

## **Pankaj Mishra, Intellectual and Spiritual Vagrant**

Pankaj Mishra has nothing good to say about those who put themselves forward as public intellectuals. Yet his own articulate and wide-ranging engagement with politics, religion, culture, and economics (via journalism, criticism, travel writing, and fiction) makes a convincing case for what a public intellectual "in the real sense of the word" might actually look like. Mishra's writings all share an abundant curiosity, an ethical conscientiousness toward the world and its inhabitants, and an exacting way with words. His modest, contemplative authorial presence is constantly informed by the larger contexts of geopolitics and philosophy.

Mishra is the author of the novel *The Romantics*; a travelogue, *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*; and, most recently, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*, an exploration of Buddhism and the life of the Buddha. He also edited the volume *India in Mind* and is a regular contributor to such publications as the *New York Review of Books* and the *Guardian*. Recently, Mishra has been traveling in and writing about China. My interview with Mishra was conducted via emails between Los Angeles, London, Dharamsala, Delhi, and various cities in China.

-Wendy Cheng

**Loggernaut Reading Series:** *In An End to Suffering*, you write that, "Just as European travelers had once alerted me to the India the Buddha had belonged to, so American Buddhists made me see the new role the Buddha had acquired in the modern world." What does it mean to you that your engagement with Buddhism was facilitated and mediated by Western eyes?

**Pankaj Mishra:** I suppose that while I was in India, where Buddhism had died a long time ago, I had thought of the Buddha as too much of a historical figure. In America, I was intrigued to see how his teachings had a great impact upon extremely well-educated people—people who may have had little time for the organized religions they had been born into but were ready to embrace the ideas of an Indian thinker. This really started the process in my head of rethinking about the Buddha, seeing his position in the modern world, or more precisely what were the

aspects of his teachings that people still found relevant in a world where science and technology had rendered so many of the old belief systems irrelevant. It made me see how Buddhism could serve as an alternative way of living and conceptualizing life, how its critique of the self, undertaken through the practice of meditation and mindfulness, could become a personal antidote to the ideologies that preached self-interest and self-aggrandizing. In that sense American Buddhism really is different from all the other revivals and growths of Buddhism around the world. Nowhere do you see it so sharply counterposed to a dominant way of life, the reigning belief systems.

**LRS:** Why do you feel Buddhism has gained a foothold with the extremely well-educated, as opposed to other sectors of American society?

**Mishra:** I suppose that Buddhism doesn't offer consolations of the kind found in other non-western religions that have become popular in America. There is no God to pray to, no prescribed rituals that could give order to one's life, no promise of an afterlife. Instead there is, for the uninitiated at least, a rather cerebral worldview, and an austere spiritual regimen. I also think that Buddhism has always attracted the elite of whatever society it has traveled to, partly because you need to have traveled through a certain experience of materialism in order to arrive at the sense that there is something problematic about desire and longing, how they don't lead to happiness, and more often than not lead to unhappiness. If you are still struggling to fulfill your fantasies of wealth, power, status, Buddhism is less likely to appeal to you.

**LRS:** Yet one of Buddhism's founding premises, that all life is suffering, seems like it would have a stronger resonance with the poor and unfortunate. During the course of researching your book, did you look into the attraction of Buddhism for these groups, such as the Dalits in India?

**Mishra:** Yes, I think it is possible to take a pessimistic or fatalistic view of Buddhism and conclude that life is suffering. The Hindu version of this idea does induce a kind of fatalism and complacency in India. But Buddhism diagnoses suffering as a

mental condition, one that can be removed. It is saying that both the rich and poor can find happiness if only they are able to control their minds, their desires. Such an austere regimen is likely to appeal more to the well-off people than to people who are still living materially deprived lives. The Dalit movement in India has interpreted Buddhism rather radically: as a program for political action. There are aspects of the Buddha's message that can be seen as a critique of social and economic hierarchies, but he never thought of organized politics as a means to redemption.

**LRS:** You've suggested that American Buddhism is distinct from other Buddhist outgrowths and revivals, but what, if anything, keeps it from being another packaged form of Orientalism—of what Edward Said referred to as "Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use"?

**Mishra:** Well, it has been domesticated to a certain extent—I talk a little bit about that in my book. But I don't see that as an unwelcome development, rather as an inevitable and necessary one. Wherever Buddhism has traveled—China, Tibet, Japan, Korea—it has been adapted to local cultural, pre-existing ways of life. Why shouldn't it do the same in America? I am not worried about Buddhism in America being an example of Orientalism. The knowledge of Buddhism doesn't allow anyone to control people or nations in the way Oriental knowledges may have done in the past. I think we may be in some danger of ignoring the enormous richness of Buddhism's encounter with America culture if we confine ourselves to narrow political prejudices.

**LRS:** Two solitary figures persist in *An End to Suffering* and your novel, *The Romantics*: one of the questing writer/traveler caught up in romantic idealism; and the other that of the monk, in an imperturbable stasis of wisdom and peace. Your work seems to struggle with how to reconcile these two figures, and how to engage them both productively and ethically with the problems and complexities of the contemporary world. What does each of these figures mean to you, and why the struggle?

**Mishra:** It is hard for me to talk about this, and I wonder if I should become too self-conscious about a process of personal growth of discovery that is often retarded by excessive self-

consciousness. You make the analogy between my novel and the Buddha book, it is very interesting, and I can only say that these two figures of the monk and the writer may persist in my writing for a while, for they do seem to represent two ways of living that I find and have always found very attractive.

**LRS:** Is there an example of someone who embodies either of these figures who has been an important influence on you?

**Mishra:** There are people who have managed to combine the two roles in their personalities. I think of Thomas Merton and Gandhi, and among writers, Tagore, Thomas Mann, and Simone Weil. Among present-day writers, I admire J.M. Coetzee for refusing to accept the public role of the wise writer and seer.

**LRS:** You've lived in New York, Delhi, England, and Mashobra, and you've spent time in Dharamsala. In *An End to Suffering*, your encounter with your friend Helen, who has become a nun, in San Francisco, and your participation in a meditation retreat there seem to help you to understand and reconcile the contradictions of "Westerners" taking on "Eastern" spirituality (of which you were quite critical when you lived in India). What are some other ways in which living in England (colonizer of India) and America (current imperial power) has changed your views of "East" and "West"?

**Mishra:** I think it is important to move away from larger political concepts like colonialism and imperialism in one's own personal view of the world. They may be important as hermeneutic devices in writing about politics and literature, but they are not very helpful when you live in very complex societies and cultures as those contained in England and America, where you have huge numbers of people thinking very differently from what their governments say or do. So I suppose close proximity to them has produced a much more refined conception of them than I had when I hadn't left India.

**LRS:** Can you tell us about something you experienced in England or America that sharpened your conceptions of these places?

**Mishra:** It is hard for me to recall a particular experience. I do think that most people live in unawareness of where they and their society stands in the world, both historically and in the present. This is not to be pitied and scorned, but to be understood in the light of the pressures the society built around work and consumption exerts in its citizens, where a kind of amnesia and ignorance is essential if you want to move from day to day without feeling unduly stressed-out. I am a writer, and I spend most of my day thinking about writing, history, the present, I have this kind of leisure, but this is not what other people do or can do. So it is important to be aware of the larger organized systems of meaning we inhabit very differently, and to not blame individuals for aggressiveness and violence of their societies.

**LRS:** To what extent have these insights been personal, and to what extent do you think they have a wider cultural reach?

**Mishra:** It has been easier for me to have a more complex idea of life in the West. But I think one of the problems we continue to suffer from is that despite the Internet and cable TV, growing numbers of writers, and improved communication systems, people in the West still don't know enough about how people live in the rest of the world—they still depend on simple concepts of Islam, Muslims, Hinduism etc. So concepts replace the reality of lived lives, real people, and these concepts promote great misunderstanding. That's where the role of writers is even more important than it used to be.

**LRS:** Do you consider yourself (or aspire) to be a public intellectual?

**Mishra:** This is one role I would like to stay miles away from, mostly because in England and the US, it implies a sort of punditry that is really information masquerading as knowledge. There are no public intellectuals really in the real sense of the word, which implies a kind of intellectual and spiritual integrity that is rare in the public sphere. There are opinion-makers, security experts, hacks, ambitious academics, and most of them are compromised by their proximity to political power.

**LRS:** What about in India—is there still a public space for this kind of intellectual integrity?

**Mishra:** No, and it is shrinking by the day as a certain kind of urban affluence spreads and the idea of Indian superpowerdom goes around and intoxicates the middle class and its media. I think this new sense of power privileged Indians have is going to be very damaging for the country's political and intellectual life. You see what this awareness of power does in the United States, where despite the wealth of talent and intellect, you have someone like George W. Bush running the country, and public debate, as reflected in the media, occurs around predictably partisan lines and is generally sterile. We are also heading toward a politically and intellectually darker time.

**LRS:** What projects are you working on now? And what are you reading?

**Mishra:** I am trying to get started on a novel; also a short history of modern India. I am also trying to read as many books as I can on China. I return to India after a few weeks of traveling, and then I plan to write for a few weeks. This is how much of my time is spent these days.

**LRS:** What's taking you to China?

**Mishra:** I have been interested in China for a long time, and I feel I ought to know more about it. People talk of India and China in tandem now. Much is made of their rise as superpowers. And, yes, both countries have ambitious middle classes longing for international recognition. But I am not sure if the two countries have sorted out the great social, political and environmental problems that they face. Or have reckoned fully with their ancient traditions in their search for a suitable modernity. I think many of this century's big questions are going to be addressed in these two countries, and I feel I have neglected learning about China for far too long.

**LRS:** You've described yourself as an "intellectual and spiritual vagrant." You also express a fear of this sense of vagrancy, that this is all there is or will be. *An End to Suffering* is openly a

personal spiritual quest—did researching and writing the book bring you to a kind of peace, even though you've said that you don't consider yourself Buddhist?

**Mishra:** Thinking about the Buddha, reading about, about Buddhist philosophy, making connections with the world we live in—these were the most rewarding things about writing this book. There was self-knowledge, too, and I feel I have found in Buddhism one of the most subtle ways of looking at the world and oneself. Yet I feel reluctant to say more because I am still living, the world is changing all the time, so am I, and nothing remains constant. So there is no permanent peace or stability I can honestly claim to arrive at. Every day begins afresh, and I feel I have to keep up that pitch of self-enquiry, not bind myself too much to conceptions of who I am or what I have become, but try to live in the present, and be alert and attention to oneself and the people around one. This is, perhaps, the greatest gift that writing this book gave me. But, as I said, I better not be complacent about it, or I will lose it!

**LRS:** Do you have a favorite Buddhist saying or teaching?

**Mishra:** Yes. The Buddha's last words: "All conditioned things are subject to decay—strive on untiringly." ❖