welter of details that can easily make a first-time encounter tedious.

The brevity of this volume is both its strength and its weakness. *A Very Short Introduction* is reminiscent of Robinson's and Johnson's *The Buddhist Religion* in terms of its structure, scope, and balance, but not in its depth of discussion. Robinson and Johnson set the standard for introductory university course texts in Buddhism years ago, and *A Very Short Introduction* is not quite in that league. Such an intentionally concise beginner's work on a subject as vast as Buddhism requires that the author include only the most basic, yet the best representative materials in it. Keown has handled this task admirably and chosen his areas of discussion wisely. The result is a book that one would certainly recommend to any interested general reader; but not assign for a class.

There is one improvement that could make *A Very Short Introduction* the best "EveryPerson's Guide to Buddhism" available, namely the inclusion of selections of Buddhist religious writing at appropriate points in the text to give readers some flavor of its original forms of expression. Whether or not one goes on to learn more about Buddhism, encountering its literary beauty, at least once, would certainly add to the valuable experience that this volume already offers.