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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

My journey with Buddhism began in 2010, when difficult times in my personal life led me to question everything I knew. I decided to seek comfort in meditation and Buddhism, but the more I learned, the more I realized there was no secret formula to eliminating discomfort in my life. It became clear that trying to eliminate suffering was actually causing me more suffering. I wanted to know more about this seeming paradox, so I started an in-depth study of Buddhist philosophy, devouring over 100 books on the subject. Soon, I started a local meditation group and began teaching Buddhist concepts to other people who were going through difficulties in life, like infidelity or religious disillusionment. Later, I started a successful podcast called *Secular Buddhism* and spent two years in a ministry program to become a Buddhist minister. Now I teach mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy online and in workshops all around the world.

This book is an introduction to Buddhism written for people who are trying to gain a basic understanding of Buddhist philosophy and core Buddhist teachings. By the end of this book, you should have a solid foundation of knowledge about Buddhism and its history. This groundwork will help you begin or continue your own Buddhist practice and understand Buddhism’s ongoing cultural influence today, which can be seen in Western interest in meditation, the current “mindfulness craze,” and the nearly 500 million Buddhist practitioners around the world.

Each of this book’s four parts will help you gain a basic understanding of a different aspect of Buddhism, including who the Buddha was, how he viewed the world, what he taught, and how those teachings are put into practice over 2,500 years later by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

The book is written in a question-and-answer format, and many of the questions here reflect inquiries I’ve gotten when I teach in-person workshops and seminars on Buddhism. Part 1 is centered on the historical figure known as the Buddha, while part 2 focuses on key Buddhist concepts and ideas you’ll need to help you understand the Buddha’s most significant teachings. Part 3 covers the teachings that are the basis of Buddhist philosophy and religious traditions. Finally, in part 4, we’ll explore Buddhist practices, including things like meditation and chanting. Because of the way it’s structured, newcomers to Buddhism will get the most out of this book

by reading in order from start to finish. But you can also use it like a reference book—if you’re interested in particular topics, you can find them in the index and go directly to those pages.

Throughout the book, you will see occasional sidebars from the main text labeled “Everyday Buddhism.” In those sections, I try to bring the topics I’m discussing down to earth by giving you examples from everyday life. Some of these concepts can seem a little abstract, so my hope is that the stories I share will demonstrate how Buddhist teachings can reveal themselves in your day-to-day experience.

I want to make a quick note here about the different schools of Buddhism (we’ll talk about this in more depth on page 22). If someone wrote a book called *No-Nonsense Christianity for Beginners*, there would be some significant differences if the author were a Catholic as opposed to, say, a Jehovah’s Witness. Christianity is broad, and there are many differences in doctrine and approach among its various branches. The same is true for Buddhism. I personally started off studying Tibetan Buddhism, then shifted focus to Zen Buddhism. I later graduated from a ministry program that was heavily influenced by Pure Land Buddhism, but today I practice secular Buddhism. So, while I do my best here to give a neutral view regarding the relative merits of any specific tradition, I realize that I am inevitably influenced by the schools of Buddhism in which I’ve studied and learned these teachings. My hope is that you’ll be able to gain a

general overview of Buddhist ideas and teachings from this book, with the understanding that teachers in other traditions may have different ways of explaining some of these concepts.

And a note about language: It's common in Buddhism to hear the words *skillful* and *unskillful* being used when referring to aspects of the Buddhist path. This comes from the Sanskrit expression *upāya-kaushalya*, meaning “skill in means.” *Skillful means* is a concept in Mahayana Buddhism that emphasizes that a Buddhist practitioner may use his or her own methods or techniques on the path to enlightenment depending on his or her own specific set of circumstances. The Buddha was known for adapting his teachings to the specific person or audience he was addressing, taking into account the listener's specific needs and skill level. In this way, we can adapt Buddhist practices to conform to our individual needs and circumstances. This is considered skillful means. Now let's start learning about Buddhism!